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## Death on Display: Understanding the Publicized Eulogies of African American Cultural Figures as an Empowering Rhetorical Discourse

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**DEATH ON DISPLAY: UNDERSTANDING THE PUBLICIZED EULOGIES OF  
AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURAL FIGURES AS AN EMPOWERING  
RHETORICAL DISCOURSE**

by

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Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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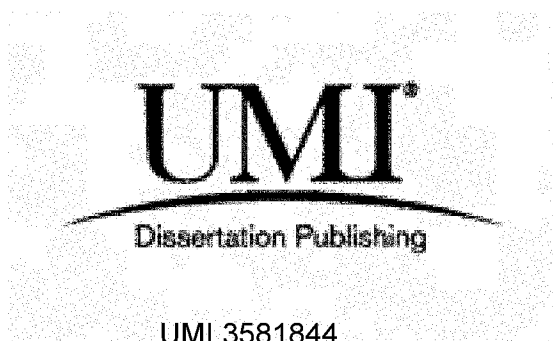
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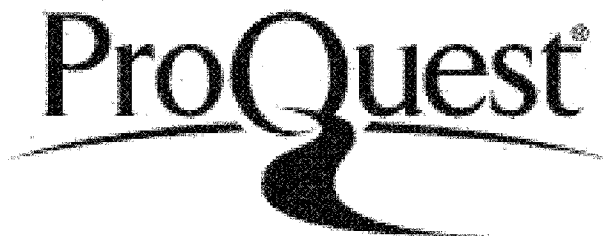


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## **ABSTRACT**

### **DEATH ON DISPLAY: UNDERSTANDING THE PUBLICIZED EULOGIES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURAL FIGURES AS AN EMPOWERING RHETORICAL DISCOURSE**

Melody Shelton Williams  
Old Dominion University, 2014  
Director: Dr. Timothy Robinson

This dissertation names and identifies the African American Eulogic Tradition as a specific custom within Black culture in the U.S. that originated during slavery and resulted from a fusion of West African burial traditions and Protestant Christianity. The emergence of the Black Church as an influential social institution led by free Blacks cemented the use of funerary practices to support and preserve the bonds of community. This project explores how modern eulogists collectively empower African American audiences through their delivery of Eulogic oratory by analyzing the contextual framework and rhetorical modes of eulogies delivered for Whitney Houston, James Brown, Michael Jackson, Luther Vandross, Rosa Parks, and Coretta Scott King. Through studying the social impact of public, oral performances given by African American preachers and orators in the last decade, this dissertation establishes that the African American Eulogic Tradition still exists and that Black Americans use it to disseminate African American Compound Collective Rhetoric, a term I coined to classify the strategic, open communication shared by Blacks, in open spaces, to aid them in overcoming injustices that permeate their life experiences as Black Americans.

This dissertation is dedicated to the late Dr. Jeffrey H. Richards, who mentored me from the first day we met and never waived in his support of this research project.

Dr. Richards always said, “Every day is a gift,” and I never fully understood the importance of that saying until the day I had to continue working on this project without him. Thank you for everything Dr. Richards—thank you.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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**GOIN' UP A YONDER: THE EULOGIC TRADITION AND THE PHENOMENON  
OF SPEAKING LIFE IN THE PRESENCE OF DEATH**

I knew something was happening. “She ain’t give up—so you can’t give up!” The bold, dynamic Black preacher began to eulogize my aunt and, as he spoke to the audience of about three hundred (primarily) African Americans that filled the chairs, I could not help but marvel at the looks of intensity and engagement on every face. Prior to this moment in the service, we laughed when my aunt’s siblings reminisced about her bubbly spirit, cried when my sister read the original poem I wrote about her passing, and meditated in silence while reading her thoughtful obituary. But now, now we were doing something altogether different. As the eulogist spoke and explicated with rousing vernacular language on the magnificent triumph of my aunt’s life—a woman diagnosed with polio and autism that doctors said would only have the cognitive ability of a seven year old, but actually went on to earn her GED and live a productive life independently—he taught the audience about overcoming adversity, taking care of one another, and living life to its fullest.

As the preacher continued to instruct us on what was most important about each day granted to us here on this Earth, we all listened in earnest agreement. There was hardly a dry eye in the house when he finished, and when I talked with my family later about the eulogy, we all agreed that it inspired us and forced us to think about the purpose and importance of our own lives. The same year that my aunt passed away, I went to three other funerals of extended family members, and although they were at Baptist and African Methodist Episcopal churches, and different African American ministers delivered the eulogies, the moving experience that the eulogy created among the audience

was quite similar. It was then that I recognized that the eulogy in the Black church was a distinctive form of ceremonial oratory and oral performance that employed Black American vernacular (what linguist Geneva Smitherman defines as “reflecting Black American’s linguistic-cultural African heritage and the conditions of servitude, oppression, and life in America”) (2). They also include counter-narratives (stories from the voices of minorities that are not a part of traditional history), to instruct, incite, and inspire African Americans concerning their identities and belief systems within the larger context of Black communities in America (Delgado and Stefancic 43).

Not long after attending all these funerals, I watched a live television broadcast of Whitney Houston’s funeral. Houston was a very famous African American singer and it amazed me how once again, the largely Black audience present connected so strongly to the words of the eulogy. Even more amazing than that, however, was the overwhelming amount of discussion about the eulogy delivery on social media outlets by Black viewers that like I, attended the funeral by way of streaming video. I knew then that it would be extremely valuable to perform a research study and examine the function of the funeral ceremony experience in Black culture, specifically focusing on how such eulogies disseminate content to, and about, African American communities in idiomatic open forums.

Thus, this dissertation *Death on Display: Understanding the Publicized Eulogies of African American Cultural Figures as an Empowering Rhetorical Discourse* explores how the resonant content of eulogies for Black celebrities publically broadcasted in the last ten years impacts African Americans—or Americans of African descent in the United States—as a specific viewing audience. In this study, I am investigating the social issues

that are addressed in eulogies by African Americans, for African Americans, and their influence on the shared perspectives held by members of Black communities. I chose to term the long-held practice of using the funeral service and public eulogy delivery to facilitate a means of Black expression and inter-communal communication the “Eulogic Tradition.” I hold that this influential tradition, now shared through television and Internet broadcasting, allows for masses of African American men and women across the nation to become receptive hearers to instruction on the ideas and outlooks that represent conceptions of Blackness and Black life in America.

The first vestiges of the Eulogic Tradition in African American culture began with the development of unique and distinct burial practices by the first Africans to arrive in early Colonial North America. Joseph Holloway’s edited collection *Africanisms in American Culture* discusses the influence of African practices in America at the very beginning of slavery, and notes how Christian conceptualizations of God and the afterlife that were exposed to slaves mirrored some of the beliefs they already held from African cultures (166). According to Holloway:

Like Islam and Christianity, traditional African religions adhered to monotheism...The Supreme Deity was generally considered omniscient and omnipotent, the creator of all life forms. God represented the highest values—kindness, justice, sincerity, and mercy. Thus in African perceptions God was no formentor of mischief or ill will...Belief in afterlife was integral to traditional African religion...In this land of the dead, where life continued, there was no sickness, disease, poverty, or hunger. But underworld inhabitants retained the positions of their earthly hierarchy. Death was a journey into the spirit world, not a break with life or earthly beings. The idea of the perpetuity of life through time, space, and circumstance was common to African religious culture.

Holloway explains that burial practices were part of the legacy of crucial African traditions instituted in slavery that still have visible signs present today, primarily because of the critical communal role they played. Historian Dr. Suzanne Smith notes

that because Africa is a great continent of diverse countries and cultures, it is “difficult to make specific claims about every aspect of death and burial practices” of African nations, but she believes, like Holloway, that all African funerals place preeminent focus on their beliefs about the “ancestor” figure (19). According to Smith:

The profound cultural significance of the funeral in African society, and subsequently in African American life, arose from the basic but essential belief that one’s deceased ancestors have direct relationship and authority over the lives of their descendants...they exist as powerful spiritual beings who continue to influence the living world through the actions of their descendants. (20)

Both Holloway and Smith communicate in their research that the initial slave communities that would later become the African American communities of the United States were very much connected to a spiritual belief system that enabled them to create constructive burial practices through which they derived deeper meaning from even the most traumatic or senseless deaths in slavery.

It seems that early African Americans constructed burial traditions so quickly after the commencement of their chattel experience because of the large numbers of slaves who died both during and after transport from Africa to the Americas via the Middle Passage (Frey 300). Having to process death as a direct result of their conditions of captivity was an all too common reality for slaves, and Holloway notes that enslaved Africans believed that “a dead person’s spirit could not rest until he had a proper funeral and burial” (196). Historian Hugh Thomas writes in *The Slave Trade*, an exhaustive text covering the Atlantic Slave Trade from 1440-1870, that “illness was rife on slave ships” and that “a third of deaths were probably so caused, or from, dehydration induced by it;” Thomas further explains that several deaths during the Middle Passage also resulted from “rebellions.” According to many historical accounts, the punishments recorded for slaves

that participated in uprisings included decapitation and/or dismemberment because “many Blacks believe that, if they are put to death and not dismembered, they shall return again to their own country after they are thrown overboard” (422-423, 426-427). The accounts of slave executions that Hugh Thomas references demonstrate the extent to which newly captured slaves, because of conditions of extreme duress amongst foreigners and adversaries, held fast to their spiritual beliefs about death and burial. This unyielding commitment forced slavers to develop ways to try to debunk or divert Blacks’ ideology about death and the afterlife because these beliefs were meaningful and crucial to African cultures.

The funeral and burial traditions of early Black populations in America were the precursor to the oratory of the Eulogic Tradition in African American communities and Holloway explains in the following passage the continued shaping of funeral experiences for Blacks in America through customs from Africa:

...The funeral ritual, as distinguished from the physical act of burying the body, [was] a public phenomenon. Funeral rites in traditional African societies were often occasions for celebration, creating an intensely renewed sense of family and communal unity among the survivors. (241)

Blacks in America who have ancestry from slaves have almost always experienced funerals as open and engaging societal events and historian Eugene Genovese, in his text *Roll, Jordan Roll*, explores the funeral tradition of slaves in the chapter fittingly titled “Let the Dead Bury the Dead” (194). Genovese too underscores how important the funeral service was culturally and socially to newly-formed enslaved Black communities (194-195). I agree with both Holloway’s and Genovese’s emphasis on the importance of recognizing how slaves fused the funeral practices of White Protestant Christianity with their own African burial traditions to form a heritage that functioned as the social and

emotional outlet for the constant and frequent reality of death, but I also believe the Eulogic Tradition, as a specific convention within African American funerary practices, emerged to serve as something more than a means of demonstrative expression; in this dissertation I demonstrate that it actually fulfilled the need for a method of distributing strategic communication between and amongst ever-growing, ever-changing Black communities.

The very first African American eulogists, when sermonizing on behalf of the dead who died at the hands of White aggressors, had a fitting opportunity—a *kairos*<sup>1</sup> moment perhaps—to speak inspiring words to their own people that assaulted the oppressive conditions of a Black person's existence in America and championed causes for freedom and equality that grew as the cruelty and subjugation continued. I suspect those words given by eulogizers also acted as agents of a different kind of introspective dialogue—one that introduced and facilitated conversations about the identity of Black Americans. My suspicions concerning the cultural influence of Eulogic oratory are not unfounded, as scholars uphold the Oral Tradition of African American culture—in which Eulogic sermonizing find its roots—as one of the few cultural practices that Blacks retained upon their introduction to Anglo-European culture via the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and slavery in the Americas. Taken from predominately oral cultures in Africa between 1620 and 1865, slave traders abruptly transplanted African captives into Anglo-European society—a society where written texts took primacy over oral (Frey 300). This unfamiliar Anglo-European society forced Blacks in America to establish a written

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<sup>1</sup> *Kairos* is a rhetorical concept that describes a right or opportune time to communicate an idea or perform an action; in Christian theology it also carries the meaning of the “the appointed time of God.” During a eulogy in the Black Church, the moment can be valued as an instance of “*kairos*,” one that is divinely inspired and renders the speaker more effective and influential (Herrick 36).

<sup>2</sup> Scholars have called the lack of computer or technical literacy among minorities the *digital*

literary tradition as part of securing freedom and agency in their new world, but Blacks never lost connection with the moving communal experience created by the delivery of oral speech. Although the written tradition for cultural and collective advancement developed in African American communities, the performance aspect of the Oral Tradition was not so easily translatable to written texts.

Scholar of African literature Dr. F. Abiola Irele, in the essay “Sounds of a Tradition: The Souls of Black Folk,” explains in the following passage how complex and multifaceted oral literature was and is in Black communities:

In an oral culture, what can be isolated as text, that is, as the verbal content in an extended utterance that aspires to the quality of literature, is so closely bound up with other artistic modes in the context of performance that it can be considered as only an element of the total artwork, an essential and central one...but existing in a necessary relation to other elements of the total performance. (25)

Irele articulates well the idea that oral texts are performances that are interactive in nature when they are performed. Written texts lack the ability to incorporate the linguistic, auditory, and physical elements that are unfolded in a performance. Blacks, therefore, even after the advent of mass literacy initiatives and formal education programs that followed the abolition of slavery, did not forego or forsake their Oral Tradition in favor of the privileged written word. Instead, the Oral Tradition within Black culture came to coexist with the African American literary tradition as a parent to its emergence and development. Bernard Bell writes in *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* that since the birth of slavery, Blacks used “narrative models” from the Oral Tradition of African societies to process through their captivity and enslavement and that the “unwritten history and literature” that exists in Black communities formed as a subculture within the larger American society where written texts are “the chief mode of

acculturation” (15). In the introduction of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. states that:

...the Anglo-African literary tradition was created two centuries ago in order to demonstrate that persons of African descent possessed the requisite degrees of reason and wit to create literature, that they were, indeed, full and equal members of the community of rational, sentient beings, that they could, indeed, write.  
(xxxviii)

The entire canon of African American written texts over the last two hundred years is hence a direct descendant of the Oral Tradition of Black culture combined with elements of the literary tradition found in Anglo-European societies, and it was crafted as proof of the competency, creativity, and ingenuity of Blacks.

The vocal nature of oral stories and narratives is important not just to the overall definition of what they are, but also to how they are understood as a method to communicate certain themes or ideas. It is logical to assert then that the significance of performance in the delivery of a Eulogic sermon reflects the greater significance of performance as an inimitable characteristic of the longstanding Oral Tradition in Black culture. Dr. Irele describes, in his essay, many of the rhetorical devices and figures of speech that make up an oral manuscript and how the performer of an oral piece enlists all of those devices and figures to create the experience of the performance and successfully reveal its meaning. He states:

Devices such as apostrophe and hyperbole, parallelism, enumeration, repetition and anaphora or iteration generally, and collocations, are reinforced in the oral mode by sound values such as ideophones, onomatopoeia, tonal balance, and effects which are sustained in oral delivery by modulations of the voice. Moreover, the verbal/vocal aspect is conditioned by the personality of the poet and the dynamic context of the poetic recital, within which the visual impact created by props and costumes enhance the dramatic impact of delivery. It is in these ways that setting and audience participation come to count as active elements of the total aesthetic experience. They form part of a total process to

which the deployment of an intense register of language is both instrumental and central. (26)

In this passage, Irele meticulously lists the parts of a highly stylized oral performance; the establishment of the Black Church, with its centering upon the practice of animated and dynamic preaching, helped sustain oral performance as a thriving custom in African American culture. The preaching of a sermon is consequently one part of the Oral Tradition that offers African Americans the opportunity to consider and address their communal needs in an environment that is conducive to both the exposition of a single significant event, like a loved one's death, and the corporate exploration into the consciousness of Black society.

In the delivery of the preached word to a predominately Black audience, a traditional requirement is an enlivened performance by the speaker, and the aforementioned Geneva Smitherman, in her work *Talkin and Testifyin*, specifically discusses “signifyin” as one of the most prevalent verbal techniques used in Black preaching to engage the people, teach them, and garner their support and esteem (80). She defines signification as “the art of insult in which a speaker humorously puts down, talks about, needles—that is, signifies on—the listener.” Smitherman points to Black preachers as the best practitioners of “deep signifyin,” a technique where the speaker indirectly addresses both the listening audience, and those he may be referencing, in a negative manner to teach a lesson, provide a moral judgment, or make a point (118). Signifyin(g) is both a term, and an action, that can be credited to the scholarship of the aforementioned Henry Louis Gates Jr., and in his text *The Signifying Monkey and the Language of Signifyin(g): Rhetorical Difference and the Orders of Meaning*, he explains the principle purpose and reasoning behind signifying:

Signification, in standard English, denotes the meaning that a term conveys, or is intended to convey...By supplanting the received term's associated concept, the black vernacular tradition created a homonymic pun of the profoundest sort, thereby making its sense of difference from the rest of the English community of speakers. Their complex act of language Signifies upon both formal language use and its conventions, conventions established, at least officially, by middle-class white people. (47)

What Gates is describing in this passage is the subversion of traditional, Anglo-European meanings, in the practice of signifying, and how a Black speaker creates his own meaning with and from words that the dominant race in American society cannot fully understand, appreciate, or appropriate. Signifying is an art that the slang, colloquialisms, sayings, and sharp comebacks of Black vernacular expertly code and mask, and when I discuss examples of “deep signifyin” later in this dissertation, I analyze eulogy delivery by those in the preaching profession in particular, as the preachers delivering the eulogies I studied favor utilizing this rhetorical device to make meaningful commentary about the personal qualities of the celebrity they are eulogizing and the world in which the celebrity lived.

Geneva Smitherman includes a selected glossary of Black semantics as an appendix to her book and this lexicon defines words or acts that are customarily used by Blacks vocally when participating in the Oral Tradition (251). Smitherman's glossary is relevant to my study of the Eulogic Tradition because each moment of eulogy delivery requires that eulogists speak to their audience in a language that hearers can understand and connect with. African American eulogists are tasked not only with disseminating information and ideas, but also continually cementing the bonds of community through effective oral communication. Therefore, Smitherman's glossary provided some of the necessary vocabulary for me to discuss the vernacular and rhetorical practices that are

routinely used in African American English and I use terms like “deep signifyin” in the coming chapters to discuss the eulogy experience.

Since the Oral Tradition is upheld in history as the method by which Blacks in the United States developed communities and customs in the face of oppression and marginalization, I am considering the Eulogic Tradition—and its multifarious purposes of protest, expression, and empowerment—to be one signifier of the larger practice of Blacks in America continuing to use oral communication to create a sense of collective self and resist the notions of skin color acting as an indicator of their inferior humanity. The Eulogic Tradition was indeed a pivotal counter-tradition for African Americans through the throes of Slavery, the Jim Crow Era, and the racism of Segregation and the Civil Rights Movement, and I believe the Eulogic Tradition is a frame through which I can examine the continuance of oral literature in Black culture and legitimately provide some evidence as to what extent one aspect of the Oral Tradition in the twenty-first century will continue to influence and direct African American communities, as it has in previous times. In *Talkin and Testifyin*, Geneva Smitherman takes the position that the Oral Tradition will always remain a fixture in Black communities, operating almost outside of the destructive reaches of time and social change. According to Smitherman:

...that tradition preserves the Afro-American heritage and reflects the collective spirit of the race. Through song, story, folk sayings, and rich verbal interplay among everyday people, lessons and precepts about life and survival are handed down from generation to generation...even as each new generation makes verbal adaptations within the tradition, the core strength of this tradition lies in its capacity to accommodate new situations and changing realities. (73)

From her perspective, “adaptations” to the Oral Tradition are possible, and even expected, as changing times periods affect Black communities. I concur with Smitherman’s opinion that the Oral Tradition has the flexibility to remain relevant

regardless of societal changes and I share her perspective largely because of the Oral Tradition's established role as an indispensable practice within the Black church, an institution that I review in the following section as a pivotal force for impacting, instructing, and influencing African Americans in both the past and the present through the practice of sermonizing.

## **THE HERITAGE OF THE EULOGY AS A SERMON**

*Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750-Present* explains that Eulogic oratory fits into the “cultural survival” genre of sermon preached across all denominational lines in Black churches (Simmons and Thomas 10). It is important to consider the origins of the African American sermonizing tradition itself when examining the eulogy as a genre of preached sermons because it helps emphasize how such a speech act became a direct and essential didactic method for corporate communication. In the late 1700s and early to mid 1800s, the rapid emergence of Black ministers in Baptist and Methodist churches, and the eventual ordination of Black preachers who had rudimentary educated congregants, fostered the emergence and development of what we know as the Black church today (Frey 270). Six of the most popular historically African-American Christian denominations and conventions include the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) formed in 1816, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ) formed in 1821, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (CME) formed in 1870, the National Baptist Convention of America formed in 1895, the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) formed in 1907, and the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., formed in 1916 (Mellowes). As these church organizations came

into existence, the speech acts within them became a nexus for personal and communal expression by Black Americans in a safe space.

The presence of oppression and racism in larger society made the privacy of the church appealing to Blacks against the backdrop of such harsh realities, and it became one of the first places where they enjoyed an almost guaranteed acceptance. The public sphere of America was a scene where the life and culture of Blacks would always be stereotyped, trivialized, condemned, and marginalized. As a result, the church was a private sphere or domain where Blacks could speak and act with relative freedom, amongst one another. It is this relatively uncensored gateway for communication, I surmise, that allowed sermons to become the penultimate moment for Blacks gathered together to hear the complexities of their lives discussed openly and reflect on their identity as Black people. The content of those sermonic messages had to transcend simple exegesis of the Bible and include discussions about the social, political, and economic landscapes of African American communities.

In this dissertation, I explore how the eulogy, when performed in present-day Black communities, incorporates strategic communication with the listening audience, and I also examine how the practice of broadcasting such communication serves two important purposes. First, at the most basic and fundamental level, the dissemination of eulogies through media broadcasting ensures the preservation of the eulogy as a valued oral text—and the Black eulogist as a significant author—that is accessible by all, for posterity, as part of the African American Oral Tradition. Second, and the purpose for which I am most interested in this study, the dissemination of eulogies through media broadcasting allows for a much larger viewing audience, within Black communities, to be

included in this educational experience than those who attend the funerals in person. The entire audience will not be African American, and thus, may not fully understand or grasp the significance of the moment, but the moment nonetheless carries an air of open dialogue for Black communities. So, although not physically present, through broadcasting, the instructional content of the eulogy still impacts African American viewers and allows them to become students in this metaphorical classroom. This study, focusing on Eulogic sermons for celebrated Black public figures delivered in the last ten years by iconic social, political, and religious leaders of Black society, thus explores the contemporary social and cultural effects of this open format as a means for edification and learning.

### **SPEAKING IN SAFE SPACES**

As I stated earlier, I perceive the Eulogic Tradition to be a protected outlet, a safe space through which Blacks routinely participate in free speech and self-examination. Vorris Nunley, in his work *Keepin' it Hushed: The Barbershop and African American Hush Harbor Rhetoric*, defines “hush harbors” in Black communities as those safe spaces where African Americans freely share their values and customs (1). He calls the practice of Blacks speaking and expressing themselves openly only within their respective communities “Keepin it Hushed,” and Nunley makes a quintessential point about the history and existence of this phenomenon: “[it is about] the spaces where such talk has occurred during and since the Middle Passage and the enslavement of the minds so often kept to themselves...” (2). Nunley further articulates that hush harbors are about the openings, intervals, and occasions where Blacks “*could* be everything that being human allows” (2). Places like the church—where the Eulogic Tradition developed—and in later

decades gathering spaces like the barbershop, were unbelievably critical for African Americans because of the talk that took place within them. Nunley's barbershop is really a symbol for all of the spaces where there is no censorship of Black speech by imposing outside forces and he brings to the forefront how important these spaces are. For Black women, such safe spaces throughout history included hair salons, kitchens, church fellowship halls, and other areas where women were likely to congregate and communicate with one another.

According to Nunley, the actual open dialogue and communication that takes place—which he terms African American Hush Harbor Rhetoric—

... excavates, theorizes, and reclaims a residual and emergent genealogy/tradition of African American knowledge frequently alluded to but *rarely named*, theorized, or taken into account in the public sphere or public spaces because of the danger of its hidden transcripts pertaining to Black perspectives. (3)

The Eulogic Tradition is part of this legacy of creating safe spaces to allow individuals to enter for conversations about issues and perspectives specific to Black life; but in recent years, these conversations became more mainstream and less concealed as Blacks continue to gain equalities, freedoms, and a prevailing social influence. That is, movements like Civil Rights and Black Power or Black Nationalism changed the nature of African American Hush Harbor Rhetoric and the covert existence of these “hidden transcripts;” today, not only are they public knowledge, but they are publically disseminated. The label “hushed” is arguably no longer suitable for this form of rhetoric given the frequent public exposure of the content it describes; and in Chapter One, I expound upon the new label I conceived, “African American Compound Collective Rhetoric (AACCR),” which in my estimation better defines and characterizes this modern rhetoric that was once hidden dialogue. AACCR is rhetoric that builds upon past cultural

knowledge and enhances it through the exchange of information in an open forum; and the context of an open forum is key, because the intellectual engagement and robust dialogue that occurs there reveals the speech that is no longer deferred to the private sphere.

While it is true that the entire content of formerly hidden or “hushed” rhetoric may not be exposed when African Americans gather for an occasion that includes the delivery of public oratory, the fact remains that in the last fifty to sixty years, the quest to eradicate racism, segregation, and discrimination through protest and legislative overhauls yielded a revealing of some very private dialogues that spoke to African Americans’ humanity. Iconic leaders in African American communities, like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., hinged many of their arguments for racial equality on the premise that White society failed to realize just how important the most basic of freedoms were to Blacks. I find this historical fact relevant to my review of the rhetoric in the Eulogic Tradition, because like the current eulogists this dissertation studies, past Civil Rights leaders and social activists in their public addresses often revealed what the discourse of important Black issues such as freedom or empowerment sounded like in the closeted spaces of African Americans. In his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, Dr. King stated that Blacks “will never be satisfied” so long as “as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities” and “our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating ‘For Whites Only’”(The King Center). These statements by Dr. King revealed that in the private communes of Blacks—in their homes, businesses, and places of worship—the everyday conversations they had were not necessarily about the more formal legal issues

like being disenfranchised, but included things as simple as frustration with the inability to find a safe place to rest while traveling, or have a meal with their children in a local restaurant. Causes like voting rights were of premier importance, but Dr. King strategically chose to share the more intimate concerns of African Americans to highlight the basic humanity inherent in their quest for equality, and once again point out that these difficult shared experiences are something which all in Black communities can relate to in some form or fashion.

By sharing such information, the public address of Dr. King in a sense became an extension or new branch of the safe space, or “hush harbor,” for the discussion of previously hidden African American knowledge. Dr. King was a pioneer in using television and public broadcasting to bring to the forefront the issues of Blacks, and as a powerful preacher, he also publicized the performativity of sermonizing in the Black church (The King Center). Dr. King’s broadcasted speeches did not eliminate the need for the private dialogue in private spaces among Blacks, but it allowed Blacks a unique opportunity, during his speeches, to engage corporately with the reality of their plight as people of color and find solidarity, comfort, and direction concerning their complex social condition. As continued technological developments in television, and years later the Internet, allowed for more public transmission of important communally affirming moments like Dr. King’s speech, I believe this permanently altered the African American cultural practice of needing to securely conversely solely within hush harbors. Through repetitive use of media broadcasting, collective dialogue with Black communities became possible, and acceptable, in certain open forums.

Christopher Alan Bracey, in his book *Saviors or Sellouts: The Promise and Perils of Black Conservatism, from Booker T. Washington to Condoleezza Rice*, suggests that in the twenty-first century, Blacks of all socio-economic standing are becoming increasingly connected through media and that the Internet is now the most popular open forum for Blacks to connect and engage in problem-solving communication (187). Bracey insists that the constant change and advancement of low-cost electronic and digital devices, such as smart phones and gaming consoles, enables technology and the Internet to be brought into households that previously could not afford an expensive and cumbersome desktop computer, which was the main form of access to the online world just ten years ago. I find this fact compelling because as technology evolves, it facilitates new opportunities for African Americans to connect and create culturally affirming experiences. Presently, many members of Black communities can view important cultural events where key communal dialogue occurs online via a Smartphone or some other hand-held device, in addition to watching it by television and therefore, have one more means of connection to relevant social conversations.

Andre Brock, in his 2009 article “Who do you think you are? Race, Representation, and Cultural Rhetorics in Online Spaces,” shares the perspective of Bracey that fewer and fewer Blacks are victims of the digital divide<sup>2</sup> and suffering without access to the Internet or some form of computing technology, for information, for person-to-person communication, or for participating in online communities. Even the

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<sup>2</sup> Scholars have called the lack of computer or technical literacy among minorities the *digital divide*. In her book, *Crossing the Digital Divide*, Barbara Monroe explains that “the metaphor of a divide serves as a reminder that a vast gap does indeed separate rich and poor in this country, and that gap is at once economic, racial, discursive, and epistemological in character” (5). This metaphor of a divide symbolizes how technology and cyberspace—and the computer literate—are on one side, and those that are foreign to it, remain on the opposite side, with very little agency to cross.

current widespread impact of the Eulogic Tradition can be partially attributed to this gross abundance of personal computing technology available, because technology has come to serve as a conduit for members of African American communities to attend the funerals of important cultural figures and engage with the oratory shared in this safe space. Andre Brock actually argues that with this rapid increase in technology use, the Internet for African Americans is emerging as a new place where Black identity can be defined and reshaped, “adding an interactive, discursive dimension to exterior renditions of Black identity and thus, enabling interior perspectives on Black identity to become part of the conversation” (16). Accordingly, eulogies that are accessible to the Black public in real time through the Internet—a new familiar place for African Americans—easily facilitate the dissemination of critical political, social, and cultural ideas on a massive scale.

For the scope of this project, my discussion of media and web technology is limited to recognizing that it is a useful method for access to, and the publicizing of, important cultural experiences in African American communities. The parameters of this study do not allow me to delve into the critical examinations of digital literacies, Internet cultures, and online histories of communication and production as they relate to Blacks and people of color. I do, however, want to clarify that I am not attempting to paint the picture that the greater degree of access among African Americans to technology for such high profile events, produces no downsides to the understanding or reception of the cultural experience. Likewise, I am not suggesting that the imagery and words disseminated through a eulogy increases the agency of African Americans substantially in American society. What I am arguing, however, is that when African Americans are

able to connect to a broadcasting or streaming of a eulogy for one of their own, delivered by one of their own, one of the benefits of this connection is that it provides them a chance to build and affirm their existing communal relationship. Adam Joel Banks writes in *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multi-media Age* that digital and media productions allow Black users to “resonate with African American audiences and find new ways to reach young people in African American communities” (59). These technological productions also allow Black users a needed interface, or common virtual space, to critique and evaluate issues and ideas relevant to them. This means that the mediated delivery of eulogies has the potential to be even more impactful than the traditional face-to-face experience, especially when considering factors like the effects of the eulogy’s influence, because of the multi-faceted ways in which knowledge can be taken in and analyzed in respect to one’s own perspective and collective identity when partaking in it as a participant from a distance.

### **PUBLIC PERFORMANCE: THE EULOGIZED AND THEIR EULOGISTS**

In Chapters One, Two, and Three of this dissertation, I examine the delivery of six eulogies from the last decade. I selected the eulogies I felt would be most enriching in this study based on the following five criteria; 1) the deceased is of the African American ethnic race, 2) the deceased has contributed substantially to, or significantly altered, the political, social, religious, or artistic realms of Black culture, 3) the eulogizer is of the African American ethnic race, 4) the eulogy was disseminated through some form of media at the time of delivery and made available to the general public by internet or on-demand viewing, and 5) transcripts of the eulogy are available and/or can be created from the available media recordings. I am defining the term African American as being of the

Black race and being born in the U.S. and claiming full lineal descent from enslaved Blacks and I determined, for the scope of my study, that it is most useful to look at the eulogies of those who have been important figures in Black communities because celebrities in cinema, television, music, sports, and even politics hold great influence in contemporary culture. Their celebrity uniquely enables them to be the guiding forces for cultural trends and preferences, and their commercial success often parallels the immense social acceptance they receive from their audience of fans and followers. Eulogized by people of the same or an even higher social status, the fame of the celebrities I selected reflects their relevancy in the public arena and proves the democratic and flexible format of the Eulogic experience; and in the upcoming chapters, I discuss the extent of this free and uncensored dialogue that public figures engage in as eulogists.

Recent sociological studies of celebrity have found that generally, in modern society, the identity and role of any celebrity is conceptualized through an “established narrative arc” (Kurzman 354). That narrative arc is divided into three components; it starts with a “compelling personal story about the future celebrity’s training where his or her extraordinary characteristics are developed,” then it tells of “the happenstance of the celebrity’s ‘discovery,’” and lastly “dwells on the celebrity’s ascent from triumph to triumph, overcoming challenges of all sorts” (354). Within African American culture, all of the components of the established narrative arc that shapes and undergirds a celebrity’s identity are indeed at work, as those who achieved superstardom and prominence within Black communities are often known, not just for the skills or accomplishments that brought them fame, but also for being famous as a person of color, who by consequence of their race, had to “overcome challenges.” A Black celebrity’s perceived ability to

succeed in the face of racial oppression cements him or her as an attractive figure for consumption in Black media; and interestingly enough, it also affords such celebrities influence and an authoritative voice in their ethnic community. As important representatives to and for African Americans, Black celebrities, by virtue of their fame, generally have the freedom and permission to say and do the things that reinforce or challenge the values and paradigms of the community to which they belong.

All references to the fame or celebrity of individuals mentioned in this project are made with the *ethos* that those individuals are, or have been, famous for truly exceptional achievements in their respective careers or professions. Author and literary essayist Joseph Epstein makes a distinction between fame and celebrity in his piece entitled “Celebrity Culture,” stating that “Fame...is based on true achievement; celebrity on broadcasting that achievement, or inventing something that, if not scrutinized too closely, might pass for achievement” (9). I am nonetheless using the words fame and celebrity interchangeably in my study, as both words represent the state of being easily recognizable in the mainstream media by the public at large. In addition, for every cultural figure I discuss, I clearly state and validate what their “true achievements” are through providing the biographical facts that list their honors, awards, accomplishments, and records broken or surpassed; I also discuss the context of their “celebrity” with references to the analysis of sociologists such as Dr. Ellis Cashmore, the author of *Black Celebrity*, and in the first chapter I specifically examine celebrity studies and the exigencies of African American celebrities’ social and cultural existence. I also must acknowledge at this juncture—before detailing the six celebrities whose eulogy I chose—that the politics of representation will inevitably spur questions about the authenticity and

veracity of the “Blackness” that I am asserting certain African American celebrities represent. These politics have to do with the fact that the platforms of fame and celebrity allow for open exhibition, and exploitation, of the Black experience by African American celebrities at an unprecedented scale, and I present later in this project how thinkers like bell hooks connect such displays to entrenched cultural conceptions of gender and identity.

All individuals who have reached the notable status of a celebrity must live with the knowledge that they will be on display, for the world to see—and there is undoubtedly some masking and censorship that is employed by the celebrity, because of this. With each eulogy I analyze, I am exploring the necessity for both the celebrity being eulogized, and the celebrity giving the eulogy, to have masked and censored themselves in certain areas, or on certain subjects, and the social implications of such a requirement to do so; and while it is true that the act of being self-aware enough to mask or censor oneself, in a highly voyeuristic society, is not specific to the rich and famous of Black America, the reality remains that African Americans specifically in this country have always had to exist with what W.E.B. Dubois terms in *The Souls of Black Folk* as double consciousness (2).

Dubois defines double consciousness as “a peculiar sensation...of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others...One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.” The position of African American celebrities in the public eye, constantly on display, adds a whole new dimension to W.E.B. Dubois’ conceptualization. The addition of the element of fame and celebrity, I believe, results in a triple consciousness for those

who are a highly valued symbol of “Black” in a Black America. Black celebrities have to identify with their racial identity within themselves (the first or single consciousness), they have to cope with their racial identity as a Black person in a Eurocentric society (the second or double consciousness), and they also have to reconcile their racial identity as the “ideal” Black man or woman for many of their African American fans and supporters (the third or triple consciousness). Hence, it is my argument that African American celebrities today function as a representation of Blackness, as a construct, to those within Black communities; and therefore, the cultural product they produce, which holds great sway among their people, is constantly affected by the proliferation of fame.

A powerful and candid publicized speech that directly exemplifies the reality of this compounded tension is a televised speech delivered by beloved Black comedian Bill Cosby in 2004. I see Cosby’s speech as valuable to this discussion because, like the aforementioned Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Cosby brought to forefront, in an open forum, important social problems within Black communities, thereby choosing to take advantage of such an opportunity to raise consciousness and voice bold criticisms. Cosby’s oration was to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the landmark decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*, and I would even classify it as a eulogy, not for a person, but for a long lost way of life, as Cosby spent much of it celebrating and lamenting the loss of a conservative lifestyle in Black communities. Donning a double-breasted suit, he spent much of his address referencing nostalgically a Civil Rights Era when African Americans constantly promoted ideals of self-sufficiency and community betterment. He condemned the Black poor and lower middle classes for not living up to the moral

standard that generations of past Blacks fought for and Cosby scolded the upper middle class and wealthy elite for not reaching back to both help and motivate those in need.

While some portions of the speech are generically entertaining, he does use signifying Black humor to chastise Blacks for completely wasting opportunities to better one's self through education and economic development. These were just some of Cosby's passionate and scathing remarks—

No longer is a person embarrassed because she is pregnant without a husband...Look at the incarcerated...these people are not prisoners...These people are going around stealing Coca-Cola. People getting shot in the back of the head over a piece of pound cake...These people are fighting hard to be ignorant...That's not my brother. And that's not my sista... We can't blame White people. Brown v. Board of Education is no longer their problem. ("Pound Cake Speech")

Cosby's address, known by many and listed on the Internet as the "pound cake speech," expressed his frustration with consistently poor and underdeveloped lower echelons of Black communities. On a televised platform and viewed by thousands across the nation, he berated the failure of African Americans, as an ethnic group, to remedy negative communal patterns of behavior. The outpouring of commentary and discussion that erupted among Black Americans in response to his fiery public performance demonstrates just how much of an impact a television and film celebrity, like Bill Cosby, had, and his ability because of his fame to facilitate serious intellectual engagement and robust dialogue about concerns and issues plaguing African American communities.

The aforementioned Christopher Alan Bracey discussed Cosby's speech in *Saviors or Sellouts*. He noted that internet polls on African American web communities like *Black Planet*, a social networking site for African Americans started in 1999 with over twenty million members, and *The Root*, an online publication about African

American culture, showed its users overwhelmingly voted that they agreed with the gist of what Cosby said (176-177). African American intellectuals and political figures, conversely, openly criticized Cosby for the content of his speech. Academic and media commentator Dr. Michael Eric Dyson was one of them. He blasted Cosby for “unmasking” the Black community and very negatively airing serious social issues, with little empathy for the scope of the problems and regard for how members of other ethnic groups might now perceive Blacks Americans (178). Although Dr. Dyson is not nearly as much of a celebrity as Cosby, he is a moderately famous scholar<sup>3</sup> known by the Black public and he routinely appears to do commentary about African American issues and events on national cable news programs. Dyson took issue with how Cosby used his celebrity, and the airwaves, for the social instruction of Black communities and Dyson challenged the idea that Cosby had the right—or the right perspective—when it came to discussing such concerns. This very dissension between two outspoken Black public figures about what is acceptable, or appropriate, for individuals who “represent” the African American people to say publically to their own community speaks to how highly such moments of open address are held in importance and also what can be learned when we look introspectively into who spoke at these engagements, how certain celebrities delivered their address, and why it had a lasting cultural impact.

In this dissertation’s investigation into the cultural impact of current Eulogic oratory, the six African American celebrities’ eulogies I am studying are: Whitney Houston, James Brown, Michael Jackson, Luther Vandross, Rosa Parks, and Coretta

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<sup>3</sup> An article published in 1997 in the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* looked at the celebrity of Black academics and found in 1996 Dr. Dyson was listed at no.12 for the top Black scholars being written about in popular media; but also noted where he received 144 overall mentions, that same year entertainer Bill Cosby received 4,193 (43).

Scott King. For Michael Jackson, Luther Vandross, and Rosa Parks, I chose the celebrities that I would consider to be their eulogists based upon their performed orations at the funerals, and I cite mainstream news reports and commentary from Black audiences to corroborate my decision. I will discuss the lives of all six celebrities and the significance of the identity of their eulogist in depth over the course of the next three chapters; the following short biographical details simply provide a brief overview of each celebrity's life, their accomplishments or distinctions, their current relevance to African American communities, and identifies the influential Black public figure who eulogized them:

*Whitney Houston (1963-2012)*

Whitney Houston was a female vocalist who rose to superstardom in the late seventies and eventually went on to earn seven consecutive multi-platinum albums, and had a successful film career, as an actress, with crossover and international appeal ("Biography," Whitney). She was celebrated for her ability to garner fans that were outside of her ethnic, racial, and national backgrounds. Dying at age forty-eight, the latter years of Houston's life however, were plagued by rampant substance abuse. She was an African American celebrity whose career paradoxically represented the height of professional accomplishment possible for Blacks over the last three decades and the depth of personal destruction that addiction and illegal drug use drags many in Black communities. Her funeral service was on February 18, 2012, and the eulogist was Bishop Marvin Winans, a *Grammy* award winning gospel music artist, pastor of Perfecting Church in Detroit, Michigan, and a close friend to the Houston Family ("Our Pastor").

*James Brown (1933-2006)*

Known as the “Godfather of Soul,” James Brown was a singer, songwriter, and performer who defined the direction of Black music for three decades, and is attributed to creating the genres of soul music in the Sixties, funk music in the Seventies, and the early vestiges of rap music in the Eighties (James Brown). His chart topping song, “Say it Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud” became a Black power anthem in the Sixties for African Americans and Brown remains a figure that Blacks uphold as model for how to maintain one’s cultural and ethnic distinctiveness, as a professional artist, in the face of discrimination—and yet still impact mainstream American society. His funeral was held on December 30, 2006, and his eulogist was the Rev. Al Sharpton, a Baptist Minister, civil rights activist, and media personality widely known for his liberal political stance and candid discussion of race issues and social injustice in America (“Rev. Al Sharpton”).

*Michael Jackson (1958-2009)*

Singer and entertainer Michael Jackson holds the informal title of “King of Pop” because of his award-winning musical career that included the sale of over 750 million units and over 450 professional awards (Michael Jackson). He holds the *Guinness* world record for the Most Successful Entertainer of all time. The American public memorialized Jackson for his impact on popular culture and the ability to unite different racial communities through his music, but Jackson also has negative associations with his reputation, primarily because of the controversy surrounding his eccentric outfits, child molestation accusations, and the medically

induced lightening of his skin color. The duality of positive and negative connotations with his identity, as a Black male public figure, represents the complexities of functioning as an African American man whose life legitimizes the premise that there are varied definitions of what it means to be Black, or personify “Blackness,” as a man in America. Like James Brown, the eulogist at Jackson’s memorial service on July 7, 2009, was the Rev. Al Sharpton (Michael Jackson).

*Luther Vandross (1951-2005)*

Luther Vandross was a singer and record producer who is easily credited as the leading romantic Rhythm & Blues artist of his generation, receiving thirty-one total *Grammy* award nominations from the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences from 1982-2004, and winning eight (Biography, Luther). A constant debate existed throughout his career concerning his sexuality because Vandross never had a public romantic relationship with a woman nor had any children. Vandross, however, never confirmed or denied his sexual orientation and it was only after his death that some of his friends allegedly verified that he was a homosexual (Out.com). His choice to conceal his private life and personal relationships, despite a highly acclaimed musical career in the public sphere, exemplifies how a Black man’s masculinity is determined and sustained, within his community, largely based upon his sexual orientation and how any variation from a heterosexual identity is circumnavigated. Vandross’ funeral was held on July 8, 2005 (Biography, Luther). The Rev. Henrietta Carter, a female pastor in Manhattan, New York, performed the formal eulogy for Vandross’ funeral but

most online news reports, blogs, and the like, however, do not mention her as the eulogist, and rather highlight the remarks of rhythm & blues and pop artist Patricia Louise Holte-Edwards, also known as Pattie Labelle (Biography, Luther). Labelle is a *Grammy* award winning artist whose career in the music industry spans over forty years and spawned several hit songs (Labelle and Lancaster 135). She is recognized during Vandross' funeral as a close, personal friend, who truly knew Luther Vandross well and I chose for this dissertation to analyze her remarks as the eulogist for Vandross.

*Rosa Parks (1913-2005)*

Rosa Parks was a Civil Rights Activist and public figure most known nationally for her participation in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, after being arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a bus in 1955 ("Rosa Parks"). She remains a symbol in Black America for courage, steadfastness, and the ability to weather the storms of racism and discrimination as a refined Black woman with dignity and class. Like the eulogy for Luther Vandross, I chose funeral remarks to analyze as the eulogy of Rosa Parks because of public response. Oprah Winfrey gave the remarks I chose as the eulogy for Parks at Parks' Washington D.C. memorial service, on October 31, 2005. Winfrey is a media figure, business woman, and philanthropist whose syndicated talk show ran for 25 years, earning her numerous professional awards, a huge fan following, and massive economic success as the first African-American female billionaire ("Oprah Winfrey's").

*Coretta Scott King (1927-2006)*

The wife of the assassinated Civil Rights Leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Coretta Scott King gained social prominence after her husband's death in 1968, as an activist in her own right. She worked to sustain the legacy of Dr. King by establishing the King Center for Nonviolent Social Change and campaigning for the eventual creation of a national holiday in his honor (About Mrs. King).

Coretta Scott King proved that it was possible, as a woman—and more specifically as a Black woman—born and raised in an era when women were relegated to the domestic sphere of the home, to be vocal, outspoken, and empowered to change her ethnic community and society at large. Her funeral was on May 7, 2006, and her eulogist was her daughter, the Rev. Bernice King (“About Mrs. King”). Bernice King is the second and youngest daughter of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta, and as a lawyer, ordained minister, and activist, she continues to serve and defend the oppressed and marginalized.

I opted to analyze Whitney Houston's eulogy first in this study because she is the most recent Black celebrity to have a publicized funeral; her very traditional service and the traditional eulogy both work as ideal objects of study for Chapter One, as I outline the emergence of the Eulogic Tradition in African American culture, review how the formation of the Black Church facilitated the integration of the tradition as a routine practice in African American communities, and establish what the standard accompaniments of Eulogic experiences are and how they work together to make it a significant celebratory moment. Following that discussion, in Chapter Two, I analyze the eulogies of James Brown and Michael Jackson to look at Black masculinity as it relates to racial representation and combatting racism, two common aspects of Black culture that

recently broadcasted eulogies seem prone to address. I then close the chapter by exploring Luther Vandross' eulogy as a unique and interesting indicator of how questions of sexuality inform conceptions of Black masculinity. Chapter Three examines the eulogies of Rosa Parks and Coretta Scott King, and how their lives, coupled with the lives of their famous female eulogists, challenge the norms of patriarchy still at work in Black culture, and by extension, the Eulogic Tradition. The final chapter of this dissertation evaluates the significant findings of this research and looks optimistically towards future areas of study within the Eulogic Tradition, such as completing a survey of eulogies delivered every day for the common man or woman and exploring African Americans'—as members of the African Diaspora—reception to, and interpretation, of publicly broadcasted eulogies for Blacks who are not African American and live outside of the United States.

### **THE RACE IN THE RHETORIC AND THE GENDER IN THE JEREMIAD**

To analyze comprehensively the Eulogic experience as an activity that aids in the progressive maintenance of Black culture, I am using the theoretical bodies of Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought. I find these two approaches most fitting because this research project is a recovery of a rhetorical tradition for which race, gender, and class are central. By situating the research within these two critical perspectives that examine Anglo-European society, culture, and history for its imbalanced distributions of power and mistreatment of marginalized groups, this method provides a context for exploring how the selected publicly delivered eulogies reflect the way that both Blacks in America and Black women, as marginalized groups, currently continue to sustain cultural bonds and kinship through the practice of eulogizing.

Within Critical Race Theory, the focus of research is upon the intersections of race, law, and power for people of color in a Eurocentric world (Delgado 3). Critical Race Theorists acknowledge that there are many formations of Blackness in America, and they simultaneously acknowledge that there are shared experiences among Blacks in America with discrimination, racism, and inequality as a result of their Blackness; and while not all Blacks in America are anchored in ancestry from slaves in the continental U.S., as Blacks living in America and residents subject to the country's laws, they are therefore subject to the country's inequities. Consequently, all Blacks share in the reality, as Cornel West states in the foreword of *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*, "of the historical centrality and complicity of law and government upholding white supremacy and hierarchies of ethnicity and race" (xi). My use of the term Blackness in this dissertation is not meant to imply or present that all Blacks and their identity are the same, or that all Black Americans are descendants of slaves and share that tradition, but rather to point out that burial services are one place where Black people in America of all generations and backgrounds can collectively come together and reflect on experiences of inequality and marginalization that have occurred presently, and in the past, in this country.

Noted Critical Race Theorists Richard Delgado's and Jean Stefancic's scholarship places great attention on the untold and undiscovered stories of people of color in relation to instances of racism. Critical Race theory uses such counter-narratives to gain a more authentic account of a significant era or period in the past and eradicate the prevailing narrow, one-sided mainstream narratives that often benefit the majority (43). I believe that such counter-narratives are found in the eulogies of all African Americans and in

looking at the eulogies of the aforementioned six celebrities, I will be gathering the stories and perspectives that are not commonly treated as complex, nuanced, or multi-layered by the mass media. Entering the transformed “hush harbor” of the Eulogic Tradition, I am in search of the details, contemplations, and reflections in the oratory of their eulogies that communicate the reality of the Black experience in America, but yet still remain on the outskirts of valued mainstream knowledge.

*Black Feminist Thought* examines, in part, the extent to which mainstream society does not routinely recognize the untold, empowering narratives of Black women and suppresses the “minds of grandmothers, mothers, and sisters,” and attempts to rectify this problem (Collins 13). Dr. Patricia Hill Collins is credited with coining the term Black Feminist Thought and writes in her book by the same name, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, that “Contemporary U.S. Black women are engaged in the struggle to reconceptualize all dimensions of the dialectic of oppression and activism as it applies to African American women.” This statement indicates that African American women are doing the work of uncovering and reclaiming the achievements and the experiences that are part of American and Black History but have not been rightfully credited to Black females. Cheryl Glenn is a noted feminist scholar of classical rhetoric and she constantly argues for the remapping of rhetorical traditions to include and canonize women, in particular, that contributed to the culture-making of societies through speech acts (3). Hence, I consider a portion of this dissertation to be a contribution to the recovery work that Collins and Glenn mutually advocate because through studying the eulogies of Whitney Houston, Coretta Scott King, and Rosa Parks, I argue that these women have great significance in Black communities,

not only for their achievements, but also for their ability to alter the course of African American culture when it comes to the ideology about, and representation of, Black women. I classify my approach to be an endeavor of Black Feminist Historiography and the fact that King and Parks were eulogized by accomplished African American women points to the socio-historical weightiness of their funeral moments to further cement the transformative shifts they were responsible for concerning the issue of gender equality within Black communities.

African American Literary thinker bell hooks remarked that the balance of power in African American culture still favors heteronormative conceptions of masculinity on display in authoritative roles (86). The stage or pulpit at a funeral ceremony is certainly a space of authority, and so, when women challenge such gender conventions and enter that space, what they say, how they say it, and why they say it becomes that much more important against the backdrop of hegemony. Exploring the role and function of the female eulogist will, therefore, lend itself to a valuable discussion of the present and contemporary power struggle that Black women endure who attempt to facilitate acts of cultural engagement within the context of an ethnic group that is itself resisting a position of powerlessness. Similarly, by comparing and contrasting the eulogies for controversial celebrities like Michael Jackson and Luther Vandross with that of James Brown, one of the quintessential Black male entertainers of the Black Power Movement, I will explore how “non-standard” representations of masculinity are politicized in open forums and in conflict with conceptions of Black manhood as defined by the “Cool Pose.” Psychologist Dr. Richard Majors and Sociologist Dr. Janet Billson define the Cool Pose as a strategy or method adopted by African American males to maintain a sense of self, confidence,

and respect while combatting a systemic history of oppression and social isolation in American society (xi). Since Brown, Jackson, and Vandross all represent different types of Black masculinity, they consequently dictate the different interpretations of the Cool Pose that I am examining.

## **THE LESSONS AND LIMITS OF A LEGACY**

I am optimistic that these six Eulogic orations will be a conduit for understanding how the preaching rhetoric at Black funerals acts as empowering public discourse—enabling the continuance of a lineage in which Black men and women instruct their community and influence conceptions of Black identity through a unique, and distinguished, oratorical form. By examining the dual experience of grieving and growing in African American communities facilitated by eulogy delivery, I provide insight into how the death of a celebrity allows Black communities to look inward, or internally, to rectify outward, or external, social ills and societal injustice. The increased ability of Black America to utilize media and broadcasting as a means to unite and share ideas means they are traversing “traditional boundaries” as modern society evolves and taking advantage of every available method to build and maintain community. This now common practice of broadcasting eulogies enables such a speech act, or performed public utterance, to execute two important cultural functions for African Americans that are worth exploring: 1) the establishment and redefining of the parameters of open conversation that communicates social norms and beliefs and 2) the use of open conversation to target Black communities with strategic messages that address social ills and promote healthy collective dialogue.

As with any study, there are restrictions with this research in that there is no way to definitively say that all of the resulting observations, from every close reading, are categorically correct or absolute. That is, in my careful analysis of the eulogies of the African American social and political figures selected, it is impossible for me to posit that every conclusion I argue concerning the larger state of Black culture, based upon the eulogies I study, is an absolute truth about the cultural values of African American communities. Likewise, I do not want to imply that I will discuss every perspective, or opinion, of every African American community member throughout the course of this project. There is simply no way to account for and include every divergent point of view or anomaly within the scope of my research. One can only acknowledge that such divergence and anomalies exist. Also, I acknowledged earlier that representations of Blackness and Black identity can indeed become negative, hollow misrepresentations for some; still, I do not believe that the possibility or even presence of such misrepresentations prevents or disqualifies scholars and researchers from studying how African Americans represent themselves before one another and the impact of one individual's legacy in their communities. To question the authenticity of certain representations is not unreasonable; and rather than consider this line of questioning a downside to my study, I humbly carry such questions with me forward as I explore how Black culture is shaped through continued active participation in the African American Eulogic Tradition and how representations of Blackness are defined and measured.

During the delivery of publically broadcasted eulogies, there are commercials and other interruptions that are specific to the format of a televised event. Television stations receive large amounts of funding through their sale of advertising via commercials.

Communications professor Dr. Katherine Kinnick reports that TV commercials are “a part of the cultural fabric that constructs our perceptions of our own group and other groups in society” (99). Consequently, when eulogies for famous Black figures air on stations like *CNN*, *MSNBC*, and *Fox News*, companies enjoy a lucrative opportunity to profit from the televised event and purchase advertising space.

The field of Communications employs Cultivation Theory to analyze the capacity for television, with all its marketing, promotions, and advertising accouterments, to change or cultivate the attitudes of its viewers, and James Shanahan and Michael Morgan explain in *Television and Its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research*, that “stories that animate our cultural environment have three distinct functions...(1) to reveal how things work, (2) to describe what things are, and (3) to tell us what to do about them” (ix). My analysis in this dissertation points to how the publically shared eulogies for Black Americans, by Black Americans, fits with the last function that Shanahan and Morgan outline, but Shanahan and Morgan assert in this same text that television commercials, as the “the advertising messages and images we see and hear everyday,” are the “instructions, laws, regulations, cautionary tales, commands, slogans, *sermons*, and exhortations” that the mass media—and the companies that pay to participate in the mass media—want to effectively disseminate to the viewing public (x). Dr. Kinnick corroborates with this perspective and notes that, “Of particular concern to people of color is the major role that the mass media play in influencing the knowledge and attitudes of the larger population toward minority group” (99). A palpable element of commodification therefore exists in the present practice of the Eulogic Tradition, and I cannot ignore it or take it lightly in this study.

Undoubtedly, large advertising dollars were amassed by the networks which aired the memorial services for Whitney Houston and Michael Jackson, who are recognized by the public for their international fame and impact, and they surely caused companies and businesses to consider the benefits of displaying their goods and services during the scheduled breaks throughout the televised funeral programming. In chapters two, three, and four of this dissertation, I list in the introductions to my analysis of each eulogy, the many television stations that broadcasted the eulogies live; some of these stations even designated commentators to discuss the services in detail, both before and after the funerals took place. Hence, these cultural moments that I am arguing were moving, reparative, and empowering for Blacks, were also couched by a financial strategy that reflects the economic order of modern society: an order that insists all social and political events be measured by, and maximized for, profits and gains. This commodification of both the memorial event and the collective grieving experience of Black communities is arguably an exploitation of the deaths of Black celebrities and the grief people experienced as a result of their passing; but I must also point out that this same phenomenon of television broadcasting that allows companies and businesses to exploit the cultural practice for monetary gain, also allows eulogy speakers to remember, rewrite, and re-member the bodies of African American public figures.

Death and mortality allow for a momentary opportunity of reflection, when the life of a person, and the “good” and the “bad” associated with them, can be evaluated without literal interaction, or input, from the deceased. Celebrities, as famous people, thus have an opportunity for their identities to be reconfigured when they die, by family, friends, fans, and community members; it is my assertion that the counter-narratives of

Black public figures in eulogies rehabilitate negative images of these specific Black individuals, ultimately doing the work of re-membering their Black bodies, for the benefit of the legacy of the celebrity and the benefit of changing the overall public perception of how Blacks are viewed. George Yancy writes in *Black Bodies, White Gazes* that Black Bodies are continually subject to destructive depictions in films, news media, television, and by government officials (4). Yancy goes on to say that as a Black individual, "...my Black body, my existence in Black, poses a threat. It is not necessary that I first perform a threatening action. The question of *deeds* is irrelevant. I need not *do* anything." These personal statements by Yancy reflect his consciousness of the bias and prejudice against Black bodies in mainstream White society, and historically, this bias in the U.S. has resulted in the dehumanization, abuse, and exploitation of Blacks. Serious civil rights work over the last century was intended to mend and reconfigure such negative perceptions, but Critical Race Theorists astutely recognize that racist ideations remain and they persistently predispose Whites to "see" and judge Blacks falsely. Narratives in the public domain that oppose these characterizations are thus all the more necessary to combat the injurious beliefs that mutilate Black bodies and the spirits that possess them.

Therefore, even Black celebrities, with their affluence, opulence, and adoration, remain unable to escape the forces of racism that oppress the skin they are in. The aforementioned sociologist Dr. Ellis Cashmore writes in *Black Celebrity*, that rich and famous Blacks, like supermodel Tyra Banks, do represent the oxymoronic "attainable fantasy," of overcoming limitations of race, to amass wealth and the powers of agency and influence that come with fortune and assets—but they are still all the more rich in "incongruity" and instability, standing upon a high rung on the economic ladder, but

holding a low position in the racial hierarchy (90). Cashmore makes clear that because racism still exists and plagues Blacks regardless of their economic or social position, there is no amount of prosperity that can ward off the intolerant and discriminatory ethnic notions from which America cannot “purify” itself (3). As such, I am inclined to consider Black celebrities in my study as representative of a hyperreality for Blacks, rather than an “attainable fantasy,” because the lines between freedom and bondage from certain setbacks and obstructions due to racism and racial stereotypes are at any given time varied, veiled, approximate, and even unpredictable. The only certainty concerning Black people and racism in the U.S. is that it exists and it can harm Blacks through diverse lines of attack. Andrew M. Kaye, who has published scholarship on the politics of celebrity for Black athletes, explained that historically for Black celebs, “The pressures of celebrity and the effort to please across racial and class boundaries meant that truth and accuracy were not key elements in publicity campaigns...” (14). There is a sense that regardless of what the true social condition and context is from which famous Blacks must operate, there is a permissible and tolerable degree of falsehood and fabrication that exists to enable the public figures to be the epitome of success and achievement for African Americans in a racially charged environment.

Consequently, I am neither ignoring the reality that the rhetoric in the six eulogies I examine is broadcasted at a moment of public consumption that is not free from commercial advertisers profiting from the high amount of viewers watching, nor that the celebrities in attendance to these homegoings may be making conscientious appearances to visibly “grieve” in order to gain some sort of benefit to, and with, their own fans. This study takes these realities into consideration—and even elaborates upon them in future

chapters where addressing them is most appropriate—all the while maintaining that such factors are not conditions that preclude my research from bringing to light how the African American Eulogic Tradition operates as a positive ritual to encounter and discover the diverse lives and experiences of Black people. According to Patricia A. Brieschke, author of “Reparative Praxis: Rethinking the Catastrophe That Is Social Science:”

Once we have acknowledged our own philosophical stance, and state overtly what we believe about individuals, society, and the role of education, then as social theorists and educational researchers our responsibilities and activities acquire direction and boundaries. The framework of our task as researchers becomes one of developing meanings that not only do not further violate human life but that also are based on an emancipatory approach to societal self-direction. (176)

It is essential to acknowledge the politics that surround the structures of culture and celebrity, as well as history, because as I proceed, I will reference them repeatedly as I contextualize the public delivery of these eulogies.

I firmly believe that this tradition, which centers upon the important exercise of collectively grieving and celebrating the life of a person who has died, has a motivating and reassuring affect upon African American communities that participate in it. Therefore, there is a strong and unwavering theme of empowerment that manifests throughout this project, and that is due to the nature of the Eulogic Tradition’s inspirational function. Homegoing services, and the eulogies that mark the climax of these services, have helped to build and restore the identities and representations of Blacks in America within themselves, and it is for this reason that I consider my dissertation’s presentation of the Eulogic Tradition, and its historical origins, to be a narrative that is inherently reparative and rehabilitative to the atrocious, and at times even unspeakable, history of chattel slavery that several Blacks in the United States identify

and commiserate with. Scholar and political theorist Judith N. Shklar stated "...the creation of a new kind of history, new in its subject matter, in its greater reliability and, above all, new in its aims... secure[s], for future generations, history worth knowing" (645). The Eulogic Tradition offers "a new kind of history" to the study of African Americans and their long and storied past in the U.S., and my study of its impact in Black communities of the past and the present certainly introduces to current and future scholars a compelling and introspective look into an African American cultural practice that is simultaneously profound, paradoxical, ironic, and affirmative.

## ***HAVIN' CHURCH: OUTLINING THE LEGACY THROUGH THE LENS OF WHITNEY HOUSTON'S LAST RITES***

Whitney Houston's funeral service functions essentially as the control in this study of the Eulogic Tradition as a Black cultural practice. All of the events surrounding her funeral proceeding—from the initial fervor created by the media after her death on February 11, 2012, to the star-studded church service seven days later that culminated with Bishop Marvin Winans' climactic eulogy—exemplify the current components of this tradition as a public phenomenon. Her funeral also signifies what the loss of a prominent public figure means to African American communities, as there is a cultural expectancy inherent in the Eulogic Tradition because it enables the collective celebration of lives transitioning from this world to the afterlife. The Eulogic Tradition also facilitates the parsing through of what the life of the deceased actually meant to the masses and how best to move forward honoring and learning from the deceased's legacy. In this chapter, through analyzing Whitney Houston's eulogy (see Appendix A), I examine how and why many Black church denominations began to use the term "homegoing" to identify their burial practices, how her publicized service reveals that African Americans generally support airing funerals or homegoing celebrations, and why the eulogies given at homegoings function to systematically reaffirm the tradition of bringing closure to the end of life through open, communal dialogue that I call African American Compound Collective Rhetoric (AACCR). This chapter also examines why a more culturally diverse and racially integrated society, in post-millennial America, actually operates as an impetus for a sustained commitment, by Black communities as

members of a minority group, to maintain this specific tradition as a socially constructive cultural custom.

## **ORIGINS OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCH**

In 2013, on the day of her funeral, a cold February 18th in Newark, NJ, Whitney Elizabeth Houston was being laid to rest at New Hope Baptist Church, the church she grew up attending as a child. The entire world appeared to be watching that day. All national and even international major cable television news outlets were there in Newark—*CNN*, *MSNBC*, *FOX News*, and the *British Broadcasting Corporation*, or *BBC*, to name a few—and several news stations' videos of the live broadcast can now be found on *Youtube*. Just days after Houston's death on February 11<sup>th</sup>, the news outlets began showing continuous coverage of the story on her passing and they all advertised their planned future broadcasting and live streaming of her funeral for the general public to view. The intrigue and anticipation surrounding what her final moments in the public eye would be like continued to grow. Prior to the service, an anonymous source leaked a photo to the tabloid press of Houston's lifeless body, in her casket, at a family-only service (Fisher). Thus, by the time February 18<sup>th</sup> arrived, the public speculation about her funeral was at an all time high.

Several celebrities attended the service, and in many ways the star-studded guest list made it seem more like a gala event than a funeral proceeding (Houston 270). Noted attendees included billionaire media mogul Oprah Winfrey, actor Kevin Costner, music industry executive Clive Davis, and tenured news anchorwoman Dianne Sawyer (Gast and Carroll). Invitations granted celebrities and attendees access to the service and the high profile nature of the funeral demonstrated the far-reaching impact of Houston as

both a prominent social figure and performer. According to the commemorative article published by the journal *Popular Music and Society*, Houston was a multi-platinum album-recording artist and successful film actress whose humble beginning, as a national magazine print model, cannot really be considered humble at all (Roberts 701). Her talent garnered her praise by many as one of the best American Pop and R&B singers of all time. Houston, therefore, by most accounts was an accomplished woman who seemed to be destined for a long life of great success. Her music and entertainment legacy, however, will always be shrouded by the reality that she was found dead in the bathtub of a hotel at the age of forty-eight, largely as a result of prolonged drug abuse.

In a manner that seemed effortless, Houston rose to superstardom and received the adoration of millions of fans, and the biographical book about her life written by her mother, Cissy Houston, entitled *Remembering Whitney: My Story of Love, Loss, and the Night the Music Stopped*, discusses how Houston became an archetype for what was possible for women, and particularly Black women, to become and accomplish in society today. Houston's life, however, also reflected the mental and emotional cost of her superstardom and her mother Cissy, along with many in her close circle of family and friends, say that Houston was driven to drug and alcohol abuse as a coping mechanism for the responsibility and burden she felt as a prototype, and pioneer of sorts, for Blacks and women to reach new levels of social and economic greatness (Houston 100). Her worth to the public, after all, was not wrapped up solely in her status as a famous person, but more so from the reality that she was a public figure that transcended the boundaries and limitations of her race and gender through the use of her talents. The significance of who Houston was, and why her funeral was so important, is therefore multi-faceted.

Although she could not prevent succumbing to her own personal struggles that were self-inflicted and tenaciously destructive, that did not eliminate her weighty influence and impact in the lives of those who enjoyed her music and were both inspired and enriched by her life.

To begin the funeral, the New Hope Baptist Church's mass choir officially opened the service in song and when watching one of the many *Youtube* videos posted, you can see the family of Houston proceed into the sanctuary, to their seats (HighwayHunkie). After this, the church's clergymen delivered remarks, offering prayers of condolence and comfort to those who were obviously grieving. Then close family and friends shared what they remembered most fondly about Houston. In between these remarks, pop and R&B singers such as Alicia Keys and Stevie Wonder sang heartfelt tributes to Houston. By the time Bishop Marvin L. Winans arose to deliver the official eulogy, several people had already spoken and indeed given what some would consider moving eulogies in their own right.

Before Houston's service even commenced, many television reporters labeled the funeral as an official representation of a "homegoing" service (Gast and Carroll). Homegoings are traditional celebratory ceremonies in Black communities for those who have died and gone "home" to heaven and they are an integral part of the African American Christian tradition. Houston's funeral was indeed proceeding along as what one might call a typical or customary homegoing funeral in the African American Church, and *CNN* went so far as to report that by having her homegoing, "Whitney Houston went to church one last time" (Gast and Carroll). This was not necessarily a far off declaration, as most of the accouterments of the traditional Black funeral experience

in America are derived from the religious customs and legacies of the African American Church.

The very idea of a “homegoing” or “going home” can be mapped back through slavery, to the first Blacks in America (Holloway 175). The progression and transformation of Africans from foreign, indentured workers to church-going, God-fearing American slaves, with their own unique Christian burial traditions, is indeed a complex narrative of how Blacks merged their native African heritage with Protestant Christianity, and by doing so found a means of mental escape, social subversion, and self-expression. Before I discuss Houston’s homegoing further, and examine Bishop’s Winans’ didactic eulogy in the context of this traditional service, the following section will map the concurrent establishment of the Black church in America and the emergence of the Eulogic Tradition so the connections I highlight later in the chapter between the Black church, homegoings, and the rhetoric of eulogies are understood with relative ease and with real-world examples.

In Early America, a time period that ranges roughly from the years 1607-1799, Christian religious beliefs and doctrine determined the social customs and prescriptions for nearly all non-native communities in operation at that time (Sweet 5). The many Protestant groups that settled to form the nation of the United States created a notably religious environment from which even Black churches were birthed. Religious groups such as the Puritans established a symbiotic relationship between religion and communication through canonical biblical texts and religious oratory; their establishment laid the foundation for the subsequent involvement of the Christian religion in the significant societal changes and advancements of all of the major American Christian

movements, and their doctrines, including African American Christianity and even today's Contemporary Evangelical Spirituality in Black America. Jewel Spangler's text, *Virginians Reborn*, specifically recounts the experiences of Baptist Christians in the first American colony of Virginia and how different denominational clergy during this era were extremely important to the development of emerging Black slave communities (164). Likewise, the article "I Saw The Book Talk: Slave Readings of the First Great Awakening," by Frank Lambert, explains the impetus of the nineteenth century Christian revival movements and the appeals to the social and moral fiber of slave populations that took place during them (121, 12).

In the text *Virginians Reborn*, Spangler directly connects the first materialization of the African American Christian tradition to the emergence of the Baptist denomination in Christianity. Unlike the then prominent European institution of the Anglican Church, Baptists were open to, and accepting of, the lower classes of the White working poor and Blacks. The Baptist Church during this era was known for its community service to all people, its willingness to help the widows and orphans within their congregation, its leaders holding public office, and its later staunch support of and participation in the Revolutionary War (127, 128). According to Spangler, Baptists' early disposition towards a democratic church organization did leave many non-converts afraid that their democratic ideals might harm the very undemocratic institution of slavery at work in the new Virginian colony (164). They worried unnecessarily however, because while African slaves participated in Baptist churches as second-class members, only a rare few were ever granted leadership in the church or freedom from enslavement by their Baptist owners as a result of their Christian convictions and allegiance.

This reality indicates that although Baptist churches in the first colony of Virginia did admit Blacks, they ultimately chose to ignore the inconsistency of being a denomination built on equality and brotherhood, while their wealthy members actively engaged in the injustice and oppression of slavery. As a result, in many ways, they ended up as restrictive as the larger White Anglican majority and most slaves did not greatly benefit from their minimal equality and freedom in the White Baptist church. There were less popular denominations than the Baptists, however, that emerged in the colonies and extended more rights to Blacks, specifically seeking to make slaves literate. The early Presbyterian Church in America is one example. Samuel Davies, a White Presbyterian preacher during the New Light Movement in the mid 1700's, spent most of his theological career preaching to Black slaves in America and providing them the opportunity to learn to read and write (Richards 335).

Davies was one of the first "abolitionists" who believed in Christianizing slaves and his ministry, perhaps, marks the documented origins of when Blacks began to transform Christianity as an organized religion for their own use. Although evidence indicates that Davies did not staunchly condemn the institution of slavery itself, he acted as an advocate for Blacks with their White slave masters so as to provide them opportunities for literacy and the elimination of brutal, inhumane treatment (Richards 336). Davies saw literacy as essential to Blacks being able to convert to Christianity and becoming effective, practicing Church members. He received transatlantic help in his pursuit from members of the larger Presbyterian Church in England and became well known for his exceptional campaign that led to the conversion of several slaves and poor Whites in the Virginia colony around the Hanover County area.

According to the late Dr. Jeffrey Richards, a scholar of Early American Literature, ministers like Davies, who worked to assist Blacks in becoming literate, provided slaves a means to know the language of their White owners (345). Davies believed in the “full humanity” of Blacks, and in his eyes their social condition did not preclude them from salvation. The fact that some White ministers believed Blacks had the intellectual capacity to learn and live as moral, Christian people, directly contradicted the ideology of the slaveholding South and the White members of Christian churches which labeled Blacks as inept and inferior (346). This attracted some Blacks in Early America to become church members. It is likely that as individuals abruptly taken captive to America, they still remembered and longed for their former “home” (341).

Frank Lambert’s article on the First Great Awakening describes how the first church-going Blacks experienced the Early American revival movement as not just a revival of their spirit and a spiritual awakening, but also as an “active, intellectual effort,” whereby Blacks had a motivation “to learn as much as a desire for salvation” and “not only consumed texts, but produced their own meanings” (14). Lambert notes that the awakening of the 1730s and 1740s “represented the first time Blacks embraced Christianity in large numbers” and it is not surprising that they did, as any shred of livelihood that replicated their lives of liberty and relative autonomy in Africa, before slavery, would certainly have been a welcome reprieve. Likewise, the Christian belief of going home in the afterlife to heaven with God certainly paired well with their longing for deliverance from their social condition. Thus, the very concept of a homegoing, which was used to describe the funeral of Whitney Houston, clearly finds its roots in this early tradition of perceiving death as a celebratory, and even welcome return, to a better place.

Most homegoings today in Black communities are usually organized through the combined efforts of a Black church and a Black owned funeral home—a popular business for Blacks to start and own during most of the twentieth century—that put together the celebration for the deceased individual. There are differences amongst Black communities concerning the open, communal gatherings that funeral services became in different cities of the U.S. Dr. Suzanne E. Smith explains in her book, *To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African Way of Death*, that at the start of Reconstruction, societies for aid and benevolence in free black communities of the North and the South helped Blacks pay for the cost of a funeral and to help ensure a traditional burial (40). The start of the twentieth century was the beginning of modern funeral homes that served Black Americans and included funeral directors and professional mortuary services, and places like Harlem, New York became known for elaborate homegoings with pageantry that included luxury hearses during the Harlem Renaissance (81, 86). A recent 2013 Public Broadcasting Station (PBS) documentary, *Homegoings*, shows that the contemporary version of this African American burial service is not hugely different from the version that existed when these funeral services were modernized at the turn of the century, and homegoings today usually consists of an embalmed body that is beautifully displayed in a casket, music and dance to encourage celebrating the dead going to a better place, the attendance and participation of many family and friends in the community, and a well preached eulogy by a local spiritual leader (Turner).

Before the first Great Awakening or the modernization of the homegoing service, in 1770, slave Phyllis Wheatley, the first Black writer of Early American poetic literature to be printed, published a very famous poem that was a eulogy to Anglican preacher and

evangelist George Whitfield, who spearheaded the start of the First Great Awakening in America (Willard 244). Although George Whitfield was not Black, Wheatley's Eulogic poem for him references the idea of him "going home" and existing in the afterlife. The final four lines of the first stanza read:

He leaves this earth for Heav'n's unmeasur'd height,  
And worlds unknown, receive him from our sight;  
There WHITEFIELD wings, with rapid course his way,  
And sails to Zion, through vast seas of day.

Wheatley's verse reminded her readers that Whitfield was enjoying a new life—an afterlife—in the promised land of "Heav'n" that was only accessible through death. The remainder of the poem then suggests what Whitfield would have the world to do in the wake of his new residence in heaven. According to Wheatley, Whitfield would have all people of America and Britain—his original native homeland—to accept Christian salvation and to give equal treatment to the "Africans" who practice Christianity as their brothers and sisters in Christ. Scholar Carla Willard discusses how revolutionary Wheatley's call for equality was at the time of the poem's printing:

...the dialogue conducted with "Whitefield" functions as a sermon dedicated not to the then memory of his mission but to a remedy that, in the poem, challenges the unjust difference in the American present...the Jeremiad of "Whitefield" points implicitly to the uncommon, to the forgotten, to a classist and race-divided society...the sermon explicitly represents an ex-slave master encouraging society toward complete emancipation. (246)

Willard's commentary points to the fact that Wheatley's eulogy for Whitfield does more than merely eulogize Whitfield and lament his death. Like nearly all African American eulogists who have participated in the Eulogic Tradition, Wheatley, as a eulogist, took advantage of the eulogy as an opportunity for strategic communication and argues with a

serious, authoritative tone, that Blacks as fellow Christians deserve freedom, humane treatment, and respect.

Dwight Callahan, author of *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible*, explains in his text that slaves in Early America, especially those literate like Wheatley, recognized Christianity and the Bible as a source of validation for their freedom. According to Callahan, the themes of exile and exodus found in biblical narratives supported and affirmed slaves' hopes for deliverance and this ideology would actually become known as Black liberation theology. Callahan discusses in the following passage the way slaves accepted and understood the Bible as a text they heard preached and read:

American slaves did not read the Bible through, or even over and against, the traditions they brought with them from Africa: they read the Bible as a text into which these traditions were woven. The characters and events of the Bible became the functional equivalent of the ancestors and heroes long celebrated in West Africa. The many ancestral and natural spirits were subsumed in the Holy Spirit, and the mighty acts of God supplanted ancient tales of martial valor. Biblical patriarchs and heroes now sat on the stools of the esteemed ancestors of ages past. (xii)

His analysis of how slaves experienced biblical scriptures is important because it indicates that slaves embraced Christianity through seeing it as an extension of their own African beliefs. Later in Chapter Three, I discuss how Black liberation theology—which centers upon the belief that God and biblical scripture advocates deliverance for Blacks from all forms of social and economic oppression—benefited Blacks during the Abolitionist Movement, and a century later with civil rights, but did little to help Black women address the issues of patriarchy and sexism.

It is reasonable to assert that by reaching out to slaves, Presbyterian minister Samuel Davies recognized that slaves in Early America possessed a compatibility with incorporating Christianity as a part of their customs and traditions. Even for a clergyman,

his effort to be a minister to Blacks as well as Whites was out of the ordinary, especially considering the violent and dehumanizing institution of slavery that rapidly grew in the southern colonies. Davies undoubtedly had shortcomings in his pursuit to bring ministry and literacy to Blacks, but for fifteen years he served those whom he believed, contrary to public opinion, were worth sharing salvation. As Blacks became more involved as Christian parishioners to Davies and select other like minded ministers, the traditions within their communities became more Christianized and religious funeral traditions developed like “putting objects both in and on top of graves,” “singing and shouting over the body,” “delaying “preaching the funeral” for weeks,” and holding “wakes or setting up” meetings around the body (Holloway 175, 197, 242, 274).

Another Early American minister who, like Davies, was instrumental to converting Black parishioners, improving the perception of Blacks in the Protestant church, and inadvertently enabling Black Christian traditions like the “homegoing” service to continuously develop was Lemuel Haynes, a mulatto preacher who pastored White congregations for over forty years in Vermont’s Christian churches (Macclam xi). Born in 1753 to a Black father and a White mother, he was an indentured servant to a foster family that sheltered him from the harsh reality of slavery from early childhood into his young adult life (xx). His writings, as a young man in his twenties, indicate that he was well aware of enslaved Blacks’ need for freedom and believed that the same quest for independence in the Revolutionary War should be undertaken for the freedom of slaves (xxi). Haynes knew that the Revolutionary War created a context of social flux for the uncertain future of America and that many anti-slavery campaigns could gain steam

and influence the budding country if they capitalized upon the rhetoric of resistance and protest circulating.

Sylvia Frey, in her work, *Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age*, traces the social changes for Blacks in America during the Revolution through the changes in the religious culture of the time; because religion was such a significant social sphere of life for people living during that period, her chapter entitled “The Christian Social Order: Reformulating the Master’s Ideology,” discusses how Christianity paradoxically offered, for converted Blacks, a line of attack against slavery, and for White slaveholders, a method to police not only their slaves, but their consciences as well (243). In the early nineteenth century, slaveholders recognized that by claiming the ownership and use of slaves as a form of evangelism or “rescue,” they could vindicate their continuation of the institution of slavery. Therefore, most evangelical church leadership, even if they did pass resolutions about the immorality or evils of slavery, gave way to accommodation in order to keep slave holding church members and foster proselytizing and the First—and later Second—Great Awakenings that traveled through the South (250). Through Christianity, slaves gained a psychological escape from the perils of a savage economic system and slaves owners could validate enslavement of non-European others and encourage segregation between the two races (Frey 266).

As the Methodist denomination emerged in the Americas as a legitimate force in the Protestant Church, a select number of Methodist preachers, like Dr. Thomas Coke who toured the Virginia preaching circuit in the 1780’s, spoke out openly against slavery (245). In Charleston, South Carolina, the Methodist General Conference supported evangelizing to Africans and creating schools to teach them to read and write (255).

These incidents of public condemnation of the cruel institution by Methodist religious leaders, coupled with the large amount of Black congregants who subsequently started attending church, caused revolt hysteria to sweep through the South—somewhat confirmed by Gabriel’s revolt in Virginia in 1800<sup>4</sup> (257). This reinforced the position, for most slave owners, that certain Protestant denominations could not be trusted. To calm fears and maintain an amicable relationship with the slaveholding public, in 1822 Baptist preacher Dr. Richard Furman published a pastoral letter which encouraged familiar themes of paternalism and the divine order of White masters to rule Black slaves (259). The important point that Sylvia Frey’s discussion makes about the White denominations’ impact on the formation of African American Christianity during the Revolutionary War, is that evangelical religion undeniably crafted Black culture in the Eastern and Southern states as the United States began to form, thereby influencing the customs and oratory that would become the religious foundation for the Eulogic Tradition.

Frey lists some of the earliest and influential ordained Black/mixed-race ministers of both Baptist and Methodist interracial congregations credited with starting the legacy of the African American Church as the aforementioned Lemuel Haynes of Vermont, Jesse Peters and Henry Francis of Georgia, and William Lemon, Jacob Bishop, and David Payne, all of Virginia. Later, there was Richard Allen of Philadelphia, and Harry Hosier and John Charles of the Carolinas (269). These extraordinary Black ministers, of the late 1700s and early to mid 1800s, never held the same executive power as White ministers to discipline or correct White parishioners if they had them, even if they were in positions of authority over mixed race congregations. In all denominations, the egalitarian elements of

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<sup>4</sup> Gabriel was a literate slave in Richmond, VA, owned by tobacco farmer Thomas Prosser. He attempted to organize a revolt in 1800 with 25 other slaves and was caught before the revolt took place and hung after his capture, as were many of his coconspirators (Aptheker 220).

the Christian church certainly had their limits. Any degree of equality in the church was not meant to contest the social control of White patriarchy. However, the inclusion of Blacks into White congregations did result in a few improvements in the domestic treatment of some slaves. As State court cases like *Allen v. Cunningham* (1824) and *State v. Negro Will* (1834) granted slaves the right to decide their religious affiliation as rational beings and to defend themselves from life-threatening beatings, some slave owners began to accept churches' admonishment to treat slaves better as converted members of the Christian family (276, 278).

The eventual ordination of Black preachers in the early nineteenth century and the education of colored congregants fostered the development of what we know as African American Church. This is the institutional context in which most modern day funerals are held and where Eulogic oratory that functioned as more than simply laudatory words, became the norm. Black churches, in cities in the states of Maryland, the Carolinas, and Georgia, started to appear in the 1800s, and as more developed that catered to Blacks only, mixed race congregations soon dissipated (290). Interestingly enough, the Tidewater area of Virginia where I work and reside is historically recorded as being the first locale to produce autonomous, self governing African American churches with Black leaders (286). Throughout the nineteenth century, Blacks continued to develop their own forms of worship and spiritual expression in the church that were decidedly different from White congregations and this would include burial rites and traditions. African Americans repurposed the Christian religion to fit their spiritual and societal needs as oppressed individuals and once this transformation occurred, the Black Church firmly established itself as a means for African Americans to connect with God, with

their environment in America, and with the hope of strength and self-sufficiency as a people.

As more Blacks connected to the Christian Church learned to read and write, and the establishment of Black religious leadership became permanent, African American ministers published sermons, and like Phyllis Wheatley, also wrote and delivered eulogies for famous deceased White political or religious leaders that became printed texts for the public (Smith 714-715). Frances Foster Smith, in the article “A Narrative of the Interesting Origins and (Somewhat) Surprising Developments of American Print Culture,” states that the very start of African American Literature began with the printing of such religious texts and sermons and that “The most consistent and influential element in the first century of African American literary production was Afro-Protestantism...” (715). The future founder of the African Methodist Episcopal church, the Reverend Richard Allen, delivered a eulogy for George Washington that the Philadelphia Gazette printed in 1799; and in his piece, he made a point to mention Washington’s crusade for liberty and his positive treatment of his slaves. Allen stated:

And it is now said by an authority on which I rely, that he who ventured his life in battles, whose “head was covered” in that day, and whose shield the “Lord of hosts” was, did not fight for that liberty which he desired to withhold from others—the bread of oppression was not sweet to his taste, and he “let the oppressed go free”—he “undid every burden”—he provided lands and comfortable accommodations for them when he kept this “acceptable fast to the Lord”—that those who had been slaves might rejoice in the day of their deliverance.

If he who broke the yoke of British burdens “from off the neck of the people” of this land, and was hailed his country’s deliverer, by what name shall we call him who secretly and almost unknown emancipated his “bondmen and bondwomen”—became to them a father, and gave them an inheritance!

Although Allen’s eulogy for Washington, like Wheatley’s for Whitfield, was not composed on behalf of a Black man, the content within it was nonetheless strategic. Like

Wheatley's, Allen's eulogy celebrated the deceased's role as a trailblazer for and proponent of Black liberation. Allen celebrated that George Washington was a liberator for slaves as much as he celebrated the first president's role as a liberator of the American nation and he definitely took a risk as a Black preacher discussing the importance of emancipating Blacks in a sermon that would be printed during the height of slavery in the Americas.

The genre of the eulogy, as epideictic or ceremonial oratory, enabled the Reverend Richard Allen to make such bold affirmations in support of the freeing of Black slaves because he did it in a dedicatory fashion, as part of a tribute. The printing of both Wheatley and Allen's eulogies, as popular Early American literary pieces despite their then controversial content about equality and freedom for African Americans, demonstrates that historically, Eulogic oratory delivered by African Americans was more than stirring, commemorative speeches. In Black communities, the eulogy literally became a means of agency to speak and address social causes with conviction, confidence, and candor. Therefore, on February 18, 2012, when Bishop Marvin Winans stood in the pulpit of New Hope Baptist Church to deliver his strategic Eulogic sermon for Whitney Houston, at her homegoing, he joined the ranks of many Black ministers who, for over two centuries, preached eulogies latent with moral points and conscientious arguments. Moreover, Bishop Winans was even standing in a space where there existed a great legacy of caring Black public servants, preachers, and eulogists. New Hope Baptist Church is itself over a hundred years old and a fixture in the Newark, NJ Black community ("Our Church"). According to the church's website, New Hope first organized in 1903 and later became incorporated in 1918. For over a century, the church

actively completed community outreach, food distribution programs, and social services. Thus, the very church hosting Whitney Houston's homegoing was a repository of Black culture and customs and evidence of the historical significance of African Americans collectively practicing their religious traditions.

## **THE PRAXIS OF PREACHING**

Bishop Winans began his eulogy by declaring in a calm but authoritative tone, "Let's go to the word of the Lord." The complete transcript of Houston's eulogy is available in the dissertation appendices, as Appendix A, and all quotes and references I make to the eulogy can be reviewed in context, using this transcript. Before revealing his chosen Bible passage for the Eulogic sermon, Bishop Winans explained that he told a lawyer earlier that week, that as the eulogist, he cannot have, nor did he want, legal "rights" to the content that would be delivered in the eulogy. According to him, this was because as a preacher preaching "the word of God," it was not his to own, but rather words from God, freely given to every person. By declaring in his opening statement that he and the entire audience were now going to the scriptures, Winans advised those listening that the words he would be saying were not just words of sympathy or reminiscence, as previously shared by others, but words from a sacred text—the Holy Bible. Consequently, they were special and indicative of the sacredness of the moment at hand.

Quite abruptly, after sharing this short story with the audience to give them a glimpse into his perspective on preaching, Winans proceeded to break into song. He soulfully belted out the first stanza and chorus of the Baptist hymn, "We'll Never Grow Old." The song's lyrics, first published in 1914, describe what heaven and eternity will be

like (Moore). As Winans reached the chorus line that simply repeats the verse, “we’ll never grow old,” several shouts of “Amen” could be heard coming from individuals around the church. When watching the eulogy delivery by video, one can see at this very moment the choir and honored guests, seated just behind the pastor, nod their heads, waive their hands, and even stand to their feet at the start of his impromptu singing.

The traditional hymn “We’ll Never Grow Old,” and the idea found within it, that heaven exists as a place, a “home” as the song says, where everyone is to go after death and never die, reiterated once again the homegoing belief. Bishop Winans sung the hymn for only a little over a minute, but in that extremely short time frame, he managed to engage the entire church and likely many Christian African Americans viewing the broadcasted funeral from their own personal spaces. It was a pivotal climax in the beginning of Bishop Winans’ sermon because it demonstrated a very clear instance of communal involvement, and affirmation, of the ideology he shared in song. In this way, even though the song was unexpected, it was also paradoxically, exactly on time. Winans, who was a contemporary gospel music recording artist before he became a licensed member of the clergy, offered a crowd pleasing, almost rhythm and blues interpretation of the traditional hymn. The melodic highs and lows of his alto-tenor voice stirred those hearing it and the spontaneous nature of the song’s delivery seemed to only add to the moving and emotional quality of the moment.

Editors William Willimon and Richard Lischer of *The Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, describe “spontaneity” in preaching as the “unction of the Spirit” to touch, not only the sermonizer, but also his or her listening audience (3). They explain the importance for Black preachers, in particular, to be in tune with their congregation and to

be open to, and demonstrators of, the “spontaneity” of the sermon experience. Willimon and Lischer point out that the first several self-taught Black preachers of the late 1700’s and early 1800’s who entered onto the religious scene in Black churches began this tradition of using a very animated, tonal, and even lyrical sound in their preaching when they felt the unction of the Spirit. It is therefore customary and expected in the practice of Black sermonizing that the preacher will use intonation, play with the musicality of one’s voice, and even sing for rhetorical effect to connect with the audience. Bishop Winans’ incorporation of spontaneous music in his sermon opening was hence, an apt choice, and demonstrated his continuance of a customary characteristic of African American preaching that attendees familiar with such conventions celebrated; because Winans was eulogizing a musical icon like Whitney Houston, his use of that hymn was all the more appropriate. Music itself, in Black communities, has historically been a source of cultural expression and innovation<sup>5</sup>, and his singing worked symbiotically with the coming words of his message; after his emotive song, Winans offered the scriptural basis for his eulogy.

Matthew Chapter Six, verse twenty-five, was the bible passage, and as he read it emphatic shouts of “Amen” and “Jesus” could still be heard above the lingering tunes of an organ. He proceeded to say he was looking for an “Amen Corner” to assist him in getting through the sermon and to confirm to him that the audience understood the words he preached. This beckoning by Bishop Winans to a congregation of hundreds, and a broadcast audience of millions, to audibly participate in the sermon provided a formal introduction, into the service, of another long held tradition inherent in the Black Church:

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<sup>5</sup> Music is important to the vernacular tradition; Early African Americans used distinctive rhythms and tones, along with words, to compose music that told stories, expressed emotions, entertained, and later created blues, jazz, gospel, R&B, funk, rock & roll, and hip hop, all of which became mainstream musical genres in American culture (Gates 3, 6).

call and response. According to *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, in African American Christianity, the speaker, often times the preacher, calls out to his listener and looks for verbal and non-verbal responses of affirmation (Gates and McKay 94). The quality or effectiveness of a sermon, for a Black preacher, is therefore often determined by the amount of involvement from those listening, and “the best sermons are not just individual productions in the usual Anglo-European sense of the artist’s product, but spring from a creative process involving all those in a given congregation who participate with a full spirit” (95). The church is expected, as a congregational body, to be delighted and engaged with this aesthetic pattern of dialogue and exchange. The term “Amen Corner” refers to the section of the church, often near the pulpit, where those seated are the most boisterous and affirmative in their responses. After Winans called out to the funeral’s congregation, asking where his corner was, on video, a prompt and resounding round of “Amen” can be seen and heard.

Within African American Literature, revered writers such as James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) and James Baldwin (1927-1987) depicted scenes in their literature like the one Bishop Winans generated that highlight the experience that the “Amen Corner” creates during a religious service. Johnson’s book *God’s Trombones: Seven Negroe Sermons in Verse*, first published in 1927, is a collection of poems that mirror traditional sermons delivered in Black churches; in his preface, Johnson remarks about his inability to include the very lively environment that a Black church possesses during the minister’s preaching. Acknowledging that his poetic sermons lacked this key component, Johnson stated:

There is, of course, no way of recreating the atmosphere -- the fervor of the congregation, the amens and hallelujahs, the undertone of singing which was

often a soft accompaniment to parts of the sermon; nor the personality of the preacher—his physical magnetism, his gestures and gesticulations, his changes of tempo, his pauses for effect, and, more than all, his tones of voice. (10)

Johnson recognized that the preacher's interaction with the congregation is an indispensable part of experiencing sermonizing in Black communities, and James Baldwin, like Johnson, also attempted to recreate and represent this moving experience, in a literary context. Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), is about a young man who is part of a Black family that is engrossed with their life as leaders of a Pentecostal church and the book includes several descriptions of the theatrics of African American church services. Baldwin even wrote a three-act play a year later entitled *The Amen Corner*, which began touring in America in 1968 (Cienfuegos). This stage play actually depicted the long, dramatic scenes of a complete church service and showed how the entire worship experience moved Black congregants. Baldwin was the stepson of a preacher, and actually preached himself for a portion of his late teenage years, so he knew firsthand the power of sermonizing and its importance as a collective practice that displays the social gospel tradition in Black culture (Gates and McKay 1696). Both Johnson's and Baldwin's text signal how the custom of call and response greatly contributes not only to the overall reception of a sermon's message, but also to the communal connection or bond created by the performance of sermon oratory.

The first ten minutes of Bishop Winans' sermon—what I would term the introductory sequence of his eulogy—drew out both an emotional response in his audience and elicited from them a stronger degree of attentiveness to his words. Dressed in his liturgical garment of a black Cassock robe with a scarlet red sash and wearing

stylish black rimmed glasses (as seen in Figure 1 below), Bishop Winans' displayed a formal and pious appearance.



Fig. 1. Bishop Marvin Winans preaching in a Cassock Robe and glasses (Short shot). "Whitney Houston's Funeral & Eulogy." Video Image. *Youtube*. Uploaded 18 Feb. 2012 by FirstDayChurch3. Accessed 19 Feb. 2014.

Combining this look with his bold, conversational preaching style, one could even posit that Bishop Winans was a reflection of the theoretical "Cool Pose" at work in a religious context. The Cool Pose is a coping mechanism that sociologists and cultural studies scholars theorize many African American males adopted to express themselves in their daily lives while enduring racism and other environmental stressors (Majors 4). Bishop Winans' choice to wear distinctive, religious attire and adhere to a manner of preaching that is highly stylized demonstrated his awareness that the nature of his dress and sermon performance were crucial to his acceptance and receipt by a Black audience. Although the Cool Pose is sometimes associated with the negative behavior choices and lifestyles of urban Black males in particular, Bishop Winans' institution of a pious Cool Pose gained him approval and credibility as a minister with members of his racial community.

Seeking to solidify his credibility as the preacher, Bishop Winans used the eulogy's introduction, complete with Baptist hymn, to do five important things: 1) establish himself as a spiritual authority in the pulpit, 2) declare his intent to instruct on God's word, 3) share a relevant personal experience, 4) provide an improvisational song, and 5) address and encourage the "Amen Corner." This series of activities, executed in a thoughtful yet theatrical and dramatic manner, reflect the performative nature that is African American preaching. In this sermonic tradition, the "Word" is performed as much as it is taught. Martha Simmons and Franklin Thomas wrote in the introduction to their recently published anthology on African American sermons from 1750 to present that there are five principles to Black Christian preaching. They list these principles as 1) the centrality of the Bible to the sermon, 2) the Word coming alive through narration and descriptive imagery, 3) the provision of stories to illustrate biblical precepts from every day life 4) the supernatural power of the holy spirit to facilitate effective preaching and 5) the powerful ending or conclusion of the sermon (7, 8). All ten of these principles speak to the sermon as an uplifting presentation built for human interaction and consumption.

The use of music, spontaneity, call and response, traditional or ceremonial dress, vernacular language, and incorporating personal experiences in the preached message all work together to enable the minister to pass biblical insight from himself to his listeners. The characteristic of performance in Black preaching, therefore, cannot be simplified as just religious entertainment. Through the performance of the Word, there comes an oral telling and retelling of the scriptures and this is what brings the Bible's content to life for congregants and makes it palatable, even tangible—what Simmons and Thomas describe

as “enhancing biblical literacy” (591). The praxis of preaching is consequently realized in, and empowered by, the preacher’s performance.

The animated congregation that responded with “Amen” to Bishop Winans’ performance, in the packed New Jersey church, is often not visible on video during the eulogy delivery. This is an interesting fact to note because the camera frames at the start of the funeral service often displayed several of the seated guests in the audience, as well as those speaking on the pulpit (see Figure 2 below). This camera shot is called a long shot in film and television production, because it gives a wide picture of everything in one scene (Thompson and Bowen 8).



Fig. 2. View of funeral service before Bishop Winans begins preaching (Long shot). Video Image. *Youtube*. Uploaded 18 Feb. 2012. by FirstDayChurch3. Accessed 19 Feb. 2014.

Once Bishop Winans began to speak, however, the camera primarily stayed zoomed in on him from the waist up (as shown in Figure 1). This camera position is known as a mid shot, and it typically is used to show the main subject clearly when delivering information (Thompson and Bowen 8). A mid shot reflects an individual’s view if they

were having a conversation with the subject, in person. The latter camera shot was indeed a fitting one to use, in that context, because Bishop Winans in seeking his “Amen,” very much desired to have participation from every listening person who could hear the sound of his voice.

In the African American Church, the production of all preached sermons is a collaborative activity between preacher and congregation. Although most ministers prepare their sermons in advance, preached sermons still, as communal texts, enjoy a degree of invention as they are performed. Professor Antonio Brown, in the article “Performing “Truth”: Black Speech Acts,” labels performance in African American oratory as “Black Speak” and he explains in the following passage what that term means:

I define Black Speak as a fully conscious and purposeful performance...the orator invokes Black Speak in order to communicate and illuminate a “truth.” The invocation of Black Speak acts to link the orator to the shared cultural experiences and consciousness of the listener and connect the listener to the purposeful subversion and aversion of standardized language and culture. (215)

According to Brown, the usage of vernacular language, call and response patterns, shared personal experiences, and spontaneous music and lyricism, all classify as Black Speak. Eulogists, therefore, through decisively and accurately employing Black Speak, bond with their Black audience. This bonding enables them to speak, uncontested, with an implicit respect and trust.

Brown goes on to say that “Black Speak is not the “Truth,” but a “truth” about American experiences as lived by African-descent peoples” (216). This “truth” reflects the consciousness of African American life, as it exists everyday, for the average Black person; and although the eulogy is not an “every Sunday” sermon, it is a routinely performed sermon that is particularly disposed to bringing preachers like Bishop Winans

together with members of Black communities who anticipate learning a life lesson or grasping a moral from a eulogy's timely delivery. Consequently, the delivery of a Eulogic sermon remains a cultural activity through which an orator can relay social principles and perform the "word"—both their word and the biblical Word—with passion, fervor, and intensity.

### **EULOGY HOMILETICS VIA HOUSTON**

Bishop Winans explained early on, in the eulogy, that he was going to preach about understanding what is truly important and prioritizing one's life. He revealed that the title of Whitney Houston's eulogy was "Prioritize" and read his first scripture from the King James Translation of the Bible: Matthew Chapter Six, starting with verse twenty-five. "Therefore I say unto you, take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body raiment?" (*The King James Bible*). Bishop Winans stated that he was focusing on the rhetorical question that Jesus, the speaker in the verse, ended with and he repeated it for effect; "Is not the life more than meat, and the body raiment?" He then asked his audience to consider the fact that popular public opinion suggests that life is not more than "meat" and the body more than "raiment," and that living a Christian lifestyle that esteems morality, generosity, and community service, is boring and unsatisfying. "Nothing can be further from the truth," Winans argued emphatically, and he insisted that we must "prioritize" our lives to uphold these very noble ideals.

According to Bishop Winans, the mandate to prioritize is the crux of the message that Jesus tried to teach in this part of a well-known passage of scripture, often entitled the *Sermon on the Mount* (Matt. 5-7). He explained that the *Sermon on the Mount* was

Jesus' first teaching to a mass audience described in the Bible and it included a plethora of instructions on how to conduct oneself, in life, and treat his or her fellow man. Bishop Winans described the entire *Sermon on the Mount* of Jesus as, a "discourse" that all should "go back and read later," to understand Jesus' important lesson, in its entirety. As he explained the significance of this sermon in the context of Jesus' ministry, he loudly enunciated key words important to the main theme of his own Eulogic sermon, such as *arrange* and *authority*, and paused after speaking these words for dramatic emphasis.

It is interesting to consider the effectiveness of Winans' message about prioritizing on those listening because anyone who is familiar with Houston's turbulent life and lifestyle while living would likely agree that she was unable to "prioritize." In a televised interview with talk show host Oprah Winfrey that she gave in 2009, Houston admitted she began using narcotic substances in the late eighties, and vowed that at that time she was no longer addicted ("Whitney Houston"). After this interview, it was undisputed public knowledge that Houston had been an illicit drug user for quite a while. Cissy Houston's book recounts the latter part of Houston's career, from the early nineties until the day she died, when several tabloid photos and videos circulated in the media showing Houston visibly disheveled, slurring her speech, dangerously frail, unable to perform many of her greatest musical hits at concert events (Houston 227-237). During this period, Houston also participated in a reality television show, "Being Bobby Brown," with her husband at that time Bobby Brown. It showed them fighting constantly and behaving disparagingly in front of their young daughter. The Los Angeles County Coroner's Office ruled Houston's untimely death, just three years after her Oprah

interview, as a “drowning and effects of atherosclerotic heart disease and cocaine use” (“Final Coroner’s Report”).

Thus, it seems that Bishop Winans, in constructing his sermon, used Houston’s life and experience as a cautionary tale to everyone of what can happen when one does not “prioritize.” He did not outright say that Houston failed to do so, but the fact that everyone present at the funeral, in person and by way of media broadcasts, were there to bid farewell to a woman with the financial and social means to have a much longer—and less notorious—life, was a proverbial elephant in the room. This social context of being gathered together to both mourn, and celebrate, is part of what makes the Eulogic sermon experience so unique, as a genre, in the sermonizing tradition. Although there are certainly several aspects of a eulogy, and its delivery, that can make it distinctive, the duality of purpose is the first of four seminal characteristics that I review here because it so starkly differentiates eulogies from other general sermons that are customarily preached from Sunday to Sunday.

The function of allowing people to process through a very real physical loss by understanding the experience as it interrelates with their own life is a function specific to the eulogy alone. The eulogy in the African American Church, at its core, is still a piece of religious oratory performed with biblical ideals as its focus. What causes it to be that much more poignant, impactful, and even provoking, however, is its existence as oratory that is only heard, and performed, as a way to bring closure to the permanent loss of life. In the case of Houston’s eulogy, Winans used this context and the unsettling circumstances that surrounded the loss of her life as a teaching aid to preach to those in

attendance about morality, generosity, and community service—the things he posits are truly satisfying and valuable in life.

Part of the responsibility of the eulogizer, in eulogizing the dead, is having to construct a tactical plan for navigating through such sensitive subject matter and any difficult, controversial, or aberrant behavior that the deceased may have engaged in or been a victim of. Therefore, in the content of a eulogy, what is left unsaid about the deceased can be just as powerful as that which is actually spoken about them, and this is the second seminal characteristic of any eulogy. The phenomenon of “silence speaking volumes” in this situation is more than a choice of propriety, however. Anyone speaking openly, in honor of an individual, might choose to avoid painful and difficult topics of unpleasantness out of respect for the deceased’s family and friends and many might consider it poor manners to air a person’s private matters or “dirty laundry” at a service intended to memorialize an individual’s life. I do not reason this to be the main impetus for why orators of eulogies make such a choice; I instead view it as a part of the rhetorical strategy, in eulogy delivery, to allow the true power of “silence speaking volumes” to be exercised. By choosing to handle the reality of her bad decisions in this manner, Bishop Winans avoids “calling Whitney Houston out” on her bad decisions and disrespecting or desecrating her body, so to speak. “Silence speaking volumes” as a rhetorical strategy facilitates no additional harmful communication to be spoken as it relates to the memory, or legacy, of the dead, which is usually very important to the family and friends present in mourning and celebration of the deceased’s passing.

It was not because Houston’s funeral had a tone of secrecy, or “sugar coating,” about her negative lifestyle choices that Bishop Winans did not outright highlight

Houston's deficiency in prioritizing to make his sermon's main point. Several others who spoke at the funeral before Bishop Winans discussed freely some of Houston's deficiencies and shortcomings. Actor Kevin Costner, her friend and co-star from the film *The Bodyguard*, talked openly about Houston's insecurities as a person who "didn't think she was good enough," and who had an unhealthy need to please others at any cost (HighwayHunkie). Her sister-in-law and manager, Patricia Houston, expressed in her remarks that Houston, at times, "misunderstood" her life and felt "lost" and that in their last conversations together, she encouraged Houston to live "for herself." Thus, it does not appear that Bishop Winans would have had to censor himself and make a concerted effort not to mention negatives about Houston's lifestyle choices, as long as he mentioned them tactfully as the others did, and used such examples for the positive purposes of instructing and inspiring the audience.

Winans, however, made an executive decision to build his sermon around the unspoken reality that most of what he preached, many would speculate Houston did not do fully, especially if they considered how she lived. He preached about the need for everyone to put God first, to find one's significance in God purpose for one's life, and that in doing so, one would thereby experience the greatest productivity and "fulfillment." No prudent person would agree that Houston's drug abuse was akin to putting God first, that to be an addict was her purpose for existing, or that she was as productive in life as she could have been. It is the lifeless body of Houston—a body destroyed by drug use—laying in a closed casket beneath Bishop Winans shouting "Prioritize" from the pulpit that creates a great image of glaring contrast; the word

prioritize, coupled with the jarring reality of Houston's death, argued convincingly for individuals to demonstrate self-control and sobriety in their own lives.

"Deep signifyin," an earlier term I mentioned from the work of Geneva Smitherman, is also part of Bishop Winans' methodology to instruct his audience about the perils of pursuing the wrong thought patterns. He used phrases like "We have a lot of folks that say..." or "people look at..." and "people trying to..." in the eulogy to reference the negative world-views or perspectives that challenge the Christian principles he's emphasized, and he did it without specifically naming whom these "folks" or "people" are. By taking this approach, Bishop Winans refuted and challenged what he deemed as erroneous beliefs without accusing or criticizing anyone specifically, or risking offending and insulting his audience members. Likewise, through "deep signifyin," he covertly made meaningful commentary about the ideals he celebrated and he was not forced to communicate everything with candor and bravado that could be deemed inconsiderate for a funeral speaker and insensitive to the emotions of the grieving family.

Cheryl Glenn, in her book *Unspoken: The Rhetoric of Silence*, discusses how an individual's choice to remain silent about an issue is important and telling, particularly in Anglo-European societies, because the members of these societies generally assume "that a person cannot *not* communicate" (16). Glenn explains that the practice of using "silence" is special and purposeful, and users, recipients, and spectators of an act of silence can infer a lot about words that are left "unsaid." According to Glenn:

Employed as a tactical strategy or inhabited in deference to authority, silence resonates loudly along the corridors of purposeful language use, of rhetoric. Whether choice or im/position, silence can reveal positive or negative

abilities, fulfilling or withholding traits, harmony or disharmony, success or failure. Just like speech, silence can deploy power...(15)

As Glenn observes, unspoken words are powerful and powerfully revealing and when someone elects to utilize the power of the unspoken, he or she deliberately demonstrates the power they possess. Choosing the conversations they will engage in, and when they will remain silent, reflects one's agency in a circumstance and one's ability to determine the discourses in which one participates and lends one's voice. Eulogists as practitioners of the unspoken decide how they want to use the positive and negative content of someone's life in their sermon and judiciously include, or refrain from, certain subjects for the education and benefit of their audience.

During a Eulogic sermon at a homegoing service, the eulogist will almost always preach a didactic sermon where there is customarily a casket in full view of the audience. A casket is a familiar object in this environment and its presence aids in setting a tone of seriousness and finality to the service. For every deceased celebrity that I am examining in this dissertation, their casket that was a metallic gold in color, and according to a *USA Today* article printed following Michael Jackson's memorial service, the price of most luxurious style models of this color range from \$25,000-30,000 (Russell). The article even confirmed that both James Brown and Michael Jackson had caskets that cost this amount; clearly, the great expense that is paid to bury these celebrities in such an "extravagant and showy" model not only speaks to the importance of providing a tangible demonstration of the deceased's value and worth, but also their wealth. Earlier in this chapter, I referenced Dr. Suzanne Smith and her study of African American mortuary services in history, and Dr. Smith highlights how Black funerals are singular opportunities for families of all economic means to exhibit grand, ostentatious, and

exaggerated displays of importance and wealth (51). Smith largely credits this practice to tradition of Black funeral homes and funeral directors, but it also can be credited to both the long-held *ethos* sustained by African American churches to present and construe positive, uplifting, and idealistic displays of Black individuals—and their social condition—whenever they can, and the need for Black celebrities to appear well-off and comfortable, even in death.

Included with the audience's view of a casket, there may be several flowers that adorn it and sometimes even a picture of the deceased. The audience consumes all of these traditional funeral images—symbolic of death, burial, and grief—while dressed in traditional dark colors for mourning. Every one of these facets of the funeral experience surrounds the eulogy and influences its understanding and reception. This reinforces, for the audience, the seriousness of grasping, and applying, the points made in the sermon while they are yet alive.

Therefore, the traditions of the funeral service and life of the deceased in some way, shape, or form, serve as tangible support for the lessons taught to the audience. This is the third seminal characteristic of a eulogy. Regardless of any illustration or lesson provided by the speaker, those who are on the eulogy's receiving end will always have a collective commonality, in that they know they are gathered together in a moment with a traditional purpose. Every person present may not be familiar with the person orating, his or her exact speaking style, or the passage of scripture referenced, but they will be able to perceive that they are present at a funeral and share some form of an intimate relation to someone they care for and admire; thus, the burial traditions and the individual being eulogized—though no longer living—contribute to the lesson being taught. The deceased

may even assist the eulogist in determining what the lesson for the listening audience should be because the eulogist, in speaking to memorialize and bring closure to the life of a dead man or woman, must draw from the dead man or woman's personal narrative to speak an oration that is on par, and in keeping with, the reason for the service: to celebrate the deceased's life.

In preparation for Houston's eulogy, Bishop Winans, as a clergyman, had to decide what he could connect with in the "Word of God" to provide inspiration, and comfort, in this particular time of grief. Winans is a relatively prominent African American cultural figure. According to the biography on his church website, "Winans is a multiple *Grammy*, *Stellar*, and *Dove* award winning recording artist, as well as one-fourth of the legendary gospel quartet *The Winans*" ("Our Pastor"). Although his Detroit, Michigan mega-church does have "a membership of more than of 4,500" and worships in an "expansive, 165,000 square foot site facility," many who know of him, in African American communities, associate his fame with his identity as a recording artist. Thus, Houston's funeral was undoubtedly the first time that some audience members saw him functioning in an official ministerial role, which Winans himself could have taken into account as he decided the most appropriate words of instruction for his Eulogic sermon.

When crafting the text that would be Houston's eulogy, Winans was a member of Black communities as much as he was a pastor and so approached that key moment favoring the position of greater religious significance but mindful of his multiple memberships. For in the pulpit space of New Hope Baptist Church, he had to negotiate dual roles as communal citizen and religious leader and his sex certainly also affected how his audience received him. Bishop Winans' sheer existence as a successful,

upstanding Black male citizen—when Black communities are often known, and judged, for their lack of positive male role models and struggle to produce stable father figures—afforded him an overwhelming amount of credibility. The infamous 1965 U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) report “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” completed by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a PhD. in sociology and assistant secretary of public policy for the DOL at the time, reported very disparaging statistics about Black men as absent fathers and husbands. The disturbing report, which was leaked to the press, included numerous statements like this one; “The “typical” ADC [Aid to Dependent Children] mother in Cook County was married and had children by her husband, who deserted; his whereabouts are unknown and he doesn’t contribute to the support of his children” (Moynihan 3). Moynihan’s report was highly criticized by both Black and White academics at the time of its’ writing, and forty years later, when sociologists and social scientists revisited the report in a 2005 study published in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, many scholars credited the exorbitant increase in the number of African American men in prison as one of the primary reasons that many Black males are not present in the homes, and lives, of Black lower income families (Ledger 51). In a review of the recent 2005 report, Kate Ledger writes that “The United States incarcerates a rate more than seven times that of Europe and Black men in America are eight times more likely, to be locked up than Whites... There’s not doubt entire families suffer the consequences of prison sentences” (51). As the antithesis to frequent and longstanding negative representations of African American men as deadbeat dads and felons, Bishop Winans enjoyed tacit recognition as a respectable, Black male public figure. He was thus not only the right person to be delivering Houston’s eulogy,

but also the person who had a “right” to speak about the troubling issues concerning Black America, and the troubling issues Whitney Houston dealt with in her personal life.

Therefore, the fourth and final seminal characteristic of eulogies delivered in African American communities is that 1) the eulogist speaks to the people, 2) their roles have authority in Black communities, and 3) the subject matter, or rhetoric of the occasion, signifies the ideologies, problems, and circumstances evident in the current times. When Winans spoke of “prioritizing,” he spoke as someone whom a community of hearers would view as authentically teaching something that was pertinent, important, and that he himself believed in. The eulogist’s speech is privileged by virtue of the classification groups that he or she is a part of and such group memberships garner them the respect, *and* vetting, to teach certain ideals. Winans—an African American male, moderately wealthy, clergyman, and gospel musician—made full use of his power and authentication and the following two quotes from the eulogy demonstrate how he authoritatively delivered, throughout the sermon, the proverbial do’s and don’ts of living a productive and prosperous life:

...And the only way to know him is to have him included in what you do, not excluded.... Don’t get nervous about life because the life, the breath, is more important than what you eat. What you put on cannot equate to life itself.

...But Jesus is saying, “I don’t want you to become anxious about life. I don’t want you to feel as if life happens without purpose. For I want you to understand according to Ephesians the first chapter that God works all things after the council of his own will. To understand that you are not a mistake, that you are not a mishap. But God had a purpose before he ever created a person. And that your existence on Earth has significance.

In the first quote, Bishop Winans urged his listeners to remain open to knowing God as a part of one’s daily life and to be at ease, rather than troubled, when it comes to the provision of one’s daily necessities. In the second quote, he took it a step further and

assumed the voice of Jesus to remind his hearers to be at peace concerning their entire existence because, as the scripture in Ephesians that he references so aptly states, “God works all things after of council of his own will” (Ephesians 1.11). Both excerpts highlight how Winans’ method in the sermon, to teach people how to “prioritize,” was to point out how one’s thoughts and actions often do the complete opposite. This worked completely in line with the example that Houston’s life provided, because her death was a testament to the worst possible outcome of what failing to prioritize could result in.

Bishop Winans went on to say this near the end of his sermon:

...But Jesus, Jesus says that, “I’m going to give you the order of how this should go.” And in that same text he says, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.”...In other words, the first thing that comes to our mind when we begin to do things would be, “Is this consistent with kingdom living?” We want to get the proverbial cart before the horse, and we start seeking things before we seek the kingdom.

Winans boldly asserted in a crowded sanctuary with many individuals who made up the wealthy social and musical elite of African American communities that the acquisition of material possessions and a lavish lifestyle, were not the most important pursuit in one’s life. Although he asserts that poverty and destitution is not a virtue that people should be reduced to, he challenged the idea that one should be driven, or measure success, by a person’s monetary fortune or how quickly his or her dreams and aspirations are accomplished.

Marla Shelton, in her article “Whitney is Every Woman: Cultural Politics and The Pop Star,” notes that the more philanthropic, and less outrageous behavior of Houston—that Bishop Winans favored—was not a popular topic about her in the celebrity world of Hollywood. In the following passage, Shelton listed several of the charitable works that Houston gave her name and money to while she was alive and remarks that they are

consistently downplayed, or altogether ignored, when the mainstream media discusses her as a public figure:

....vulnerability and weakness characterize Houston's feminine place in Hollywood. Only at the local level and through community outreach can Houston's icon escape negative accusations. During the 1980s, Houston donated money to build Houston Estates, a housing development in Newark, New Jersey, and in 1989, she founded the Whitney Houston Children's Foundation. She has been honored for her committed charity work by media organizations such as VH-1. During the 1980s, Whitney Houston was honored by George Bush for her community action and elected to a Board of Governors. The United Negro College Fund honored her for her financial support of Black colleges, and for her wedding, the couple requested guests donate to their favorite charities in lieu of gifts. (198)

Shelton suggests that it was the excessive and negative lifestyle choices of Houston, and not the charitable contributions listed above, which became the preferred stories about her as a celebrity figure. The salacious details of Houston's drug addiction, funded by an exorbitant income and her tumultuous Hollywood marriage to famous R&B musician Bobby Brown—who had the image of a “bad boy” and a long history of legal troubles and arrests—often made the headlines instead of positive stories. Houston, obviously, was not the only celebrity to have private drug problems that eventually became public; drug use in Hollywood is rampant and substance abuse rehabilitation centers report “Celebrities and high profile people are more prone to anxiety and stress, and given the ubiquity of alcohol and other drugs in our culture, they are wildly prone to addiction...” (McKay).

In the article “Celebrity Watching,” Michael Newbury discusses how the reality of celebrities' lives that the public has knowledge of, is not determined by the reporting of celebrities' good or bad actions by the media per se, but more so by the public's desire to connect with a certain reality through them. According to Newbury, this means that the

following perspective is correct when considering what audiences “know,” “believe,” and “understand” of celebrities and their lives:

... it would be possible to understand any given celebrity...as existing in an inescapable system that facilitates the pleasures of consumption, but we would still want to understand how and to what ends consumers and audiences negotiated the commercially produced “realities” around them, or at least to what end they were produced. (148)

Newbury’s perspective points to the fact that the media routinely publicizes the fast paced Hollywood lifestyle of overindulgence, coupled with zero inhibitions, because of public interest and fascination with knowing such information. Such a lifestyle proliferated the latter portion of Houston’s life and Bishop Winans deplored and condemned it in his eulogy.

Cissy Houston comments in her biographical book about Houston that she did not understand the desire of the public to view the poor behavior of her daughter, especially towards the end of her life—as seen in the one season reality series Houston filmed with her husband, in which they constantly showed Houston disheveled and disorderly (230). However, Cissy did not blame the public’s insatiable appetite for watching bad behavior or Houston’s “bad boy” husband for the show’s production; she rather put the responsibility for the public voyeurism of Houston’s craziness squarely on Houston’s shoulders. Cissy wrote:

Being Bobby Brown went on the air in 2005, but I only watched part of one episode. That was all I could stand. I couldn’t see my daughter anywhere in it—I didn’t even know that person on the screen. She was such a mess, so unlike the daughter I knew and loved, that I really couldn’t believe what I was seeing. And you know, people will sometimes say that Bobby didn’t respect Nippy, and that you could see it on that show. Maybe that’s true. But if you ask me, the bigger question was, why wasn’t Nippy respecting herself. (230-231)

Clearly, because of Hollywood's disposition towards reporting negative stories about Houston, the illusion of a lavish, unrestrained daily life that the public liked to perceive Houston as having, and Houston's own inability to refrain from drug use, the horrid usually outweighed the admirable in the media reports about Houston's life. According to Bishop Winans, Houston suffered greatly both publically and privately because she did not prioritize consistently and make her faith central and the impetus for her all her endeavors in life. As the eulogist, he determined this was most important message to share with those attending the funeral, and as we further consider in the next section the materiality of Whitney Houston's celebrity within the larger social condition of Black communities, it becomes even clearer as to why.

### **CELEBRITY AND MAKING BLACK MAINSTREAM**

In his eulogy, Bishop Winans could have spoken about what there is to learn from Houston's many accolades as a celebrity and performer, but he did not. He could have focused on her difficult road to success and the barriers that she most certainly had to overcome as an African American and a female, but he did not. He made her eulogy a sermon about prioritizing behind one's faith and pointed out that regardless of whether Houston actually had enough initiative to be a devout practitioner of her Christian beliefs, the important thing was that she believed them. In her 2009 interview with Oprah, Houston described how her Christian faith helped her to get out of her abusive marriage: "I began to pray. I said, 'God, if you will give me one day of strength, I will leave this house and marriage.'" In the interview, she also enthusiastically admitted, "I love the Lord," when asked by Oprah who she currently loved.

According to Bishop Winans, Houston's commitment to holding fast to Christian beliefs, despite so many contrary influences around her, was her greatest attribute. Although her faith did not prevent her from succumbing to a debilitating addiction, Winans remained confident that the lesson that best served the racial community that both he and Houston were a part of was a lesson to not forgo putting one's faith in God first. Millions of viewers watched Winans deliver this message, and they were by no means all Black Americans, or even people of color, so I cannot argue that Bishop Winans literally only spoke to African American communities about the priority of faith during the eulogy. Winans preached, however, as though the audience that he was most focused on addressing was just those few, hundred, primarily African Americans sitting in that century old Baptist Church in Newark. It is in the closing prayer of his sermon that he arguably confirms who his primary audience is:

But Father, I pray, by the power of the Holy Spirit, that you would give all that are under the sound of my voice the thought to prioritize, to make you first, for us not to talk about you but for us to live for you. Let us leave here, recognizing that Whitney left too soon. Let us leave here impacted by her life, saying that I want to finish what God has started. Let us make You first.

Bishop Winans repeated, "Let us leave here," twice in that prayer, and only those present in person would actually physically leave with him. He prays for "all that are under the sound of his voice" before making that statement twice; and while that could still include the broadcast audience, only the physical attendees of Houston's homegoing could tangibly leave New Hope Baptist Church, as Bishop Winans instructed, "recognizing that Whitney left too soon" and "impacted by her life."

Considering that the broadcasting of his sermon by several television stations included the Internet, listeners heard Bishop Winans' eulogy at a global level. What is

most compelling about this fact is that to the massive, global audience watching and hearing him speak, he was a respected religious leader of Houston's racial community, and he was speaking to members of said community, at her traditional homegoing celebration, about how to handle, cope, and learn from her death. In addition, by virtue of his role as the eulogist employing AACCR in a publicized forum, he was also speaking on the behalf of members of Black communities, to the world, about a significant cultural loss. Although Winans acknowledged that Houston was an internationally known music artist who traveled the world and touched a lot of people's lives that were not African American, by choosing to perform and subscribe to all the conventions of the Eulogic Tradition in his sermon, he firmly signaled that an important and quintessential part of Houston's own life was her African American culture and membership in Black communities.

The Bishop strayed very little from tradition as he preached, and as a prominent Black male pastor, he continued in the patriarchal lineage of African American preachers who perform as they sermonize, employing the specific rhetorical practices I outlined to engage their participatory audience like call and response, spontaneity, the unction of the Spirit, and the use of shared personal experiences to illuminate Biblical scripture. Winans chose the rhetoric of the occasion to be "Prioritize" and effectively displayed the four characteristics of Eulogic preaching I theorized as distinguishing the eulogy as a sermonic genre. They are 1) the contextual duality of Eulogic sermons as an experience to both celebrate life and mourn death, 2) the power in words left unspoken or the phenomenon of "silence speaking volumes," 3) the presence of the essential artifacts of funeral proceedings like a casket, which aid the preached word, and 4) the identity of the

eulogist and their chosen rhetoric of the occasion, both of which help indicate shifts in cultural paradigms and the relevant social issues of the day. The inclusion of these rhetorical practices and characteristics in the eulogy for Houston was Bishop Winans' way of proving to his audiences that Houston, renowned entertainer and songstress, was at her core a Christian and an African American.

Near the end of his eulogy, Winans even commended Houston's mother, Cissy Houston, for "taking the world to church," because she had the much publicized funeral in their family church and allowed the funeral to follow in the footsteps of celebrating Houston's death as a transition to a better place, or a homegoing. By declaring that she took "the world" to church, Bishop Winans plainly articulated to all viewers that regardless of their ethnicity, they were just made privy to an authentic African American cultural experience; and I see this authentic cultural experience as really a composite of three special customs handed down throughout history in Black communities: the rousing eulogy that is the hallmark of the Eulogic Tradition, the moving homegoing celebration that is a staple of the African American Christian Tradition, and the coming together or assembly of Black communities in a time of importance or need—a custom that historically enabled African Americans to remain unified in the face of terrible social distress and difficulty. Dr. David R. Roediger, Professor of American Studies and History, explains that during slavery "Although so-called patriarchal impulses perhaps moved some masters to tolerate, and even to encourage, slave funerals, racism, labor discipline, and tyrannical authority led others to oppose and circumscribe them" (164). The current practice of Black Americans welcoming other people and other cultures, including other American audiences, to be a part of this cultural event does not negate the

authenticity of these three customs, but rather signals that perceptions, in society, have changed somewhat on both sides of the social and racial spectrum.

There had to be a certain level of comfort within African Americans that although the homegoing tradition—a tradition which entails the tone of the event being a celebration, African American clergy officiating the service, the delivery of rousing remarks by guest speakers, and attendees experiencing the “unction of the spirit”—might be unfamiliar to those watching the service who were not African American, it would not be mocked, trivialized, or reduced to something less than the meaningful experience that it was. Hence, there was an expectation of respect, civility, and even open mindedness from White America, the dominant group from whom Blacks have received the most abuse and ridicule in times past. In America’s history, there is an unfortunate tradition of representing Blacks and Black customs in entertainment as childlike, freakish, exotic, cartoonish, and/or primitive; Black-face minstrelsy and historical archetypes like the Happy Ducky, Sambo, Zip Coon, and Mammy reflect this prevailing negative ideology that derided and degraded Black communities in the United States for numerous decades up until the 1960’s (Motley et al. 49). However, the current expectation that publicized Black traditions, like a homegoing service complete with a vocal “Amen Corner,” would be treated with regard and appreciation by the White public conveys that in twenty-first century America, the social standard in mainstream society is to refrain from negative, offensive, and dismissive value judgments of African American culture. It is my argument that Whitney Houston’s celebrity status undoubtedly made it that much easier for the general public to embrace the Black culture that was on display the day of her funeral, because of the nature of her fame and notoriety.

During her life, those outside of her race received her music well and Houston even said in interviews she gave early on in her career that some African Americans criticized her for her crossover appeal to mainstream America as a musical artist (Houston 114). Houston, nevertheless, was still a Black female entertainer in a predominately White America and her ability to break into the mainstream entertainment sphere in the eighties, and throughout the nineties, with music that was a mix of both the Black-associated Rhythm and Blues and the White-associated Pop genres, designates her as symbol for the synthesis of portions of White and Black culture that took place at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Her music is indicative of how society, at the close of the twentieth century, was becoming culturally integrated in a more fluid, and less legalistic way, than it had in decades before.

Although the sixties and seventies are commonly known for second wave feminism, war protests, activism movements, increased sexual freedom, and an overall distinctive shift from the ultra-conservative ideals held in times past on politics and religion, it is also the time period that African American celebrities and icons performing during this era—like Diana Ross and the Supremes, William “Smokey” Robinson, Stevie Wonder, Little Richard, and the Jackson 5, to name a few—changed the public disposition and perception about Blacks in mainstream pop culture. They essentially paved the way for the likes of Houston to be remembered as one of the greatest American singers of all time. In the article, “The Myths of Oppositional Culture,” Garvey Lundy writes that during such periods, Black culture fundamentally shifts from a “protest relationship with White America to a teaching relationship” (462). Black musicians who infiltrated the mass music market with African American musical sound and artistry were

some of the first Blacks to break racial barriers, be heard on radio stations, and later be seen on television programs that previously did not showcase or feature African Americans (Harper 105).

All of the aforementioned musical artists, except Little Richard, were signed to the *Motown Record Label*, founded by its chairman Berry Gordy Jr. According to Phillip Brian Harper, a historian of Black Music, Gordy had an “early objective of producing recordings that would appeal to a wide “pop music” audience.” Harper, however, does not view the work Gordy and his musical acts did to cross over as a successful, positive fusion of American culture with Black musical tradition to create a sound that infiltrated the pop music charts and engendered a public appreciation of African American culture. He rather argues, in his article published in 1989, just when Houston was starting to approach new heights in her career, that “not only the *forms* of Black music, but the very *fact* of Black produced music itself [was] manipulated to serve a particular function in the popular music industry, and that function has to do with ensuring the market success of recorded musical product” (107). Thus, the crossover phenomenon to mainstream arenas, in Harper’s perspective, was nothing more than “the construction and manipulation of one *particular* Black identity over other, equally constructed and manipulated Black identities.” He ultimately concludes that “crossing over” in music was, is, and would be, nothing more than African Americans pathetically and futilely “pandering to White tastes” with no real lasting benefits for themselves beyond record sales and Whites obliging to give Blacks a sense of social inclusion and progress.

I take issue with Harper’s definition of what “crossing over” has meant, and his criticism of the artists who have facilitated it, because he seems to have made his

judgments about the phenomenon with a very narrow-minded perspective. That is, he considered the impact of African American's entrance in American pop culture from the music industry only as a mere dumbing down of Black musical traditions for a White aesthetic. Harper took no consideration of Black artists as individuals, the diversity of lifestyles and interests that makeup African American people of whom different genres of music represent, and the changes in Black culture that occur as society as a whole changes. To say that biracial fusion in music was, and is, only the illusion of progress, is akin to saying that the right to vote, for Blacks, is only the illusion of democracy—it is a dismissive accounting of an important part of American society simply because components of its existence are problematic. I cannot contend that some Black artists, in seeking to become mainstream artists, did not, and do not, assimilate White behaviors or adopt norms of the dominant culture; however, I also cannot align with Harper's paradigm that fails to acknowledge or consider how African Americans, themselves, have developed culturally as aspects of their social condition in American society improved, and racial integration in everyday life generally became the pattern for what was typical, not atypical.

The success and fame that Whitney Houston enjoyed as an American celebrity could not have occurred but for the fact that her colored skin, and soulful voice, did not preclude her from being received by a White audience. Even before recording her first album, early in her career as a model, in 1981 she became one of the first African American women to be featured on the cover of *Seventeen Magazine*—the oldest pop culture teen magazine to be printed in the United States (“Timeline”). Houston would go

on to become a musical artist that both Blacks and Whites in America connected with (see Figure 3 below).



Fig. 3. Whitney Houston arriving to a charity ball in 2006. “Whitney Houston Obit.” Photograph taken by Matt Sayles. *Associated Press*. 11 Feb. 2012. *AP Images*. Web. 6 July 2014.

She even co-starred opposite a White male love interest in the motion picture *The Bodyguard*, released in 1992. According to a *Los Angeles Times* article about the film, “....audiences ate it up. The film went on to become the seventh-highest grossing movie of the year and ‘I Will Always Love You,’ a song written by Dolly Parton that Houston covered in the film, became one of the singer’s most well-known numbers” (Zeitchick).

Houston’s acceptance in the mainstream media and popularity among the general public, however, does not mean her race and Blackness were inconsequential, or that they never came into consideration throughout her career. During her singing career, Houston might not have been banned from performing in arenas or eating in restaurants after shows because of the color of her skin, but she at minimum had to combat vestiges of intolerance and racism that all Blacks face in society during day-to-day happenings and

life events. Her mother Cissy wrote in her book of one instance that occurred in 1991, when Houston sang the national anthem at *Super Bowl XXV* (140). Prior to her performance, she pre-recorded the song as back-up in case of inclement weather or sound issues and when organizers heard the recording, they almost retracted their offer to let her sing because, according to them, the way she sang *The Star Spangled Banner* was not “the typical White-bread rendering.”

Critical Race Theorists rightly assert, in respect to racism in modern America, that racism is “normal, not aberrant, in American society,” that it is “an ingrained feature of our cultural landscape” and because of this, “formal equal opportunity—rules and laws that insist on treating Blacks and Whites alike—consequently remedy only the more extreme and shocking forms of injustice, the ones that stand out” (Crenshaw xvi). Whitney Houston endured racism, but she certainly did not lead an activist movement with fellow Blacks that forever prompted changes in legislation for people of color in America. What she did do, however, is leave a mark on American culture and the mainstream music industry in the last thirty years that positively impacted race relations in America—and this is why millions of both Black and White Americans flocked to watch her homegoing at a traditional, Black Baptist Church in Newark, New Jersey. As a Black woman who became a household name in the U.S. in the late eighties and early nineties, Houston, I believe, combatted racism by not only being a successful Black woman, but also by changing the reality of how often Black women were seen in the popular media, by being known for a dynamic musical sound that bridged two cultures, and even by—to a certain extent—choosing to live the latter portion of her life according to her own controversial choices.

There is a symbolic power in the number of people who took part and viewed Houston's funeral. The pluralization of musical styles, a trademark of her career's work, enabled Houston to reflect Black communities in the larger American public in a way that enriched the representation of African Americans in society and altered how the mainstream public received Black Americans. She was flawed, yes, but Houston was nonetheless an equalizing force that continued to aid the transformation of American popular culture from an all White, colorless entity, fueled by the mainstream mass media.

Timothy Vercellotti and Paul R. Brewer suggested, in a 2006 article published about their study on African Americans opinions concerning mainstream media, that Blacks are "ambivalent about the mainstream press because they perceive it as portraying Blacks in narrow and negative ways and failing to advocate on the behalf of Blacks" (237). I am more inclined to believe that far from being ambivalent, the choice to publicize homegoing services like Houston's and the services of the celebrities that will be discussed in Chapters Two and Three—James Brown, Michael Jackson, Luther Vandross, Rosa Parks, and Coretta Scott King—proves that Blacks perceive that the mainstream media can be a mighty tool for positive change, when used for the benefit of African American audiences. Rather than acting solely as a resource for strategic instruction of AACCR, the broadcasted eulogy of Whitney Houston provided Bishop Marvin Winans, and by extension the rest of Black America, the chance to deliver to the mainstream American public a glimpse into how Black people participate corporately in cultural activities, thereby expanding the social impact and relevance of such experiences, both within and outside of African American culture. Winans also repaired the negative mainstream narrative of destruction and drug abuse that plagued Houston's

life; through highlighting her loving and charitable spirit, he amended the perception of the depth and breadth of her professional work and personal commitments. This, in my humble opinion, was the true power of the moment and the legacy of Whitney Houston's last rites.

## **THE VALUE OF THE MODERN EULOGY'S EXAMINATION**

I cannot help but come to the conclusion while analyzing the existence of the Eulogic Tradition as a fundamental component of Black culture that the current phenomenon of broadcasting homegoing services signals important changes in American society worth investigating. They reflect, in a compelling way, the ever-evolving relationship between Black communities as a minority and White communities as the majority. I believe African Americans presently choose to permit such voyeurism of this genuine cultural activity because Black people as a whole, in this country, have reached a tenuous level of comfort where such a practice can act as a method of strategic instruction to the outside world, as much as it can to those within a Black community. The Black speech in eulogies today that make up the modern Eulogic Tradition is therefore not that of "hush harbor rhetoric" as Vorris Nunley explicitly labeled it, but AACCR. To that end, the study of the AACCR in the selected eulogies of James Brown, Michael Jackson, Luther Vandross, Coretta Scott King, and Rosa Parks that I am undertaking, will communicate three important things. First, it will communicate how Blacks choose, or want to represent themselves, in mainstream pop culture through a culturally specific activity. Secondly, it will communicate the noteworthy conversations that are no longer reserved or relegated as private, inter-communal dialogues within African American communities. Lastly, it will communicate what some of the

consequential changes in Black social prescriptions and norms are, given the transformations and changes in society. Through the in-depth examination of the eulogies of these five additional prominent African Americans figures, I expect to find that these broadcasted sermons ultimately tell of the revisionist power upon racial boundaries that such publicized moments containing AACCR are potent to possess.

***WE'VE COME THIS FAR BY FAITH: VIEWING THE BODIES OF JAMES  
BROWN, MICHAEL JACKSON, AND LUTHER VANDROSS AS EVOLVING  
REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK MASCULINITY***

Blacks who achieve celebrity status and have a lasting influence upon their culture do so by accomplishing great exploits, achieving uncanny success, and exhibiting extraordinary prowess in some area or genre; and within Black culture, African Americans usually openly embrace their communal celebrities who acquire fame, fortune, and accolades from the mainstream media (Cashmore 122). In the book entitled *Celebrity Culture* Dr. Ellis Cashmore describes the distinctive significance of a Black celebrity to members of their ethnic community and beyond:

Was there ever a better emblem of ethnic achievement than the celebrity? Typically, the Black celebrity coursed through society from a dysfunctional family in a poor part of town onto a fast track of fortune. Famed, often throughout the world, the celeb usually had more money than he or she knew how to spend and commanded the quality much sought after but often denied ethnic minority people: respect. Honored, admired, perhaps even approved of, the celeb enjoyed respect in abundance. (122)

Cashmore indicates, in that passage, that respect is one, if not the greatest, benefits accorded to a Black celebrity in America; in his chapter on the subject of Black celebrities and racism, and in his most recent book *Black Celebrity*, he discusses how the ability of an African American to generate respect in mainstream society as a celebrity consequently generates even greater respect for him or her from their fellow community members. The influx of respect for Black celebrities that results from superstardom is evidenced through the experience of the R&B musicians of the Fifties and Sixties, like those of the *Motown Record Label* I discussed earlier. *Motown* produced many of the superstars that became the forerunners to stars like Whitney Houston and groups such as

The Supremes gained mainstream celebrity status and a modicum of respect as national icons, during the Civil Rights Movement, as Black music proliferated the mainstream music industry (Harper 105).

The passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, coupled with the assassination of Dr. King in 1968, culminated the nonviolent protest movement that lasted roughly from the mid-fifties to the mid-sixties and also marked the beginning of the era of Black nationalism and a time in the entertainment industry when the production of African Americans films and film celebrities spiked (Lyne 44). At last, Black actors and actresses had substantial opportunities to benefit from the positive social changes for African Americans; in the sixties and seventies, actors like Sidney Poitier and James Earl Jones, and actresses like Diahann Carroll and Cicely Tyson, finally enjoyed some widespread popularity in Hollywood. Professor William Lyne, in his article “No Accident: From Black Power to Black Box Office,” explains that when the Civil Rights Act officially outlawed racial discrimination, it alleviated some of the disregard and diminishing of Black films and their stars by mainstream society (43). Black actors and actresses became popular for playing roles in Blaxploitation motion pictures—a genre of film “characterized by low production values, cops and criminals action, funky soundtracks, and big doses of sex that emphasize macho stud constructions of Black masculinity.” There were several African American social groups that criticized the budding genre, however, and according to Lyne’s scholarship on the development of the Black film industry:

When groups such as the NAACP, CORE, and the SCLC objected to the film industry's cynical exploitation of stereotypical Black sex, violence, and misogyny, Hollywood executives pointed to box office receipts and claimed that they were only giving Black audiences ‘what they wanted.’ (44)

Lyne posits that what outraged and disappointed organizations that acted as the mouthpiece for Black communities, like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) which Dr. King once led, was the low class, lowbrow representation of Blacks, by Blacks, that many films purporting to display Black culture and lifestyles disseminated.

White owned mainstream production studios did not care, or even consider, the social impact of reifying negative stereotypes about Blacks. Popular and high-grossing films like *Shaft*, where the leading African American character was a macho, gun wielding, womanizing, lawless male vigilante, arguably did nothing to improve the image of Black men in mainstream American society. Lyne goes on to say this:

The studio Blaxploitation pictures were popular with Black audiences, but it is a stretch to suggest that they represented what African Americans wanted...Unlike the situation in the U.S. popular music industry, African Americans had played little or no role in the deployment and control of Black images in U.S. film. In the 1970s, there was no cinema equivalent of Motown or the long tradition of U.S. Jazz. The Seventies Blaxploitation explosion is roughly equivalent to the early part of the century when White record companies began to record and market "race" records. The means of production and distribution were (and still are) so completely in White hands that, while aspects of the result may have appealed to Black consumers, we can also be pretty sure that the notion of 'what they wanted' came to us heavily mediated. (45)

Most of the mainstream representations in the Seventies that Lyne highlights as being disguised as the "want" of Black audiences were gross hyperbole of even the most rich and famous Black celebrity figures. These representations certainly did not realistically depict or explore the social context of oppression and discrimination that actual Black celebrities, like entertainer James Brown, not only experienced but also impressively and self-sacrificingly endured.

Black Feminist author, Dr. Michelle Wallace, writes in her book *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* that the displays of Black male boasting and bravado shown in Blaxploitation films, and that social interest groups like the Black Panthers were known for, did have some positive effects on how African American men viewed themselves, "...Yet the gains would have been more lasting if an improved self-image had not been so hopelessly dependent upon Black Macho—a male chauvinist that was frequently cruel, narcissistic, and shortsighted" (73). The famous male, African American cultural figures that rose to stardom during this era were hence, either reflections of the macho Black male persona, or the antithesis to damaging exaggerations, like *Shaft*, being advertised as authentic, masculine "Blackness" on the Hollywood screen. The public undoubtedly still viewed Black male celebrities like James Brown, and later Michael Jackson and Luther Vandross, through the idyllic and inflated frame of fame—as Dr. Cashmore notes that, "...all celebrities benefit from the wishes and fantasies of fans. That's why they're celebrities"—but they more importantly esteemed Brown, Jackson, and Vandross for being "real," tangible examples to the Black public of determination, and the ability of Black men to achieve success, regardless of prevailing social restraints in place to limit their accomplishments because of the color of their skin (130).

I consider Brown, Jackson, and Vandross to be numbered among a select number of choice African American celebrities who, beyond being "popular" in popular culture, are almost idolized by different generations of Blacks as the epitome of greatness and the ultimate example of what a person of color is capable of accomplishing in terms of mainstream fame. Cashmore describes these choice celebrities as "a handful of eye-catchingly successful and often ostentatious ethnic minorities" (117). Although the

increase in mainstream acceptance of choice celebrities correlated to their greater legacy and notoriety amidst Black communities, I attribute that phenomenon to be neither a reflection of the “normative pattern of mimicry,” as Charles Kurzman describes in the article “Celebrity Status,” nor the desire by exceptional Black American celebrities to be accepted and praised by White America. Rather, I consider it as more of an indicator of the appreciation from Black Americans for all the difficulties and adversity these remarkable African American celebrities have to face, as people of color, in order to succeed in mainstream American society. Fittingly, Michael Jackson and Luther Vandross have both received *Black Entertainment Television Awards* (annual awards given since 2001 to honor minorities primarily in the fields of entertainment and athletics) and/or *Soul Train Music Awards* (annual awards given since 1987 to honor accomplishments in R&B and soul music named after the popular Black music and dance television program that ran for thirty-five years) to honor their successes as African Americans, and James Brown is consistently recognized and/or referenced at such award shows for his groundbreaking lifetime achievements (*BET*).

Although Black male and female public figures both suffer and face challenges as a result of their race, there are unique obstacles that arise for each sex because of the gender roles and constructs in place in society. Whitney Houston, as a public figure, exemplifies a history making African American woman who did not transcend her race *per se*, but rather the borders that White society imposed upon her race, because of her race. She became a musical icon in the eighties and nineties because she effectively expressed the shared human experiences of joy, hope, pain, and love, through her music. Her two chart topping songs that spent the most time as number one hits on the

mainstream pop charts were “I Will Always Love You,” written and performed by Dolly Parton, and “Greatest Love of All,” first performed by George Benson and written by Michael Masser and Linda Creed (“Timeline”). Although both writers of these two songs are White, the theme of both songs—Love—is not specific to a race or culture. Love is a universal concept, and Houston was able to reflect and capitalize upon this fact. Her musical renditions captured the emotion of love, and its shared categorization among all cultures as a feeling, or passion, that impacts and informs the lives of all people, no matter who they are, where they are from, what they believe, or the color of their skin.

Whitney Houston had to overcome the blight of racism in American society, which dictates that all Blacks are inferior to Whites, and also sexism and gender biases that dictate the acceptable behaviors and permissible lifestyles of women and how record executives thought her image should be presented to the public. African American men had to overcome the same blight of racism, and they had to contend with being viewed, historically, as all that White men should not be; although Black males are male in physical composition, their so called inferior racial makeup tarnishes and contaminates their masculinity in Anglo-European Society. Elijah Ward, of the Institute for Health Research at the University of Illinois at Chicago, discusses in a recent journal article the negative categorization of Blacks and Black males, stating that Whites—as the ruling class—consistently “demonized” African Americans since the beginning of the institution of slavery, seeking to “effectively privilege Whiteness and denigrate Blackness” (495). The stereotypes about Black men included characterizations as “wild and hypersexual” or “violent and promiscuous,” and such imagery “persist in the US psyche today.” According to Ward, stereotypes and dehumanizing ideology plagued

African American males for centuries and there was, and still is, a need for Black males to compensate for lacking the qualities that would permit them to fit with the traditional conventions of what make a White man, a “man” from mainstream society’s perspective: conventions such as civility, sexual conservatism, self-control, and intelligence.

While discussing the fame and characterizations of Black celebrities, the Black Church is a significant political and cultural institution to keep in mind because as sociologists Dr. Charles Kurzman and Dr. Ellis Cashmore point out, Black celebrities are required to possess personal narratives that highlight and exemplify ideals like humble reference, deference, or reverence to God or divine intervention as a pivotal force in helping that celebrity reach an uncanny, elite level of success; because this is an ideal that the institution of the Church has historically upheld and communicated as significant, the Church becomes a powerful force for determining the standards and qualities that Blacks should esteem. Similar ideals that the Church celebrates, and celebrities must exemplify, include breaking free from oppressive forces to achieve greatness and the retelling of an inspiring life story or narrative to encourage others that this type of ascent is possible. Even in our modern world, the very fact that a Black person can become a celebrity and enjoy fame within Black communities is because they demonstrate qualities that Black Church finds crucial and implores its Black membership to support.

In this chapter, through my analysis of the eulogy for soul music icon James Brown, I explore the adoption of the “Cool Pose” as a remedy and coping mechanism by Black men, for their perceived deficiencies by society. Then, in my examination of the eulogy for Michael Jackson, I discuss how Jackson reconfigured the codes of conduct that legislate the trope of masculinity for Black men. Lastly, in my discussion of the

“unofficial” eulogy of Luther Vandross, I discuss how Vandross challenges and confronts the normative identity of the Black man. All three eulogies reflect how Black male celebrities can alter how Black men are represented in mainstream American culture and I use all three texts to argue that the discussion of such unorthodox male representations in the AACCR of Eulogic oratory reflects efforts by cultural leaders to maintain or refine or certain paradigms concerning Black masculinity.

### **JAMES BROWN: A MAN’S MAN**

“Say it loud, I’m Black and I’m proud.” That is probably one of the most famous sayings of ethnic pride for African Americans that originated in pop culture and its creator was none other than musician and performer James Brown, also known as the “Godfather of Soul.” Brown was a fixture from the sixties to the late eighties on the music charts, and his albums, a mixture of rhythm and blues, jazz, funk, and rock and roll, unabashedly included content that was reflective and celebratory of his culture and identity as an African American man. A common message in his music to all Blacks was one of self-love and affirmation and the more outgoing and passionate he was about the characteristics and traits that made him a flamboyant, dynamic African American entertainer, the more people seemed to be inspired to share that enthusiasm. Thus, a large part of Brown’s legacy was his ability to take his identity and make it not only commercially appealing, but also compellingly motivational for others to join him in embracing who they were as individuals.

Brown released “Say it Loud” with the chorus verse “I’m Black and I’m proud” in 1968, and the song literally became the anthem for Black empowerment in the seventies (Weinger and White). As African Americans transitioned out of the Civil Rights Era and

into a new period of community growth and development, Brown became a popular performer whose musical material struck a chord with his listeners. Although many of his songs in the sixties and seventies were “feel good” soul and dance party hits such as “Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag” (1965) and “I Got the Feelin” (1970), many also carried provocative and bold social messages that covered topics of education, drug addiction, racism, and sexism, with titles like “Don’t be a Dropout” (1966), “King Heroin” (1972), “Get Up, Get Into It, Get Involved”(1971), and “It’s a Man’s Man’s Man’s World” (1966) (“Music”). James Brown was born on May 3, 1933, and growing up in poverty in rural Augusta, Georgia, he likely never forgot the difficulties of his childhood (Weinger and White). In the autobiography he coauthored with Bruce Tucker in 1986, he recounts repeatedly that his challenging childhood living in extreme poverty, as the fourth of five children, inspired him to work hard as an artist and to help others achieve personal and professional success any way he could (Brown XIX). Brown states that he even lived, as a child, in a brothel run by his aunt at one time, and as a young teenager, he lived on the streets, singing for passersby and engaging in gambling and petty theft to take care of his basic needs (XXV). At the age of sixteen, police arrested Brown for armed robbery and he did a stint in a juvenile detention center; after his paroling, he joined different gospel singing groups while working odd jobs until joining *The Famous Flames*, where he penned a song for the group “Please, Please, Please,” that became their first R&B number one hit and caused Brown to eventually strike out on his own for the start of a long and storied solo career (65).

On the day of his public funeral, December 30, 2006, over ten thousand people lined up outside of the James Brown Arena in Augusta, GA (Sisario). Many desired to

pay homage to the man who had brought them so much joy during his lifetime. Although the arena where the funeral took place could seat approximately nine thousand people, there were several among the crowd who had to settle for listening to the service outside the facility, by way of a loudspeaker. One national cable television station, *CNN*, televised Brown's funeral in its entirety along with local stations. The media labeled Brown's service as both a homegoing and a homecoming, because in addition to it being a traditional style of service, they also held it in his childhood city where many remember him performing on street corners as a boy ("Ceremonies"). There were numerous African American celebrities who attended, mostly musicians, and they included Michael Jackson and nineties rap and dance star MC Hammer. Political leaders and Civil Rights activists the Rev. Jesse Jackson and the Rev. Al Sharpton were there as well, with Sharpton delivering the eulogy.

Al Sharpton, as an outspoken advocate of the Black community in mainstream media, is known for his animated and lively rhetorical style. As of 2012, Sharpton is the current host of a news network television talk show *Politics Nation* and still participates in protests and rallies as an activist for issues pertinent to Black Americans ("Rev. Al Sharpton"). In a recent prime-time television interview with Oprah Winfrey, he spoke candidly about how he grew up in a middle class, suburban home in New York until age nine, when his father conceived a baby with his half-sister (Winfrey, "The Rev. Al"). After this incident, Sharpton's mother was forced to move from their family home and raise Sharpton alone while she worked as a maid. It was in his early twenties that he became active in politics, and in 1972, he served as a youth director for the presidential campaign of Black congresswoman Shirley Chisholm ("Rev. Al Sharpton"). Sharpton

went on to lead several protest marches throughout his life for causes like the wrongful shootings of Blacks by White police officers and the unequal treatment of Black suspects in cases within the criminal justice system. He founded the *National Action Network* in 1991, and since its founding, he has run for political offices, including two United States Senate seats for New York in 1992 and 1994, a position as Mayor of New York City in 1997, and the Presidency of the United States in 2004. Sharpton never won any of these political offices, but he asserts that his campaigns for elected offices, like all of his political endeavors, were to ensure that social consciousness was raised about the issues and needs of African American citizens.

Al Sharpton, as an outspoken, opinionated, and to some—loudmouthed—representative of African Americans, would certainly be expected to exhibit this same “in your face” persona as he eulogized a man whose personality, and live shows, were known for over the top exuberance and pageantry. James Brown possessed a slew of iconic artistic attributes in his performances that included soulful shouts and screams, bouts of dancing that incorporated splits and spins, and the donning of a shiny cape in which he often pretended to pass out from performance exhaustion, only to be revived once more for another round of spirited dancing. Ever the consummate entertainer, he was still giving rousing performances until his death at age seventy-three in 2006, on Christmas day, a result of congestive heart failure from pneumonia complications (Weinger and White).

Like so many musical artists in the African American community, James Brown began performing gospel in the Black Christian church, and he credits this as his musical roots. His official website biography explains that Brown left singing on the church

circuit as a young man when he came across artists such as blues and rock & roll musician Fats Domino, who introduced him to a style of music and performance that appealed more to Brown's vibrant, and unorthodox, inclinations as an entertainer. His musical repertoire would consequently become a fusion of the sacred and the secular and his performance style challenged the public opinion that loud, boisterous, uninhibited, and spontaneous celebration, in music, was not artistic. Brown openly embraced cultural traits in African American gospel and similar musical traditions that mainstream popular culture was not initially receptive to seeing African Americans do. When he exploded with the signature howls and gyrations in his musical act that made up the core of his theatrics and fanfare —movements that many noted mimic the unction of the spirit one might see breakout in a traditional Black church service—and major White radio stations still played his records, this began to break down a negative social stigma about the “otherness” of Black forms of artistic expression. Brown and his stage reputation would become synonymous with themes of difference, individuality, and uniqueness, because he himself was not afraid to be a spokesperson and representative for such ideals; his songs remaining in the number one position on the American pop music charts for weeks at a time, to a degree, helped to fuse aspects of Black and White music and deconstructed some barriers separating Black and White culture.

James Brown stated in his memoir published in 2005, *I Feel Good: A Memoir of a Life of Soul*, “Others may have followed in my wake, but I was the one who turned racist minstrelsy into Black soul, and by doing so became a cultural force” (46). What Brown articulated in that statement was that he recognized that some of his artistic choices in performing might coincide with prejudiced stereotypes proliferated by White Americans

about Blacks, but that his artistry humanized and validated those traits as something more than just foolish minstrelsy. Often images of the “Sambo”, or “happy darky” figure, were some of the most offensive minstrel caricatures of African Americans and these caricatures portrayed Blacks singing and dancing in a nonsensical and dimwitted fashion; Brown, however, as the “Godfather of Soul,” created literally an entire genre of music with the vestiges of this Black stereotype as an integral component and he elevated this previously ridiculed song and dance archetype in the eyes of mainstream pop culture. In African American history and literature, the time frame in which Brown rose to superstardom is labeled as The Black Arts Movement (Gates and McKay 1987). As a generational spin off of the earlier Civil Rights Era and coinciding with Black Nationalism, the movement “sought to transform the manner in which Black Americans were represented or portrayed in literature and the arts.”

English and Media Studies Professor Dr. Kevin Glynn writes in *Tabloid Culture: Trash, Taste, Popular Power, and the Transformation of American Television* that in the eras following the Civil Rights movement, particularly during the eighties, there occurred a “solidification of a white hegemonic identity politics rooted in the fear, suspicion, and resentment of racial difference” (31). He marks the nightly news on television stations as the quintessential televised moment when Blacks were often depicted as wild, criminal, and dangerous to the American public. Glynn explains that the proliferation of these negative “narrative patterns” on T.V. reflected the “long and powerful history in the white, U.S. patriarchal imagination,” a history in which “fantasies of nonwhite, masculine sexual “animality”...migrated from the white imagination into the hyperreal electronic media, where they...link imaginary and imagistic processes.” There were collaborative

efforts by Black communities to change their negative representations in the media, and Brown was an active participant and a leading influence. Through his career, he made a great contribution artistically to reinforcing positive pride in a Black identity.

The Rev. Al Sharpton was thus tasked with the responsibility to eulogize a public figure that pioneered accomplishing social change in mainstream society by infiltrating and influencing pop culture. Although there was a memorial service for Brown in Harlem, New York, a few days before, where Sharpton also spoke, the oration that he delivered at the funeral was the most fitting Eulogic sermon to explore for this discussion because it was a discourse shrouded in all the ritual of the homegoing service; and as the last event before Brown's physical burial, Sharpton's second address was literally the final word on the subject of James Brown's life. The Reverend's eulogy, at this homegoing, highlighted the fact that Brown was indeed a cultural leader for Blacks and he focused heavily on Brown's masculinity as central to his celebratory homage to the deceased ("Ceremonies"). The title of the eulogy was "Only God Could Have Made a James Brown Possible" and Sharpton opened by expressing this sentiment repeatedly.

It would seem that there was some real truth to this expression, especially if one considers the glamor of the funeral that day, because the accouterments of Brown's homegoing exhibited a grandiose affair not easily outdone. Not only was the service in a stadium that seated thousands and filled to capacity, but the stage overflowed with flowers, there was the glimmering, gold-plated casket positioned at its feet, and a live band present in the background to back the performances of all the singing musicians (see Figure 4 on the following page).



Fig. 4. Stage at the James Brown Funeral Service. “Al Sharpton discusses word from James Brown.” Video Image. *Youtube*. Uploaded 16 April. 2007 by HatianJean. Accessed 19 Feb. 2014.

A *New York Times* newspaper article reports that Brown himself reflected his “hallmark pomp...dressed in “a black suit with sequined lapels, a fire-engine-red shirt, a black bow tie, black gloves, and a pair of black shoes tipped with yet more sequins” (Sisario).

Brown’s service included several concert like musical tributes before the eulogy delivery and the tone of the moment was certainly one of celebratory appreciation, even though attendees came to bid Brown a mournful goodbye.

Sharpton began the eulogy, which is available in its entirety in Appendix B, by sharing his personal experience of meeting Brown’s son Teddy, who would die tragically in a car accident a few months after their introduction (“Ceremonies”). After Teddy’s death, Sharpton recounted that he became close to Brown and looked up to James Brown like a father. The Reverend then made the assertion that the James Brown he knew—this father figure that Sharpton came to love—was a “man’s man.” According to Sharpton, “...he stood up like a man. He lived like a man. And on Christmas Day, he died like a

man.” The question that beckons to be asked, after considering this statement in the eulogy, is why the entertainer’s identity as a “man’s man” was so quintessential to Sharpton that he chose it as the rhetoric of the occasion and organized his entire oratory around proving, and affirming, how Brown was the masculine ideal. Furthermore, it is fascinating to ponder the cultural implications of such a discussion, as a specific type of AACCR, and explore how significant Brown’s identity as a “man” is to how African Americans memorialized him on the day of his homegoing, especially in light of the controversy that surrounded Brown as an individual with, at times, a very sordid personal life.

Although James Brown is credited with being the inspiration for multiple musical genres, including soul, funk, and later hip-hop and rap, it is also widely known that Brown served time in prison after his rise to fame and had many legal troubles in his elder years as his celebrity and recording career declined. He was sent to jail in 1988, at the age of fifty-five, after brandishing a shotgun at an insurance seminar and then engaging in a car chase with Georgia police (*The James Brown Reader*). In the eulogy, Sharpton wasted no time discussing Brown’s past incarceration as a teen, however, which is a lesser discussed narrative about Brown’s life. Brown was incarcerated for three years at the age of sixteen for armed robbery, and within the first five minutes of eulogizing Brown, he took on Brown’s voice, speaking in first person to relay what he believed was the deceased’s perspective on his initial imprisonment as a youngster:

They called me names. They persecuted me. They set me up. They framed me. They locked me up. But they couldn't lock me down. There was a god. There was a god that was with me all the way. And he said "no matter what, I know that there's a god, and I believe in god, and I believe god believes in me."

Brown, according to Sharpton, never stated verbatim that he was a victim or lived in self-pity about his early adversarial relationship with the justice system, but he certainly suggests that from Brown perspective, in the hands of “they,” he was an object of abuse. Who actually is “they” referencing in this quote: “They called me names. They persecuted me. They set me up. They framed me. They locked me up. But they couldn't lock me down?” “They” is likely a general reference to White America if listeners consider its use in context of the discussion about Brown’s unfair imprisonment. Unjustly “set up, framed, and locked up,” is how Sharpton conveyed that Brown always understood his early interactions with the United States justice system.

Growing up in the South during the thirties and forties, James Brown was undoubtedly in a climate rife with racism, segregation, strictly enforced Jim Crow Laws, and racially motivated acts of violence and brutality. This was the atmosphere in which a teenage Brown was tried and convicted, and his lifelong belief that he suffered unfairly as a result of the South’s condition of injustice towards Blacks was likely to strike a chord with most members of the audience at Brown’s funeral. Currently, in the U.S. prison system, there is a disproportionate amount of Black males incarcerated and most African Americans are keenly aware of this problematic issue (“Criminal Justice”). Although Sharpton was speaking about Brown’s experience as a defendant and inmate almost sixty years earlier, the narrative of his plight as a Black male having to combat America’s criminal courts and penal system is a very familiar one to modern Black communities.

Proven to have defects in its prosecution and sentencing of people of color, the justice system in America is routinely challenged by Black leaders and social activists to eliminate such inconsistencies. Scholars of Critical Race Theory (CRT), in particular,

worked over the last forty years to elevate mainstream awareness of these inherent disparities and provide a theoretical framework for understanding the pathology needed to overturn such a system of injustice. Legal scholar and one of the founders of CRT, Derrick Bell Jr. argued that to begin changing the system, Blacks must “view the law—and by extension, the courts—as instruments for preserving the status quo and only periodically and unpredictably serving as a refuge of oppressed people” (302). Bell’s directive challenged the popular notion in society that all American citizens receive the due process of a fair trial under the law and his position directly correlates with the lack of confidence that African Americans, like Brown, felt and continuously feel about their inability to find justice in the United States courts.

In speaking about Brown’s situation, Sharpton addressed the reality of this difficult social problem that many Black families live with every day, as “one in six Black men have been incarcerated as of 2001” and “if current trends continue, one in three Black males born today can expect to spend time in prison during his lifetime” (“Criminal Justice”). The high rate of incarceration of Black males resulted in the higher propensity of Black families to lack a male in the household and consist of only a mother and children (Chateauvert 207). This fact about “single mother head of households” being the majority in Black communities harkens back to the findings of the Moynihan Report, a deeply flawed government study that unfortunately reinforced the categorization of Black men as weak and inferior to White males who are typified in society as “leading” their households. Sharpton immediately reminded the audience that although Brown may reflect the negative mainstream perceptions of Black manhood, he overcame the life altering set back of imprisonment (“Ceremonies”). His ability to

overcome was an action, as a “man,” of service to his people; “He wasn’t just singing for himself,” Sharpton declared, “He sang for us.” The “us” in Sharpton’s statement are the members of African American communities and Sharpton is depicting Brown, from the outset of the eulogy, as a socially conscious man who resisted categorization within the stereotypes and statistics of Black men in American society.

It is important to hone in on how Sharpton unfolded the story of Brown’s life through the delivery of AACCR because it reflects his aim to build, or re-member, the image of Brown as a “man” to Blacks and to thereby uphold a certain model of masculinity. Using the Eulogic sermon as an educational discourse for the Black audience, Sharpton utilized the Tradition’s characteristic of incorporating the life of the deceased to serve as tangible support for the lesson he is teaching the audience. He allowed the reality of the troubling state of Black manhood to be compounded by the knowledge of Brown’s early struggles in manhood. Then Sharpton pushed for a collective cultural inclination towards handling such disadvantages as Brown handled them.

Sharpton goes on to say that “...He looked like us. And he made the whole world see how good we could be.” His assertion that Brown demonstrated, to the world, “how good” Blacks could be, does not specify if “good” is a reference to artistic talent, financial success, or even community development. It could be any one of these positive things that James Brown reflected. The critical implication of Sharpton’s statement about the “good” Blacks are capable of is that it points toward the problematic reality of current civil rights legislation. Although laws and amendments exist to prohibit the disenfranchisement, discrimination, and mistreatment of Blacks, they cannot eradicate

offensive and malicious notions and stereotypes about African Americans, and Black males in particular. This subtle reference to the social limitations of Civil Rights legislation, by Sharpton, reflects yet another characteristic of eulogies of the Eulogic Tradition: the subject matter, or rhetoric of the occasion, signifying the contemporary problems and adversarial circumstances for Blacks. In this portion of the eulogy, the Reverend ultimately makes the argument that the role that Brown played as an unapologetically Black entertainer was one of an advocate, and an intermediary, for African American communities; as Brown's songs climbed the mainstream pop charts, he helped to make the difference between White and Black artists and their music a fact of different cultural aesthetics, not negative cultural otherness.

I cannot argue that by doing so, over the span of his career, James Brown achieved equality with White musical artists in pop culture, because as Derrick Bell Jr. firmly believed, equality is simply a myth that will never fully materialize in our existence (306). Equality is used as a rhetorical theory to represent a way of life that we idealize in America—and only idealize, never fully committing to the changes brought on by reformative laws and policies which, if left alone to be enforced and uncontested, could over time ensure equality actually happened. It does not appear, however, that Brown's goal as an artist was equality akin to making his music equal to White music, as I also argue was not the sole aim of Whitney Houston's "crossover" musical sound; the goal instead was to have his music, and by extension his Blackness, valued and validated alongside, and not beneath, other forms in mainstream society. Dr. Marlo David, in her article that discusses contemporary Black musical genres like neo-soul, quotes African American Studies professor Dr. Alexander Weheliye in her warning that any popularity

of Black musical artists and artistry in mainstream society is not “mere uncritical echoes of the White...” (697). David is right to suggest that acceptance of African American musicians and their musical genres is far more nuanced and complex. Such occurrences should not be easily written off as simply an indicator of how well Black music reflects the current tastes of White society because the individuality and uniqueness of the entertainer also contributes to the composition and production of a performance.

Sharpton asserted in the eulogy that because Brown was of a darker complexion, and had little European or Anglo-European features, his looks were not what endeared him in the mainstream public eye (see Figure 5 below). He made noted remarks about Brown’s physique and stated that, “James Brown wasn't smooth and wasn't acceptable. He wasn't tall and light-skinned with good hair.” Sharpton pointed out to both the Black communities as participants, and the general public as voyeurs, that even Brown’s physical characteristics and physiognomy made him different from not only the ideal of the American White man, but also the ideal American Black man. By doing so, he declared that the images that positively reflect Black people do not have to be a fair skin tone person with hair that has no roughness or texture. Rather it could, and should be, the image of a “man” like James Brown, a man with dark chocolate skin, coarse hair he wore proudly with, and without, a chemical texturizer, and an insatiable pride in his ethnicity.



Fig. 5. Head shot of James Brown singing in 2006. “James Brown & Luciano Pavarotti-It’s a Man’s World.” Video Image. *Youtube*. Uploaded 15 Sept. 2007 by 0NeSsE0. Accessed 19 Feb. 2014.

The qualities that Sharpton upheld, in the eulogy, to identify Brown as a man were therefore his ability to survive difficulties, particularly those that arose out of his social condition as an African American male and his ability to uplift and proudly represent his race. Sharpton did not quote biblical scripture at any point in his oratory to support his points, but he did reference the biblical apostle Peter, and commenced to perform for the listening audience, whom he affably called his children, the prayer conversation he had with St. Peter on behalf of Brown.

...I sent a message, children, to St. Peter this morning. I told Peter to open the gates wide, not that James Brown is that tall, but he swaggers and he likes a lot of room to walk in. You need to open up the gates for the godfather. He's a little short in height. He'll be swinging his arms. You'll know him because he'll be walking to the beat of a different drummer. He'll be humming a tune you never heard before.

The conversation that the Reverend presented between himself and St. Peter about a heaven-bound Brown includes a key factoid: Brown's walk "to the beat of a different drummer." This meaningful detail describes Brown's highly stylized mannerisms and way of being, and Sharpton's passage basically describes the "Cool Pose" without calling it as such (Majors 4). Viewed as a method of detaching from mainstream society and its constant degradation and dehumanization of the Black male, when African American males know how to be "cool," in other words, they are determining how to survive dangers and problems that come with being a colored man in a country that discriminated against, and oppressed, people of color (5). To say that Brown needed extra walkway in heaven because of a "swagger" indicates that this survival mechanism had not left him, and literally became entrenched in who Brown was as an individual.

Drs. Majors and Billson suggest this about the difficulties Black male face in their book, *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*:

For the black male, achieving masculinity is complicated by the threats of marginality and anomie that plague his race, and if he is of lower-income status, his social class. The subcultural press toward innovative and rebellious modes of achieving success in the face of remarkable odds shapes his pursuit of masculinity. (7)

Like Majors and Billson correctly assess, James Brown—a Black man born into extreme poverty in the Jim Crow south—achieved his success from being different and being bold in his demonstration of unconventional approaches to music, dancing, and other forms of performance. Author Maurice Wallace, in the introduction to his book *Constructing the Black Masculine*, agrees with the assessment of Majors and Billson that there is “a schema of generative modes by which African American men have historically survived the self-alienating disjunction of race and manhood in American culture” (5). Wallace further explains that representations of Black masculinity like the Cool Pose are part of “the discrete metaphysics by which Black masculine identity has sought its own ideological equilibrium of race and masculine subjecthood” (6). James Brown’s popularity within mainstream music and culture can, in part, be credited to his steadfast consolation and confidence in behaviors and ways of being that had undesirable associations of ethnic difference and inferiority; instead of employing them in such a way that they had a polarizing effect on American audiences, Brown innovatively shared them in such a manner that he forever changed the way the general public regarded Black performances and artistry. Brown’s innovation is proven by his forty-one songs that landed on the Billboard’s Hot 100 chart and peaked anywhere between the number eleven slot and number one hundred slot; they were “Gravity,” “Bodyheat (Part 1),” “Get Up Offa That Thing,” “Sex Machine (Part 1),” “Reality,” “Funky President (People It’s Bad/Coldblooded),” “Papa Don’t Take No Mess (Part 1),” “My Thang,” “Sexy, Sexy,

Sexy,” “Think,” “Down And Out in New York City,” “I Got Ants In My Pants (and I want to dance)(Part 1),” “I Got A Bag Of My Own,” “Get On The Good Foot-Part 1,” “There It Is (Part 1),” “King Heroin,” “Make It Funky (Part 1),” “Hot Pants (She Got To Use What She Got To Get What She Wants),” “Escape-ism (Part 1),” “I Cried,” “Soul Power (Pt. 1),” “Spinning Wheel (Pt. 1),” “Get Up, Get Into It, Get Involved (Pt. 1),” “Super Bad (Part 1 & Part 2),” “Licking Stick, Licking Stick, Part 1,” “Get Up (I Feel Like Being Like A) Sex Machine (Part 1),” “Brother Rapp (Part 1),” “Funky Drummer (Part 1),” “It’s A New Day (Part 1) & (Part 2),” “Let A Man Come In And Do The Popcorn (Part Two),” “Ain’t It Funky Now (Part 1),” “Let A Man Come In And Do The Popcorn (Part One),” “Mother Popcorn (You Got To Have A Mother For Me) Part 1,” “World (Part 1),” “Lowdown Popcorn,” “The Popcorn,” “I Don’t Want Nobody To Give Me Nothing (Open Up The Door, I’ll Get It Myself),” “Give It Up Or Turnit A Loose,” “Tit For Tat (Ain’t No Taking Back),” “Goodbye My Love,” and “The Bells” (“Chart History”). His seven top ten Billboard Hot 100 songs were “Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag, Part 1” (1965) at #8, “It’s a Man’s Man’s Man’s World” (1966) also at #8, “Cold Sweat, Part 1” (1967) at #7, “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud” (1968) at #10, “I Got the Feelin’ (1968) at #6, “Living In America” (1985) at #4, and of course his most widely played song and biggest hit, “I Got You (I Feel Good), released in 1965, reached #3 on the Billboard charts and has become known for his signature boogie and dance moves (“Biography”).

Sharpton cleverly spoke to Brown’s innovation as a music artist, in the eulogy, as he continued to perform his prayer directed to St. Peter:

And, Peter, if you don't consider it too arrogant, I don't know too much yet about what you do in heaven. But if you have Sunday morning service, you ought to let

James Brown sing tomorrow morning. I know you got angels that could sing, but they never had to shine shoes on Broad Street. They never had their heartbroken. They've never been to jail for doing nothing wrong. They never had to cry because their friend betrayed them. They need to let James Brown sing tomorrow. He's got a song that he can sing about what god brought him through ("Ceremonies").

In Sharpton's opinion, experiences of destituteness and persecution are what qualify and distinguish Brown as a special figure with a unique knowledge derived solely from living through certain events. By espousing this as truth, Sharpton gave credence and validity in Brown's eulogy to the narratives of all Black Americans who, like Brown, overcome adversity, particularly as a result of racial oppression and discrimination. Studies in Critical Race Theory show that today racism is still rampant and unchecked in many social institutions like business, politics, and education, and cases of discrimination constantly arise and enter our U.S. courtrooms (Delgado 103). Mainstream society, however, is consistently hesitant to admit that racial and ethnic inequality is still a significant problem. This is an inconvenient truth for the majority and therefore, when counter-narratives like Brown's are broadcasted to the world through such stirring and pointed delivery as given through Sharpton's eulogy, they work to prevent the ignorance of the nation on the matter and reduce disdain towards the actuality of such unjust circumstances for African Americans.

As a final commentary on the social impact and influence of the persona of James Brown, Sharpton decided to tell of his last conversation with the "Godfather of Soul." While they spoke on the phone, he says that Brown gave him instructions for "the people" ("Ceremonies"). According to Sharpton, Brown's final message to Blacks was this:

“...But I want you to tell people to love one another. I want you to fight to lift the standards back.” He said, “What happened to us that we are now celebrating from being down? What happened we went from saying I'm black and I'm proud to calling each other niggers and ho's and bitches?” He said, “I sung people up and now they're singing people down, and we need to change the music.”

When Sharpton uttered these sentences, the entire arena rose to their feet in resounding applause in a near standing ovation (see Figure 6 below). The profane words that Sharpton used rang out from the arena microphone and echoed in the building, but the truth that rang out from them into the ears of Black listeners was arguably much louder.



Fig. 6. James Brown funeral audience standing in applause. “Al Sharpton discusses word from James Brown.” Video Image. *Youtube*. Uploaded 16 April 2007 by HatianJean. Accessed 19 Feb. 2014.

This section of the eulogy was undeniably the climax and close, and Sharpton saved the best, and most aggressive statements, for last. It is not customary for a preacher to use profanity in their sermon in the African American Christian tradition, but at the funeral of the ever original and provocative James Brown, it did not seem too extreme a gesture by the Rev. Sharpton. The content of the statements that Sharpton made allowed audience members to give him a pass to use that sort of colorful rhetoric, and because he framed it

as him simply communicating the last words and wishes of James Brown to his African American audience, Sharpton could defer onus and ownership of what he said.

Brown is still considered one of the primary artists whose musical style paved the way for hip-hop and rap, but Brown apparently wanted to distance his legacy from being connected to the controversial lyrics that are most commonly associated with certain hip-hop and rap music of today. Rap music, in general, is a genre dominated by male artists, and Hardcore rap music is the genre of Black musical style that has been condemned within the African American community for having the greatest amount of misogynistic language, degrading depictions of Black people, and glorification of criminal activity (Gates and McKay 79). Sharpton, as a famous social activist for African American causes, brazenly condemned the state of such Black music as harmful and damaging through the voice of Brown, one of its originators. What is even more compelling is that he did it in front of the cameras. Fully aware that the funeral was being broadcasted live on the local and national news, Sharpton emphatically chastised Black artists, and their supporters, on camera for using slurs and “singing” their community down (“Ceremonies”).

This powerful scene provides an exact demonstration of AACCR at work and how it functions. Sharpton as the speaker utilized his message about Brown as a man’s “man” to affirm longstanding cultural definitions in the Black community about masculinity and then communicated openly to the audience that certain artistic displays of manhood within the community, if they do not uplift the people, should not be tolerated. In doing so, as a voice of authority receiving a standing ovation, he attempted to re-establish what the respectable standard is for one aspect of Black culture. To the

larger, non-communal viewing audience, he also provided access, insight, and education concerning how African Americans collectively police and govern themselves as a unified entity.

The homegoing service for James Brown included a lot of flair and showy fanfare, but behind all the outward displays of pomp there was a deep reverence for Brown by the thousands present in the Georgia arena affectionately named after him. He was not just a man, as Sharpton so eloquently explained, but a man's "man." For the African American communities who felt he represented them, Brown deserved their esteem because he was unafraid to be "Black" in his music, dance, walk, or mannerisms. His Cool Pose, on display in the mainstream media from the sixties through the eighties, essentially became a catalyst for other Black entertainers, especially future Black male hip hop artists, to be shown and celebrated for a strategy of lifestyle that began as a method of resistance to White oppression in daily life.

Brown was by no means a model of moral and ethical perfection, as he did publically struggle, for a large amount of his life, with drug addiction, arrests, and accusations of domestic violence from his female partners, the most notable being his White wife, Tomi Rae Brown, from 2001-2004 (*The James Brown Reader* xxxi). He, however, always remained candidly reflective about his faults and imperfections, citing in the end of his last memoir, *This River*, which was published posthumous, that he was a "hopeful man firmly determined to stay sober," forever aware of the danger of "what is burrowed deep inside his other self, the alcoholic, the addict, always waiting to reemerge" (Brown 178). Brown's transparent discussion about his weaknesses, even up to his death, epitomize the uninhibited and authentic identity he will always be

remembered for—a quality that Sharpton praised and championed throughout the entertainer’s eulogy. The greatest takeaway from the AACCR disseminated in Brown’s Eulogic sermon to attendees was hence, not that the “Godfather of Soul” or “Hardest Working Man in Show Business” became a mainstream success, but that he was successful at establishing to popular American culture the cultural identity of Blacks through a positive method of artistic presentation, and by doing so modified how African Americans—and Black males in particular—valued themselves and how society valued them.

### **MICHAEL JACKSON: THE KING OF POP**

Despite there being no formal eulogist designated by the Jackson family for the memorial service of Michael Jackson on July 7, 2009, I am compelled to posit that the words the Rev. Al Sharpton delivered at that service were, nonetheless, a consummate eulogy for the legendary performer. Not only did many news media outlets report Sharpton’s remarks as the most stirring and inspiring of all the speakers that the audience heard at the Staples Center stadium in Los Angeles, California, but the AACCR of the oratory itself conveyed the tone and spirit of a sermon one might hear from the pulpit in a Black Christian church, on any given Sunday. *CNN* reported after the memorial that of all the speakers, the Reverend “got the loudest applause” (Duke). *The Root*, an online Black news and opinion site that is a division of the *Washington Post*, also recognized Sharpton as the most engaging speaker and the unofficial eulogist for the service (Izrael). They even cited his delivery as part of their evidence for labeling Jackson’s memorial service a true homegoing. Regardless of how controversial an entertainer Jackson was, Sharpton’s eulogy ensured that on the day that so many gathered to pay their respects and show their

love and support, they would not forget that Jackson changed American culture as a Black man who brought the racially divided U.S. together.

As I mentioned at the start of this chapter, the same type of gold-plated casket—a symbolic display of economic power—that James Brown was resting in at his homegoing, in 2006, was positioned at the foot of the stage that the Rev. Sharpton strolled out onto when the announcer introduced him as the next speaker for Jackson’s memorial program. The lighting in the arena casted shades of cobalt blue around a spotlight where a suit-clad Sharpton stood at the podium, and proceeded to address thousands of onlookers (See Figure 7 on the following page). Sharpton acknowledged, from the outset, that there were people “all over the world” that Jackson impacted through his career, but immediately proceeded to focus in on how the life, and experiences, of Michael Jackson from “a working class family in Gary, Indiana,” primed him to be the Jackson that the world would know and embrace (“Rev. Al Sharpton’s”). The Reverend made it clear that in his oratorical remarks, he was going to explain just why Michael Jackson’s memorial warranted a service that thousands desperately wanted to attend in person, and millions watched reverently from their respective spaces. Like Sharpton did in the eulogy he delivered for James Brown, he established his credibility as a fitting eulogist for Michael Jackson by incorporating his own private experiences with the deceased. He indicated he was a personal associate of Jackson by sharing early memories of the entertainer.

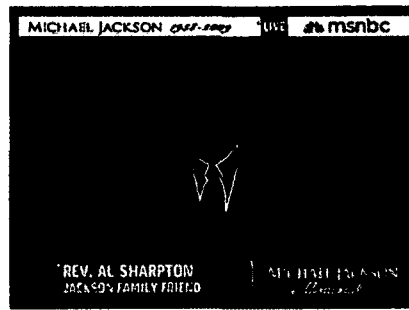


Fig. 7. The Reverend Al Sharpton speaking at Michael Jackson's memorial service. "Michael Jackson Memorial Service-Rev. Al Sharpton." Video Image. *Youtube*. Uploaded 7 July 2009 by PoliticsNewsPolitics. Accessed 19 Feb. 2014.

The Reverend spoke of first meeting Jackson at "the 1970 Black Expo," a three to four day event meant to celebrate Black culture and Black-owned business. As a skilled eulogist, Sharpton recognized the merit of the fourth characteristic of African American eulogies I outlined, which is that the eulogist, as a speaker of the people, plays a key role in not just determining what will be said, but how effectively audiences receive it. He made use of his personal relationship with Jackson to give authenticity to his message. Sharpton went as far as presenting himself as a prophetic individual who was able foretell Jackson's success, asserting that even in their first meeting he sensed that Jackson, as a child entertainer, had great ambitions for the future.

Jackson ultimately became a legendary public figure not only to Blacks, but also to people of all races and nationalities. Extolled by masses as the entertainer of entertainers, the name and persona of Michael Jackson is known all across the modern world, arguably more so than that of James Brown. Considered to be a performer with unparalleled talent, there are few artists that can challenge Jackson for the title of greatest American pop artist of all time. He was a definitive cultural icon for the entire nation for at least the last thirty years, and Jackson was a complex character because of the many

nuances of his personal life that informed his artistic work, in very distinctive and unique ways. Jackson was, and is, conceivably the only entertainer to essentially undergo a near complete change in skin color during the course of his career—from black to white. This makes him, to some degree, a polemic figure when discussing what his legacy is, and truly means, to African American communities.

Like James Brown, Jackson, after his death, was not given a traditional funeral in a church, but in an arena where thousands of fans could partake in his memorial service. The difference between Jackson's memorial audience and that of Whitney Houston's, which was granted access by invitation only, or Brown's, which was first come, first serve for seats, was that attendees to Jackson's service had to enter a free lottery online days earlier to be randomly selected for admission ("Lucky Few"). The Staples Center stadium could accommodate 11,000 people, and also had an overflow section at the Nokia Theater, next door, that seated 6,500. A national media event, five major networks—*CBS*, *ABC*, *CNN*, *Fox News*, and *E! Entertainment*—televised Jackson's memorial. These stations also provided streaming coverage at their respective Internet sites and the Staples Center's website. Perhaps one of the most widely televised memorial services in American history, 1.6 million fans registered online for the chance to partake in the event as attendees. Only 8,750 people received a confirmation, however, that they would actually each receive two tickets for entrance. The interest was so high in witnessing this ninety-minute service, in some form or fashion, that it was reportedly even shown at movie theaters in thirty-seven cities across the country ("Michael Jackson's Memorial").

All of the hype around being present at an event to bid a farewell to one entertainer is certainly indicative that Michael Jackson was more than just a famous “man” in the eyes of the public. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, a nonpartisan organization that conducts polling to measure American trends and attitudes towards public issues, found that even three weeks after Michael Jackson’s death on June 25, 2009, and his memorial service on July 7, 2009, he was still the topic of the greatest amount of news coverage countrywide (“Americans Remained Focused”). Likewise, their surveys also showed that he remained the primary news interest for viewers of mainstream news outlets and the most closely followed story for both the Black and White American population. Why did the Pew Center’s polls reflect such results? I believe the Rev. Al Sharpton’s revelatory eulogy of Jackson, on the day of his memorial, provides the answer to this question.

The “dream,” as Sharpton termed it in his funeral address, was what drove Jackson in his desire to be a success and persistently go after new levels of professional achievement. As a known Civil Rights activist and routine political new commentator when current events that deal with race issues like police brutality, hate crimes, or racial profiling arise, Sharpton did not arbitrarily or coincidentally use the word dream in the eulogy. In front of thousands, at a service loaded with religious undertones and rife with appeals to human emotion, Sharpton orated with a rapturous and preachy style about the power of having a “dream.” For most Americans, such strategically executed rhetoric immediately conjures up memories of another famous Black reverend who spoke in front of thousands about the power of a “dream:” the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

In considering the context in which “the dream” was used, in no way am I comparing the Rev. Sharpton to Dr. King—for in terms of influence and impact upon American culture, Sharpton will never be an equal comparison to him. However, one has to admit that invoking the word dream in this eulogy to thousands of Americans, took on a greater degree of significance, as the *pathos* of being spurred to action because of a “dream” is very familiar. To “have a dream” persists as a meaningful cultural expression among Americans because of the famous speech Dr. King delivered in the March on Washington, in 1963, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. When speakers use words and images that induce strong emotions in their audience, they cause people to bond with them and act on their feelings. The “I Have a Dream Speech,” remains one of the most well known pieces of American oratory with a pathetic proof, or emotional argument, that compels the audience to respond to racial equality in the affirmative; and whenever broadcasted, it is often replayed at the very juncture where Dr. King continuously shouts out the statement “I have a dream,” each time accompanying this assertion with a situation or circumstance that demonstrates unity and egalitarianism between Whites and Blacks. This rhythmic pattern of effective repetition and amplification—traditional hallmarks of sermonizing Black preachers—was what moved the emotions most of Dr. King’s listeners; it is in this same style that Sharpton passionately articulated the impact of Jackson’s dream:

...he never gave up dreaming. It was that dream that changed culture all over the world. When Michael started, it was a different world. But because Michael kept going, because he didn’t accept limitations, because he refused to let people decide his boundaries, he opened up the whole world. In the music world, he put on one glove, pulled his pants up and broke down the color curtain where now our videos are shown and magazines put us on the cover. It was Michael Jackson that brought Blacks and Whites and Asians and Latinos together. It was Michael Jackson that made us sing, “We are the World” and feed the hungry long before

Live Aid. Because Michael Jackson kept going, he created a comfort level where people that felt they were separate became interconnected with his music.

Each time he repeated the words “dream,” “world,” and the name “Michael Jackson,” and pumped his fist for emphasis, the eulogy’s rhetoric re-membered the body of Jackson’s identity as Black man who harmfully disrupted rigged conceptions of identity for Black men. E. Patrick Johnson, editor of *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* defines queer in the anthology’s introduction as dismantling fixed notions of identity (5). Jackson clearly fits this definition of queer, as Sharpton points out that Jackson was neither conventionally Black or conventionally masculine, making statements like “Jackson refused to let people decide his boundaries.” Moreover, Sharpton asserts that his “inbetweenness” is what connected him with different types of people, and he adamantly enforced the idea that Jackson should in no way be remembered as an average Black entertainer with a limited sphere of influence.

Sharpton reminded the audience that it was thus, illogical to label Jackson’s work, or genre, as either “Black music” or “White music,” because it proved to be equally loved by Black and mainstream audiences, and “brought Blacks and Whites and Asians and Latinos together.” *Celebrity Culture* author Ellis Cashmore wrote of Jackson that, “Few, if any, Black artists have conquered all segments of the market as accomplishedly,” and “His fads and foibles were freaky, yet somehow [each one] suited the times. His quirkiness endeared him to millions” (151, 154). Writer Kanara Ty of the *Asian Pacific Arts Magazine*, which is currently published by the University of Southern California’s US-China Institute, remarked in the most recent issue following Jackson’s death that the performer had a huge impact in Asian and Asian American pop culture. According to Ty:

...Michael Jackson's influence was translated and retranslated into something that is amazing on it's own. Michael Jackson's power has given many individuals the dream and motivation to become stars of their own. Over the course of his career, Michael Jackson broke down so many barriers for artists of color. He's the reason why there's such a thing as international stardom.

Cashmore and Ty both emphasize that it was what Jackson personified that influenced audiences towards him. His “fads,” “foibles,” and “quirkiness” are all references to “differences” that caused him to stand out from the social norm in America and the larger Anglo-European world. Ty's article reveals how Asians, as non-Whites and members—like Blacks—of a minority ethnic group, related with Jackson's willingness, despite already being othered as a minority, to risk ways of being as a performer and celebrity that were unequivocally deviant according to both the positive and negative connotations of that word.

Jackson crossed many controversial boundaries in his lifetime, the most notable being the racial boundary in the changing of his ethnic features and skin tone. Jackson, in the mid eighties, suffered serious injuries during the filming of a commercial with pyrotechnics, and his subsequent cosmetic surgeries were supposedly to fix the resulting skin burns from the injury (“Michael Jackson”). This “fix,” however, became more like a fixation when Jackson continued to have surgeries and procedures that resulted in the complete change in the physical appearance and color of his face over a ten-year period (see Figure 8 below).



Fig. 8. Side by side comparison of Michael Jackson's face as a young performer versus his face before he died. “SELF HATE: Michael Jackson Wanted To Be A WHITE MAN.” Video Image. *Youtube*. Uploaded 27 July 2009 by JAYLOVE47. Accessed 19 Feb. 2014.

Jackson later made a statement in the nineties explaining that he had vitiligo, a rare skin disease, and alleged that was what changed his complexion from a caramel brown to an almost snow white, but speculation was already swirling by this point that the entertainer was lightening his skin purposely, using chemical treatments.

It appeared that Sharpton was attempting to negotiate between the two extremes of Jackson's identity as he sought to uphold the entertainer as a truly positive leader for society's cultural transformation. This type of negotiation is immanent anytime AACCR is at work because the speaker, or rhetor, is engaging in meaning production utilizing the knowledge about a subject that already exists in the public forum, and they do so in conjunction with the knowledge that they, as the rhetor or speaker, possess. The speaker then produces new knowledge and information that will be disseminated to the audience, or listener, from this amalgamation. Sharpton knew, at the time of this eulogy delivery, that he would have to account for the scandals, rumors, and negative publicity Jackson had received, a lot of it having to do with his changed appearance, but also because of child sexual abuse allegations, eccentric public obsessions, and reported misuse of prescription drugs.

Sharpton did not let this dissuade him from presenting his perspective on Michael Jackson; whether all the memorial audience members knew it or not, Sharpton started to preach during the eulogy, and there was no "Amen Corner" present or needed in the Staples Center. Sharpton's words resonated intently with his hearers and the applause of the crowd waxed and waned in time with each of his statements, especially the commentary that Jackson rejected "boundaries." He did not dispute or contest the knowledge of Jackson's difference and difficulties; he did, however, pointedly stress

from the podium-turned pulpit that “It’s not about the mess,” (“Rev. Al Sharpton’s”). According to Sharpton, the entertainer’s nonconformity and strangeness, and even his problems, were in fact birthed out of his journey in life towards a unique superstardom that was pioneering in nature and socially transformative. To the audience of supporters, and the cohort of Jackson’s critics watching who did not subscribe to the belief that Jackson deserved such glowing praise or recognition, Sharpton emphatically challenged them to “focus on the journey.”

It is therefore fitting that the Reverend received the most applause of anyone speaking at the memorial service—a standing ovation: something I credited Sharpton with accomplishing during the delivery of James Brown’s eulogy as well—when he made this assertive statement to Jackson’s children towards the end of his address; “I want his three children to know: Wasn’t nothing strange about your Daddy. It was strange what your Daddy had to deal with. But he dealt with it...He dealt with it anyway. He dealt with it for *us*.” Sharpton’s explanation of the manifold aspects of strange that Jackson had to cope with speaks to the idea of triple consciousness I discussed as impacting Black celebrities; Jackson had to deal with the strangeness he felt about his own individual identity as a black man, then he had to deal with the strangeness of his personhood as a member of African American communities in a country that oppresses people of color, and lastly he also had to deal with the strangeness of fans and followers who worshiped him as a celebrity figure and also judged and critiqued his every action.

The “us” that Sharpton refers to in that last sentence, when he states that Jackson “dealt with it for *us*” is unlike the “us” he referred to in his eulogy for James Brown, three years earlier, because the “us” is not just a reference here to African Americans.

Sharpton credited Brown with changing how mainstream America conceived Blacks, but in this eulogy, he credits Jackson with changing how mainstream America conceived of itself. Throughout the eulogy, Sharpton made references to Jackson who “broke down the colored curtain,” “made us sing we are the world,” and caused his fans to be “comfortable to vote for a person of color to be the President of the United States of America.” These exploits do not suggest that Jackson was just a singular force for Black empowerment, but a Black American who empowered all people of America to unite.

Jackson’s surgically induced change in skin color and ethnic appearance, at the midpoint of his ultra successful career, will always be argued by some as an extreme example of a self-loathing Black man who made a blatant attempt to eradicate his otherness in order to be better received by the White majority. Postcolonial theorist Ngugi Wa Thiongo explained that such actions, at their core, are a result of the phenomenon of assimilation among oppressed individuals who are subject to the rule of those in the position of power (2). It is my argument, however, that a distinction must be made between assimilation with mainstream society and participation in mainstream society. After all Jackson, like James Brown, as a successful Black man in a White America, certainly had to find a way to navigate through oppressive conditions and adversity specifically because of his skin color. Jackson, like James Brown, therefore combatted offensive stereotypes in society by applying such survival methods as the aforementioned Cool Pose, and cultivating iconic song and dance stylings—such as the “moon walk”—that served to elevate the respect of Black performers and their artistry in popular culture. Jackson consequently, like James Brown, reached new heights of popularity with mainstream society that incited some Blacks to criticize him as an affront

to their African American roots. These practices of resistance, however, do not reflect the actions of one who is trying to assimilate, but one who finds agency to transform their world by participating in it on their terms.

Michael Jackson, *because* of James Brown, had more freedom and leeway as an entertainer to openly work through and deal with the complexities of his identity. Constantly on display for mass consumption and evaluation throughout his career, Jackson never enjoyed the safety of being classified as a man's "man." As a public figure, Jackson spent much of his life resisting labels or being pinned down to one definition of who he was. After his skin changes, he was ridiculed for not being easily typecast in the racial binary of Black or White, and was likewise accused of straddling the line of what was considered masculine and effeminate in society. Despite this, his music was often times number one on the mainstream pop chart while simultaneously being number one on the rhythm and blues charts, and his sold-out concert audiences made up of many different races were as diverse as they could possibly be ("Michael Jackson").

Although Sharpton assured the crowd at the memorial service of Jackson's ethnicity as an African American, he also reminded them that his identity was one of inclusiveness. "There's nothing that can't be done if we raise our voice as one," was the famous Jackson quote that displayed on a jumbo screen in the Staples Center throughout the memorial, and Sharpton's eulogy reiterated that Jackson lived his life as if he truly believed this. He closed the eulogy by offering thank-yous to the dead performer who defied classification, and literally raised his voice on behalf of many:

...I came to say, thank you. Thank you because you never stopped, thank you because you never gave up, thank you because you never gave out, thank you

because you tore down our divisions. Thank you because you eradicated barriers. Thank you because you gave us hope. Thank you Michael. Thank you Michael. Thank you Michael!

After this fitting repetition of gratitude for Jackson and his achievements, Sharpton left the podium with an audience cheering, and was met at the foot of the stage steps by family members who quickly embraced and thanked the Reverend for the powerful words he spoke.

Although the tone of this eulogy was notably less aggressive than the unbridled profanity that he hurled during the course of James Brown's eulogy, Sharpton was nonetheless determined, in his oratory, to solidify in the psyches of his audience that Jackson was a Black man who accomplished great things. The form of AACCR that Sharpton delivered was such that it provided Michael Jackson a final resting place in pop culture as a transformative cultural icon whose exigencies in his personal life reflected the pitfalls of his demanding odyssey to be a unifying force in American society. In the Reverend's eyes, this was the true legacy of Michael Jackson, the "King of Pop." Sharpton chose to adhere to, and perpetuate, conventions of sermonizing in the Black Church, like preaching with a repetitious rhythm of calculated pauses and vocal inflections—what Geneva Smitherman labels as "talk singing"—in the secular atmosphere of a massive sports arena where there was no guarantee of a majority African American or Christian audience (138). I believe he made this choice because it was most important to him to celebrate the heritage, and ethnicity, that Jackson as a celebrated American pop culture figure was shaped in, as a man. Sharpton's participation in the African American Eulogic Tradition through the delivery of Michael Jackson's eulogy demonstrated, in real time, the merit of Black culture and cultural practices to aid in

collective empowerment and to tear down the criticism that problem-plagued Black communities cannot generate capable, talented men who are productive in, and for, American society.

### **LUTHER VANDROSS: YOUR SECRET LOVE**

Unlike James Brown or Michael Jackson, Luther Vandross was a balladeer whose legacy, as a musician, is tied to the performance and proliferation of one type of music: love songs. Vandross is known for being the ultimate singer of love songs over the course of his twenty-five year career, and nearly all of his number one songs covered the topics of love or relationships. This is especially ironic, considering that romantic love is the one thing that Vandross, in his personal life, supposedly never experienced. The son of working class parents actively serving in their local church, Luther Vandross began singing there and finally broke into the music industry in his early twenties when he wrote songs for theatrical productions like the Broadway play “The Wiz” and composed commercial jingles (“Biography”). It was not until 1981 that he recorded an album, and had his first song, “Never Too Much,” in the top twenty on the pop charts. Vandross would go on to have a long and profitable career that lasted over two decades, and while he was extremely popular as a rhythm and blues and pop artist, there were always questions about Luther Vandross’ private life. Although he made beautiful love music, he was never seen in public with a romantic love of his own. Thus, while he was alive, a definitive answer about the question of his sexuality as a man was never really settled in the perspective of many who supported him as fans.

At the age of fifty-four, Luther Vandross died on July 1, 2005, from complications due to a debilitating stroke he had in 2003 (“Hundreds Pay Tribute”). His

public funeral was held at the Riverside Church in Harlem, New York, a seventy-four year old cathedral and national landmark that seats approximately 1, 900 people (“Art & Architecture”). Several celebrities attended the service and masses of people gathered outside to be near the location where the entertainer was memorialized one last time. Like the funerals of Houston, Brown, and Jackson, music was an integral part of the service, and stars like Aretha Franklin and Stevie Wonder sung tributes to the deceased performer. Although Vandross was a popular singer who won multiple *Grammy* awards and sold millions of albums, only the *New York One* local cable television station aired the funeral in its entirety and streamed it from their website (“Hundreds Pay Tribute”). National cable news outlets provided clips of the funeral on their television reporting, but Luther Vandross’ funeral, in their eyes, did not warrant interrupting the regularly scheduled programming.

Labeled in most reports as either a funeral or a memorial, the mainstream media did not seem compelled to classify Vandross’ service as a homegoing. This different language is interesting to note because those same reports included details of the service that are indicative of the homegoing tradition, such as an atmosphere of celebration, African American ministers leading the service, guest speakers sharing moving personal stories, and audience members catching the “unction of the spirit.” The *New York Daily News* wrote, “the memorial service for the soul legend turned into a cross between Saturday night at Carnegie Hall and Sunday morning in a revival tent” (Shapiro). Their article went on to describe the most lively and animated moment that audience members witnessed; “...the service kicked into overdrive when [Aretha] Franklin sang a version of “Amazing Grace” that sent several choir members into spontaneous dances. One man

danced off the altar and around Vandross' gold coffin as the audience clapped along in rhythm." Based upon the characteristics of Vandross' memorial, I believe it is reasonable to posit, regardless of the mainstream media reports to the public, that his church memorial service was a homegoing, and thus a safe space to practice and engage in African American cultural traditions like dancing or "shouting" in church. Those that were present felt comfortable, even with cameras watching and reporters reporting, to participate wholeheartedly in the service in the manner they were most familiar.

In addition to the celebratory context of service, the most common topic of discussion in the reports from high profile, and widely read, news and entertainment outlets was what celebrities chose to share about Vandross. Although mainstream news articles like those from *MTV News* and the *New York Times* quoted several celebrities, they failed to even mention the eulogy at all (Reid, Feuer). Only one of the six reports I found from vetted news outlets even named the eulogist—the Rev. Henrietta Carter. This lack of interest and regard for the formal eulogy at Vandross' funeral suggests that in terms of the public opinion, the eulogist had the least amount relevancy and value to the entire moment. I do not believe that this means that the Rev. Henrietta Carter did not give a moving and thoughtful eulogy, but that it did not resonate with those watching as much as the remarks given by certain celebrity speakers, the most notable celeb being Patti Labelle.

Patti Labelle, or Patricia Louise-Holte Edwards, is also a popular R&B singer, has been an active artist in the music industry for over forty years, and made crossover hit songs in Pop music like "Lady Marmalade" (1974) with her girl group The Labelles (originally known as The Bluebelles), and "New Attitude" (1984) and "If Only You

Knew" (1984) as a solo artist ("Patti Labelle"). Labelle spoke at the midpoint of the service, and she made an entrance into the pulpit of the Riverside Church in a flowing floor-length, orchid colored gown (Shapiro and Hinckley). She is a native of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, born in 1944, and she sang gospel music as a child in her local church before transitioning to singing with girl groups and later recording her first record in 1962 at age 18 ("Patti Labelle"). A few years later, songs like "I Sold My Heart to the Junkman" (1962) and the cover of "You'll Never Walk Alone" (1964) sparked on R&B record charts.

Patti reveals in her 2001 book *Patti's Pearls: Lessons in Living Genuinely, Joyfully, Generously* that she had to deal with adversity as a Black woman even before she became a celebrity because her skin color was of a darker hue:

The head of Newtown Records, a rich White man named Harold B. Robinson, almost cursed out my friend Mo Bailey for having the gall to bring Sarah, Nona, Cindy Birdsong, who was a Bluebelle before she was a Supreme, and me to his studio for an audition. The problem, however, was mostly me.

Had Mo lost his mind? Robinson asked him moments after Mo introduced me as the group's lead singer. Didn't Mo know I didn't have a snowball's chance in hell of making it in the music business? Why was Mo wasting his precious time?

Robinson's assessment had nothing to do with my voice; in fact, he had never heard me sing. As he told Mo, the reason I'd never make it in the music business was my looks. "She's too dark and too plain," Robinson said. "And everybody knows a plain dark girl can't sell records." (48)

Labelle was the visual antithesis to the fair-skinned and widely popular Diana Ross, and as her story illustrates, she had to face even greater challenges as a Black singer to impact and infiltrate mainstream music. Patti arguably overcame those challenges, and is known by many as the ultimate "soul diva" who was first to don unique "space age" costumes which other White pop music artists like Madonna and Lady Gaga would one day mimic, and enjoyed the honor of winning multiple *Grammy* awards throughout her career ("Patti

Labelle”). She exists as a popular Black public figure that triumphed over the rejection of “dark” skin that permeated American media and influenced music audiences.

Patti Labelle’s remarks at the service of Luther Vandross, which are available in Appendix D, were the top and most common result of Internet search engine inquiries on the subject of Luther Vandross’ funeral on *Google* and *Yahoo*, two popular search engine sites. This elevating of Labelle over the Rev. Henrietta Carter as the eulogist by the mainstream public demonstrates the fluidity of the Eulogic experience and how the act of eulogizing becomes a very democratic practice when done in an open format. Although the Rev. Carter, as the eulogist, was the designated speaker to deliver epideictic rhetoric that praised Vandross and reflected on his existence in order to bring closure to his life, the overwhelming response by audiences was that the person who did this most effectively was not the formal eulogist. Labelle’s words are therefore the words that I analyzed as the eulogy for Luther Vandross because my research examines the AACCR shared in public eulogies that media and pop culture interpret as having the most significance and impact.

Patti opened her remarks by stating that she was “celebrating,” reiterating that Vandross’ funeral was a homegoing gathering to celebrate the transition of a loved one to his heavenly destination. She then disclosed that the gown she wore was made especially for Vandross because “he wanted me to look like this all the time” (see Figure 9 on the following page).

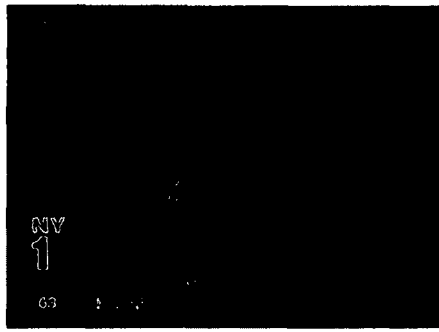


Fig. 9. Patti Labelle speaking at Luther Vandross' funeral. "Patti Labelle on Luther Vandross Funeral." Video Image. *Youtube*. Uploaded 21 March 2007 by PLabelleLVandross. Accessed 19 Feb. 2014.

Labelle's introductory confession is a revealing statement because in it she makes a reference to Vandross' known affinity, throughout his career, for clothing and fashion (see Figure 10 below).



Fig. 10. Luther Vandross performing live in 1994. "Luther Vandross-hello." Video Image. *Youtube*. Uploaded 1 Nov. 2008 by bladebalalau. Accessed 19 Feb. 2014.

One could argue that she is also making an opening reference, at the very start of her eulogy, to his possible queer identity. I previously defined queer as "dismantling fixed notions of identity," and this masked or coded reference to Vandross' unusual love affair with fashion reflect the challenge of eulogizing Vandross at a homegoing service, a social context and environment which mirrors the Black Church and functions as a space

where ideas concerning sexuality are specific and non-negotiable (Johnson 5). Thus, it is not a safe space for queer conceptualizations of sexuality to be discussed freely, even during the delivery of a eulogy. In the article, “Any Love: Silence, Theft, and Rumor in the Work of Luther Vandross,” published in 2000, scholar Jason King discusses at length the complexities of Vandross’ identity as a maker of love music whose sexuality was in question, and he stated this about Vandross well-known interests that many deemed effeminate:

... there is a kind of cross-lateralization of the singer's queer tastes and styles with his music. Vandross' immersion in royal luxury and possessive materialism explains the praises he is known to receive about his talent: “golden-throated,” “silvery-voiced,” “everything he touches turns to gold.” (435)

King saw a direct correlation between Vandross’ legacy and impact as an amazing singer with his reputation for being chic, suave, and in-style—what I believe is a representative characteristic of his interpretation and employment of the Cool Pose. I say this because Vandross remedied his perceived social deficiency as a Black man by dressing the part of a wealthy, vogueish White American male. For some audience members, Vandross being fashionable made him appear more successful and affluent, and thus, perhaps more likely to be a ladies man; while for other audience members, his savvy fashion sense could be threatening, as it might suggest a queer sexual orientation.

Ongoing public speculation that Vandross was a homosexual began after a few years into his career when he never appeared at events or award shows with a female significant other. Although Vandross vehemently denied this accusation, he never openly confirmed or displayed any interest romantically in women. I am compelled to note here that the mainstream perspective concerning open acknowledgement as a homosexual that Vandross lived amidst during the midpoint of his career reflects the perspective of the

Black church today. E. Patrick Johnson writes that “The censorship of Black homosexuality” in the church eliminates the ability for it to be “a site of comfort, affirmation, and community” for openly gay African Americans (403). The need for secrecy and concealment is consequently a must, and a biography about Luther Vandross—which Vandross approved and was published in 2004 before his death—authored by Craig Seymour, did nothing to clear up Vandross’ sexual orientation in the way of stating whom the singer actually dated during his lifetime. The biography did, however, state on several occasions the artists Luther Vandross worked with, sang for, and had close relationships with individuals who were very supportive of the gay community. In one chapter, the book talks at length about Vandross meeting and working with Bette Midler in the eighties, who was known for being a musician at that time who catered to, and was very proud of, her male fans in the gay community. According to Seymour:

Bette was one of the first performers to meet them openly on their own terms. She knew they were gay... Yet, unlike much of society at that time, she didn’t care. She understood and even seemed to empathize with their ongoing struggle to be treated with humanity at a time when homosexuality was still viewed as a mental illness... At the close of every show, she sang Bob Dylan’s nearly prayerlike anthem of emancipation, “I Shall Be Released.” (86)

Midler was a force in mainstream music for better treatment, and acceptance, of homosexuals, and Vandross found her to be a friend and mentor. He is quoted in the biography as explaining “Bette was always the kind to say, ‘What, there’s somebody new who’s fabulous? Why isn’t he singing for me? Who is he? Bring him down here now!’” (87). Vandross was that new, fabulous singer for Midler when he auditioned for her, and the actual use of the word fabulous, by Vandross to describe himself, is arguably very suggestive that she embraced him for who he was, even if that meant he was homosexual.

Vandross was publically accused of contracting AIDS as a result of practicing homosexuality in 1985 when reporter Stanley Bennett Clay, an openly gay Black man himself, reported in an article that he heard the performer's up and down weight was a result of being sick with the disease (197). Vandross' weight fluctuated between two and three hundred pounds during most of his career, and this struggle with obesity plagued him his entire life. To squelch the rumors of weight loss because of the disease, he sued Clay and appeared on the television show *Entertainment Tonight* stating, "I do not have it," and denied being gay (198). His biography admits that because Vandross was so "cagey" about his private life, the rumors lingered; but I surmise that Vandross' refusal to display a staunchly heteronormative masculinity, and not his "caginess," is perhaps a more salient reason the rumors lingered. Either way, fewer and fewer people held them as rumors at all, and Seymour, his biographer, acknowledges that, "Where Luther's love life was concerned, there were only questions, and many people supplied their own answers" (199).

Despite Vandross' sexuality being in question, he still became a chart-topping artist. Jason King explains in his article that speculation about the performers sexuality divided loyalties toward him in Black communities because by not confirming his sexual identity as the norm—a heterosexual male—to some Vandross was affirming something else, something different and *disruptive* (436). Vandross had already been criticized by music columnists in papers like the *Washington Post* for making only soft, love ballads that lacked a down-home, aggressive churchy soul sound (Seymour 253). Vandross was therefore working to change the aesthetics of Black music and his undisclosed sexuality threatened to undercut the celebrated machismo of Black masculinity. According to King,

during Vandross' career, "the singer's music was absorbed in different racial contexts" and "across sexualities within an intra-racial Black context" (436). Duke University Professor of Black Popular Culture Mark Anthony Neal writes that Vandross' songs had the tendency to "commiserate with female fans" (143). Critics of Vandross were clearly ignorant of what the entertainer was doing to diversify. Critics of Vandross were ignorant of what the entertainer was doing to diversify conceptions of Black music and Black masculinity because they could only perceive him as undermining the conventional representation of a swaggering, soul-singing openly heterosexual man—a popular Cool Pose persona for African American male vocalists—that they knew and deeply valued. In *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities*, Neal explains "The ontology of the "gay" Black man is problematic for Black communities and heterosexual black men because of the unfamiliarity and deviance from heteronormative conceptions of Black masculinity" (1). It is thus reasonable for me to suggest that if Vandross was gay, he lived much of his life as a celebrity aware that no safe spaces existed for him in Black communities as an openly gay man, and so he chose to remain silent about his orientation so as not to suffer or be maligned as a result of very specific and exacting cultural paradigms about gender and sexuality.

By focusing on the man that Vandross was, and not the "man" that he was not, Labelle's eulogizing of the performer responded rebuffed such criticisms. She talked of how knowing Vandross meant being accepted into his family, and that his mother and aunt became her "mom" and "aunt." Her personal story of acceptance in the eulogy established the importance of acceptance as a principle to practice, and Patti herself is a known supporter of Gay Rights and possesses a cult following of African Americans

within gay communities. Theatre actor and vocalist Paul Outlaw references Patti Labelle in his article on homophobia in Black music for the academic journal *African American Review*, stating that “For a gay man of color, it has always been permissible to identify secretly with a Superwoman, whose big personality or big voice expresses his yearnings for romance” (349). Labelle is that “Superwoman” for many gay Black men according to Paul Outlaw, and in a 2003 study completed in Atlanta and Chicago on improving the use of condoms among African American gay men to prevent the spread of AIDS, homosexual and bisexual participants even recommended having Labelle be a spokesperson for safe sex:

Speaking to them in their language, you know...a lot of the divas like Patti LaBelle. High profile figures or who, who gays support anyway. Basically all those people who support the gay community because they realize they wouldn't be where they are without them. (Peterson et al. 416)

Labelle, a known gay supporter, eulogizing Vandross and extoling the principle of acceptance in her remarks is thus even more evidence that she could have delivered strategically coded AACCR imploring Blacks to at last embrace Luther Vandross as a gay man.

Patti proceeded to explain in the eulogy that she was going to read a poem from “mom,” or Mary Ida Vandross, the deceased’s mother. The poem Mary Ida wrote entitled “You Kept Your Promise,” beautifully detailed Vandross’ relationship with his mother, and in it she highlighted that he loved and protected her. In one line, Mary Ida wrote that “You kept your promise, to never cause me to cry,” and in another “This path you’ve taken, it’s not your choice darling.” Both statements suggest protectiveness over her son’s choices and a private knowledge between she and Vandross about what those choices were. The choices certainly could have had to do with his sexuality, because the words of

his mother suggest that the choices that he made were made out of a necessity and responsibility for his talent. This conveys that perhaps Vandross' knew he could not reveal more intimate details about his life during his career because that would somehow inhibit or harm his success and the impact he had as a musical artist. Neither of the norms of masculinity in Black or White society included the role or function of an openly gay man, and so there essentially was no freedom for Vandross to exist musically, or otherwise, if that was indeed who he overtly identified himself to be.

His mother's poem focused on the theme of a "kept promise," and that was the rhetoric of the occasion. She ended her piece by stating that "Luther, you gave the whole world what God gave you" and that by doing so, "Son, you kept your promise." The idea of keeping a promise in the context of Vandross' life and undisclosed sexuality could easily be refashioned to say "Son, you kept your secret," because the message in the AACCR of Mary Ida's poem was one of private sacrifice for the greater public good. Mary Ida's poetic rhetoric about "kept promises" was her way of employing the Black Church tradition of "deep signifyin"—in a more stirring rather than satirical manner—because in that statement she indirectly affirms that it was actually the keeping of secrets that kept her and her son so closely bound together. Geneva Smitherman writes that, "Signifyin can be a witty one-liner, a series of loosely related statements, or a cohesive discourse on one point" (121). In Mary Ida's poem, her "signifyin" was that of a "cohesive discourse on one point:" altruism. The listeners of her poem read by Labelle were implored to respect, not condemn, Vandross' choice to share only his talent, and not his personal life, with those outside of his very small, inner circle of trusted company. Mary Ida insists that he made such choices as an act of selflessness, and the muteness

about Vandross' sexuality even at his death speaks volumes about what information she and the rest of his family and friends agreed was most important about Vandross' legacy and what information still had the power to damage it, even after his death—even in the “afterlife.”

In the eighties, the climate in society towards same-sex marriage and relationships was certainly not what they are in the twenty-first century, and Vandross would not have been wrong back then to deduct that based upon society's negative perceptions, if he confirmed his sexuality as that of a gay man, that his career might be sidelined or even destroyed. Mark Anthony Neal's chapter entitled “Fear of a Queer Soul Man: The legacy of Luther Vandross” in *Looking for Leroy* posits that “Luther's code of secrecy was challenged by the rise of “down low” culture in the late 80s and 90s,” and Neal explains that if a Black man was on “the down low,” he was in the closet, and the persona of the “closet” threatened “Black domestic life and the transmission of AIDS” (160). According to family and friends, the issue Vandross had with being labeled as a homosexual when the accusations arose in 1985 never stemmed from feelings of hatred, dislike, or fear of homosexuals, but from the invasion into his personal life that such rumors initiated (Seymour 197). Vandross' biographer Craig Seymour quotes Vandross as having said, “My whole adult life I have had gay friends. I've had gay collaborators. I have had gay mentors. And if I live to be a thousand, I could never repay the debt I owe to them” (197).

It seems Vandross was completely comfortable with his friends' sexual orientation being common knowledge, but never comfortable with his romantic life being on display. He expected that the music he created was the only segment of his life that was supposed to be consumed by the public. His close family and friends chose to ensure

that any secret he kept was buried with him, and the public will never know if his motivation to keep his love life completely absent from his identity was truly a selfless act so that he might continue to influence the music industry, or a selfish decision to protect the success and fame he achieved. Self-Sacrifice is a concept that Neal associates with Vandross as well, and he explains that because Vandross was a Black R&B singer, his masculinity had to be “believable and acceptable,” his queerness could not be overt, and he could not tarnish “Black respectability” (11).

As almost a final nail in the proverbial coffin of the argument that Vandross was indeed gay is the fact that Labelle closed the funeral with the song of a legendary gospel singer who died of AIDS and was known as a closeted homosexual (“Blacks, Gays”). To end her words of reminiscence for her departed friend, Patti Labelle sang “I Don’t Feel No Ways Tired,” a gospel song by the Rev. James Cleveland. After his passing, the Rev. Cleveland’s estate was even sued by a male who had a five-year sexual relationship with the Reverend. Labelle’s rendition of Cleveland’s song brought cheers from the audience and the final two verses resonated powerfully with the rhetoric of the occasion of Vandross’ unofficial eulogy: sacrifice for a kept promise. “Luther,” Labelle sang in her strong soprano voice, “nobody told you/the road would be easy/but I don’t believe he brought you this far/to leave you.”

Despite speculation, accusation, and criticism concerning his identity as a Black man, Luther Vandross brought a sensitivity and tenderness to representations of Black masculinity through his love ballads that did not necessarily convey weakness or inferiority. Scholars Stephanie Brown and Keith Clark astutely recognize in their article, “Melodramas of Beset Black Manhood,” that the “multiplicity of Black masculine

identities” exist, and that there is “a “continuous attack” on Black gay men who must live in a society both racist and deeply homophobic” (736). While I can only speculate that Vandross was a gay man who kept his sexuality a secret to protect himself, those he loved, and his musical career, from such incessant attacks, his characterization as loving and gentle is nonetheless evidence of the diverse expressions of distinctiveness and individuality that should be attributed to African American men as a whole by mainstream society, but often is not. If the life of James Brown demonstrated that Black men could be “men,” and the life Michael Jackson proved that Black men could be trendsetters and pioneers, then the life of Luther Vandross reaffirmed the Black man’s ability to love. Each of their eulogies celebrated their impact upon African American communities and articulated how these individuals changed pop culture by being bold and brave enough to reshape in society what it meant to be Black and to be a man.

***EYES HAVEN'T SEEN, EARS HAVEN'T HEARD: ROSA PARKS, OPRAH  
WINFREY, AND TWO KINGS—CORETTA AND THE REV. BERNICE—  
REDEFINING AND REWRITING BLACK WOMEN'S CULTURAL CAPITAL***

In nineteenth century American society, newly formed African American Baptist and Methodist churches would seem to be the likely places where both Black males and females experienced freedom and egalitarianism as the standard. Unfortunately, it was quite the contrary. Within the cultural landscape of the Black church, patriarchy—a system of male dominance that prevents women from rising to positions of power and exercising agency as leaders and decision makers in society—was more or less maintained for most of its existence. Women, for decades, were never actually able to look to the church to be a proponent of gender equality, but there were women who nonetheless managed to overcome the obstacles presented as a result of patriarchy's existence. These women rose to fame and notoriety as gifted and powerful speakers, and they stand out in history because of their ability to function as pioneers, shepherds, and guides for the cultural development of the Black community in its early formation. The remarkable lives of these women, and their presence as teachers and preachers in the pulpit in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, reveals how the politics of Black femininity were initially negotiated in the male dominated institution of the church.

In the first section of this chapter, I historicize the African American female preaching tradition. The female eulogists that I study and analyze in the final two sections of this research existed because of such groundbreaking foremothers who paved the way as some of the earliest known African American female leaders and ministers. The short, historical accounting and analysis of their journey that I will provide, before delving into

the eulogies of Rosa Parks and Coretta Scott King, allows me to accurately contextualize the plight of Black women rhetors in American society, and demonstrate how they, as orators, gained and strengthened their voice and their identity through acts of speaking and preaching.

## **THE HISTORY AND EMERGENCE OF BLACK FEMALE PREACHERS AND TEACHERS**

During the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and chattel slavery in Europe and the Americas in the seventeenth century, Black females were a very valuable asset as the property of White, male slave owners (Thomas 71). Female slaves had such high economic and domestic worth because Black women offered not only insurance for wealth and prosperity from the economic business of slavery, but also a means of instant sexual pleasure and gratification. Black women as females were paradoxically valued for their wombs and undervalued because of their sex; and sadly, within the African American community, even after the U.S. abolition of the slave trade and later slavery, Black males as free men did not choose to completely sever themselves from the ideology within the system of patriarchal oppression in White America that exploited Black women. African American culture, therefore, emerged from the throes of enslavement with Black men maintaining and enforcing some of the same sexist and repressive ways of life upon their Black female counterparts.

According to African historian Tarikhu Farrar, in many African communities, “Female title-holders placed in the highest levels of the political order were a common feature of ancient and later precolonial African political systems;” and Farrar states that matriarchy, as the “most ancient or primordial family form,” is “older in Africa than

anywhere else in the world” (579-580). Farrar’s research presents evidence that the West African and Eastern Central African communities where slaves traditionally came from had strong female leadership traditions; some of these locations include the Northern Akan or Bono kingdom of Nkoransa that is now the Republic of Ghana, the Western Sudan, and Upper and Lower Guinea (583, 593). Thus, it would be valid to assert that Black males, in choosing to identify with, and participate in, the same strict gender bias of Anglo-European societies upheld by their White oppressors, resisted their own pre-slavery cultural traditions of having influential and authoritative female communal leaders. When African American men had the opportunity to institute their own social hierarchy and valuation of Black women, they chose instead to model the same gender discrimination of those that enslaved them; Postcolonial theorist Ngugi Wa Thiongo explains the impetus of such a decision among oppressed ethnic peoples as “... want[ing] to identify with that which is furthest moved from themselves” (3). By distancing themselves from their own traditions and maintaining rigorously an Anglo-European interpretation of patriarchy and the Victorian cult of domesticity<sup>6</sup>, some Black males, after slavery, attained a slight elevation in social standing in mainstream society; and thus, at the expense of the African American female, they gained a marginal degree of upward mobility in the power echelons of the external White world.

It is also plausible to suggest that hegemonic and patriarchal oppression was so readily instituted by men in newly formed Black communities because communal traditions from African culture were largely lost over time after the start of the slave trade

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<sup>6</sup> During the nineteenth century, white middle class European and American women were subject to strict rules of femininity and womanhood; scholar Elizabeth Langland explains that this belief system upheld the home as “the haven” for women to develop and maintain values of submissiveness, purity, and domesticity (291).

to Colonial America and became less prevalent in the generations of Blacks following emancipation. This fact reflects that there was a historical impetus, in addition to the psychological, and illustrates the complexity of the process, and the reasoning, that led Black women to become oppressed and marginalized within their own communities; and regardless of which position scholars favor or subscribe to, the end result was still that Black women were doubly burdened with the reality that both inside, and outside, of their ethnic communities, they were deemed inferior and at the very bottom of the social hierarchy. Critical Race Theorists remark that in American society “Black women are presented with the double burden of race and gender domination but have no discourse responsive to their specific position in the social landscape” (Crenshaw 354). Although churches formed in the early 1800’s as a haven, or “hush harbor,” from degrading classifications for Blacks as an ethnic group, it was not to be so for African American females (Nunley 85). Women’s History scholar, Marilyn Westerkamp, has studied the evolution of African American religious culture during slavery in conjunction with the repression of Black women, and she considers the beginning of Black female resistance to silencing in the church—and the birthing of their sermonic tradition—to officially be after the formation of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church: the first independent Black religious denomination. Created in 1816, by former Black Methodist minister Richard Allen, the Rev. Allen courageously broke from the White Methodists because of discrimination and unfair treatment and formed his own church. He did not initially, however, break from the social mores of sexism prevalent in religious communities (Westerkamp 125). Allen often refused to let women preach, and he strongly discouraged two of the first known female preachers that came out of the AME

church, Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw (126). Both women were determined to enter the pulpit regardless of the reservations and disapproval surrounding female preachers, and they both wrote biographies on their journeys as female ministers and teachers of the Gospel.

Jarena Lee was born to free parents in 1783, in New Jersey, and remarked that she felt the call to preach in 1803, as a young woman (Westerkamp 126). She did not act upon her calling, however, until after her husband died and her two small children reached adulthood. Lee wrote an autobiography on her two decades of ministry that was published in 1849, *The Religious Experience and Journals of Mrs. Lee* (Andrews 25). As a minister, she spent much of her time mentoring other Black women who felt called as preachers, but had no community for which they could find support and validation.

Zilpha Elaw, born in 1790 in Pennsylvania to free parents, had a very similar life story as Lee's (Westerkamp 127). She began her preaching ministry in 1828, after having raised her children alone following the death of her husband. She too, wrote memoirs of her experience and travels to preach: the *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, and Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, an American Female of Colour* (Andrews 49). In their writings, both of these preaching women emphasized the call and direction of the Holy Spirit to lead them into the pulpit. Westerkamp argues in her scholarship that by invoking the Holy Spirit, Lee and Elaw took the onus away from themselves as women who chose to overstep the boundaries of gender conventions (128). By presenting their call as a command and obligation from God, and not an act of female rebellion, these women found agency in the scriptures. Lee and Elaw were able to

persevere through objections and censure to become the first known African American women to take authority of the pulpit and preach with “sacred fire,”

Westerkamp points out that Allen, as founder of the AME denomination, was likely so reluctant to ordain and support female ministers because he had the responsibility, and burden, of proving the sanctity and validity of his Black governed church in a larger society: a society that demoralized Blacks and subjugated women (124). Having a substantial amount of female ministers would put into question the authority and efficacy of his new church. These “unruly” Black women would be seen as openly usurping patriarchy, and would not fit particularly well with the social work that Black and White abolitionists were doing at that time, striving to dispel the negative myths of savagery and primitiveness disseminated about Blacks. Isabella Baumfree, or Sojourner Truth, as she is more widely known, was a Black female minister and speaker on the abolitionist circuit during the anti-slavery era, and Truth was often met with equal parts cheers and hisses by men during her abolitionist and suffragist speeches because of this very perception that her bold, authoritative style was indicative of radical female unruliness and disorder (Painter 464). Many White *and* Black men viewed Lee, Elaw, and Truth as females who did not adhere to the proper domestic role of women.

Westerkamp notes that nearly all women who traveled on preaching or abolitionist circuits, primarily in the Mid-Atlantic region of the East Coast, did so only before they married or after they were widowed and had no small children (128). Even then, they were still condemned by males for forsaking their responsibility to remain where a woman should—in the home.

Roxanne Mountford, a scholar of Protestant preaching and African American sermonizing, in her essay, “Engendering the Black Jeremiad,” discusses the requirement that Black female preachers had to make spaces for themselves, as leaders, in the Christian community when it came to the pulpit: the elevated place of power in the church where the word is spoken boldly and uncontested (99). Mountford explains, like Westerkamp, that Black women faced such resistance as preachers within their own community because Black men were pressured to institute a sexist, patriarchal system of leadership within the Black church, to garner legitimacy as “men” from a White patriarchal society. Part of validating their masculinity was directly connected to their ability to control and demonstrate an assertive role over females. As a result, the attendees of Black churches, like the White parishioners of most American Churches, became trained and accustomed to a masculine tone and style of oratory coming across from the pulpit (101). This was the process through which men came to monopolize the Black oral tradition, and the iconic preaching styles in the Black church, of vernacular language, sing-songy storytelling, and high emotionalism; because women were barred from entering the males-only discourse of Black preaching when it was established, those who later sought access and commanded those iconic traits, were viewed as reckless transgressors of gender lines and deemed masculine, or not speaking from a posture of authenticity.

What further complicates this is the fact that women who do not “preach” sermons with the iconic, male-associated preaching style are consequently deemed subpar, or inferior, to the standard male preacher (Mountford 102). Mountford labels this circumstance of equally negative conditions in ministry the “double bind,” and Dolan

Hubbard, author of *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination*, even posits that all modern African American women today, who freely practice their Christian faith in the Black church, are still bound and shackled by the system of patriarchy in their own communities (2). Although organized religion originated as an escape from the torture of enslavement for Blacks, it was truly only an escape for the Black male, because Black women were not given the same specific opportunity to lead their people into this realm of liberty and expression. The absence of such female leadership meant that Black women could not possibly know the full extent of this new “freedom,” and Hubbard posits that consequently Black women did not experience the same, metaphysical liberation from spiritual and psychological bondage in a tormenting place, as the Black men did—and they were not equally spiritually empowered or inspired by the church experience.

Westerkamp’s, Mountford’s, and Hubbard’s scholarship all ultimately conclude that the existence of female sermonizers will always be a challenge to the norms of patriarchy in Black communities, and I too believe that female sermonizers and speakers deliberately function as a corrective to the male dominated Black voice. As these scholars articulated, the quintessential image of the preacher, in the Black church, is still that of a Black male. Evangelist and vocalist Willie Mae Ford Smith, in the award winning 1982 documentary on gospel music *Say Amen, Somebody*, during a powerful scene, challenges her son with the question, “What’s a proper place?” after he tells her that “women ought to stay in their proper place” (Nierenberg). Smith’s question suggests that the proper place, for women, does include the pulpit; when a Black female makes claim on the pulpit as an orator, she, as the polar opposite, has the power to ever so slightly chip away

at a repressive paradigm, revising the conceptualization of who, and what, the Black preacher, is in the minds of those present. This fact compels me to assert that whenever female eulogists preside over the important last rites of community members, and courageously deliver inspiring and thoughtful sermons composed of AACCR, they undermine the authority of patriarchy and help to reconfigure hermeneutics as a gendered authoritative discourse. By examining eulogies given, by women, as an invaluable component to the modern Eulogic Tradition in African American culture, I will show that Black female orators provide cultural stewardship through speech and dialogue that helps to eliminate sexist barriers to women operating in such powerful positions of influence.

The need exists to study the roles of female eulogists as spiritual leaders because although Westerkamp, Mountford, and Hubbard were thorough in articulating the traits of preaching rhetoric which Black women were forced to subscribe to as they entered into the male discourse, they did not specifically address what Black women did, as orators in key leadership moments, to alter the structure and function of the Black Oral Tradition. These scholars made the key points that historically Black women were restricted from the authority and agency of the pulpit because of the reification of patriarchy by the Black male, that Black female sermonizers defy gender conventions in the African American community by engaging in the rhetorical act of preaching, and that the male discourse of sermonizing, in the Black church, is changing because women are now speaking. What these scholars did not thoroughly address, however, is the impact of female leaders performing specific cultural traditions and rituals outside of the generic, every Sunday sermon, and how being distributors of AACCR in communities offers

unique opportunities for Black women to teach and empower, albeit while having to cleverly navigate through a staunchly contested space.

The eulogies of Rosa Parks and Coretta Scott King are suitable for exploring such a phenomenon because, not only were those specific eulogies given for the communal loss of very important cultural icons, but they were also delivered by women who were leaders in their own right, associated with public oratory, and known in the Black community as speakers. In my close examination of Oprah Winfrey's eulogy for Rosa Parks and The Rev. Bernice King's eulogy for her mother, Coretta Scott King, I will be looking at how each Eulogic oration allows the lives of the deceased woman to intersect, and intertwine, with that of the living eulogist. Such intersection and intertwining bridges generational divides and permits an almost side-by-side comparison and contrast of the evolving representations of Black female heroism, independence, and social consciousness, and then examines how they re-member and reconfigure the image of women who were essential to the struggles and the triumphs of the Civil Rights Movement.

When the narratives of two phenomenal lives are able to meet under the auspices of what I call a hallowed speech act, this is an awe-inspiring, *kairos* moment at its finest. Within a hallowed speech act, meaningful language is spoken and heard with deep reverence. I am exploring the delivery of Rosa Parks' eulogy and Coretta Scott King's eulogy as hallowed speech acts and defining moments of the modern Eulogic Tradition in Black culture. These moments granted society a chance to witness African American history becoming "her story"—the story of how the lives of individual women of color impacted the lives of thousands, and how the communication of AACCR from influential

women enables us to determine what the voice of the next generation of similar iconic female leadership might sound like.

### **ROSA PARKS: ACTION SPEAKING LOUDER THAN WORDS**

Preacher and orator Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who I referred to throughout this dissertation, is probably the most well-known leader of the Civil Rights Movement in America; but credit for sparking the movement is often given to one woman in American history—Rosa Parks—for doing one courageous thing: refusing to give up her seat, after work, on a segregated Montgomery, Alabama city bus in 1955 (“Rosa Parks”). A department store seamstress refusing to give up her seat, on a public bus, may not warrant the historical legacy as a Civil Rights pioneer and heroine, but Mrs. Parks’ actions were indeed the catalyst for a bus boycott that progressed to become a full on national movement of non-violent social protest in America. It also fortuitously facilitated the introduction of Dr. King, a then relatively unknown Montgomery, Alabama preacher, to become the vocal spearhead for the movement. The success of the American Civil Rights Movement resulted from everyday people of color, like Rosa Parks, getting involved in civil activism and protest; but after being arrested for refusing to give up her seat, Parks somehow emerged as the singular Black female face of the movement for many years. Her identity, her existence, and her protest narrative rallied people together, and her death decades later marked the passing of a remarkable individual whose remarkability lay not just in her actions, but what she came to represent for so many people.

Rosa Parks’ effectiveness, as an agent of social change in the United States and popularity as a Civil Rights icon, arguably came from her ability to be cheered on and admired for being a person who took brave and immediate action—not just as an average

person, but as an otherwise unassuming and nonthreatening Black woman. Psychologist Barry Schwartz, in his article, “Collective Forgetting and the Symbolic Power of Oneness: The Strange Apotheosis of Rosa Parks,” argues that it was Parks’ idyllic candidacy, as a female symbol for Civil Rights, which resulted in her honoring and even idolization decades after her courageous actions. This was the primary impetus and cause for her to be honored, even above women who did the very same act of protest. Rosa Parks was indeed not the only woman, nor the first woman, to refuse to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus; and according to Schwartz, “To find advantage in the forgetting of virtue seems absurd, but our capacity to remember and comprehend the most virtuous, the ideal, depends on our doing so” (125). Few people know that other Black women were arrested in Montgomery, on buses, before Rosa Parks was, for also challenging the segregation laws, but because there was concern from Black leaders about their ability to garner support from Whites, they did not receive the backing and publicity that Parks did (“The Story”).

I concur with this line of reasoning from Schwartz that Rosa Parks’ fame, as the female figurehead of the Civil Rights Movement, was possible because she possessed all the necessary traits of a woman, in 1950s America, whom both working class Blacks *and* Whites could relate to and sympathize with. Her famous police arrest photographs do portray the image of a harmless, fair-skinned older woman wearing glasses—who could be the lady next door in any American city or town—being gingerly booked and processed (see Figure 11 below and Figure 12 on the following page). Parks conveyed a “positive” image of both Blacks and women to the public, especially in those photos, and as such, the argument was successfully made to American society that she was a victim

of the racist laws in place in the South. She did not immediately reflect the position of an “other,” as other darker skinned, younger, less petite and polished Black women might, so there was nothing to suggest, from the looks of her in the pictures at least, that she deserved mistreatment or mistrust. Parks was a sympathetic figure to the public, and as a result, she was the ideal person to become a representative of how unjust and uncivilized the system of racial segregation and discrimination was in the United States.



Fig. 11. Feb. 22, 1956: White police officer fingerprinting Parks two months after her arrest for refusing to give up her bus seat on Dec. 1, 1955. “Parks Arrested” Photograph taken by Gene Herrick. *Associated Press*. 9 June 2000. *AP Images*. Web. 6 July 2014.



Fig. 12. Feb. 22, 1956: Booking photo of Parks taken at the Montgomery, AL Sheriff's Department. “Rosa Parks Arrested.” Photograph taken by Gene Herrick. *Associated Press*. 9 June 2000. *AP Images*. Web. 6 July 2014.

Some scholars suggest that Parks' story tells the quintessential female biopic of the Civil Rights Movement. Delphine Letort, whose research entails analyzing television media and film portrayals of Rosa Parks, posits that because of a desire by mainstream American media to highlight and perpetrate the Civil Rights Movement as a narrative of "Black passivity in the face of White aggression," Parks fits perfectly with such an approach (34). Such a narrative is paradoxical narrative, Letort explains, because essentially it is still a narrative of resistance, but a narrative constructed in such a way that it does not intimidate the ruling White majority. In a recent 2012 *CNN* online op-ed article about Rosa Parks' legacy, published around the time of her birthday, Professor Danielle McGuire also sharply criticized this mainstream narrative and condemned how Rosa Parks has been dishonored, throughout the years, by the continued perpetuation of such an ideology concerning who she was and what she did:

This popular presentation of Parks as a quiet but courageous woman, whose humble righteousness shamed America into doing what was right has become a mythic fable present in nearly every high school history textbook, museum exhibit, and memorial....[Parks] has been imprisoned by this tale, frozen in time as a silent and saintly icon whose only real action was to stay seated so that, in the words of her many eulogists, "we could all stand up."...It's time to free Rosa Parks from the bus.

McGuire's perspective on the fallacy of Rosa Parks' quiet protest narrative mirrors Schwartz's and Letort's. The issue that all three scholars are raising is that essentially, American society manipulated Parks' refusal to not give up her seat into the tale of a frail, tired Black woman asking the White man's permission, in a nonaggressive manner, to simply remain seated on a bus. Part of the problematic *pathos* of such a request is that it plays on female gender stereotypes and specific social mores about women, thereby

oversimplifying, and somewhat distorting, the nuances that encompass Parks' act of social and cultural rebellion as an African American female.

While my personal opinions of Rosa Parks' actions are indeed reverential, I also subscribe to the notion that because of the roles of women in the nineteen-fifties, and the racial context of society at the early vestiges of the Civil Rights Movement, Parks was the optimal person to make such a bold decision to challenge the South's Jim Crow Laws for both the Black community and mainstream White America. It was therefore more than just her act of resistance and protest alone that contributed to make her socially significant during that era; this reality is an essential aspect of Parks' legacy that must be acknowledged to understand her cultural relevancy and longstanding adulation in American society. Cheryl Glenn has often discussed in her scholarship the need to challenge long-held perspectives of noted women in history, and their accomplishments, because they are often encapsulated by what she calls the "paternal narrative" (289). The male dominated stories that map our histories in the Anglo-European world place women as marginal figures who, if they do anything of influence, are viewed through the traditional lenses of female subjugation and powerlessness. Glenn considers feminist historiography a method to expose how females, such as the likes of Rosa Parks, are therefore written and remembered historically according to the prescriptions and notions of gender roles that relegate famous women and their achievements as variances, anomalies, or differences to the female norm (288). Dr. Patricia Hill Collins writes in *Black Feminist Thought* that "Woman is culturally constructed and by challenging the social standards, one reveals "a concept as ideological or culturally constructed" rather than instinctive or biological (16). To closely examine the lives exceptional women in

history and re-member the bodies of knowledge about them, with a new awareness and rejection of the male dominated interpretations of female acts of agency and independence, is therefore to challenge “foundational” or “instinctive” knowledge about them; and this must be done to obtain a more accurate accounting of the their experience and cultural impact. It is the only way that one can, as Glenn so eloquently put it, “catch fragmentary glimpses of the previously unconsidered variations that had been smoothed over by the flat surface of received knowledge” and “see what is familiar in a different way, in many different ways, as well as to see beyond the familiar to the unfamiliar, to the unseen” (289, 291).

Attempting to rewrite the history of Rosa Parks and her contribution to the Civil Rights Movement is a delicate matter because no one wants to discredit or undervalue her contribution to the cause of racial integration, for people of color. However, it is often overlooked that the actions of Rosa Parks speak not just to the empowerment of Black Americans, but Black women specifically. When Parks died on October 24, 2005, there was a public display of mourning and grief for the loss of a historical icon whose death marked more than simply the loss of a Civil Rights activist, but also the death of the ideal female display of nonviolent protest that American society idolized for decades. Any eulogy for her was thus, a memorial to that ideal as much as it was to the woman. I, however, would like to consider the possibility that eulogizing her also afforded a unique opportunity, if taken, to highlight the less recognized truth that as a woman, her silent protest contributed to igniting the individual’s voice against injustice and placed a national spotlight on how she, as a Black female, was progressive in her demonstration and modeling of personal agency and empowerment.

Immediately following Rosa Parks' death, she was honored posthumously with a total of three nationally recognized memorial services, one in Montgomery, AL, one in Washington D.C. after she lay in repose in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda, and at her official funeral service in Detroit, MI, where she lived for most her life after the Montgomery boycott ("Nation Hails Rosa"). Differing high-profile individuals gave public addresses at all of the services, and they all offered their personal commentary on her national impact. The Rev. Jesse Jackson's eulogy at the Detroit, MI, funeral, held in Greater Grace Temple Church, was the actual formal eulogy for the late Rosa Parks if one subscribes to the literal definition of a eulogy as the final speech delivered, at a funeral service, that immediately precedes an individual's burial ("Jesse Jackson"). However, like the social situation with Luther Vandross' eulogy, the American public did not positively respond and popularize the words of the Rev. Jackson, the literal eulogist, but rather gravitated to the words delivered from a different, more contemporary famous public figure. The consensus amongst both mainstream and Black audiences seemed to be that the most circulated eulogy for Parks would be Oprah Winfrey's address at the Metropolitan AME church as part of the Washington, D.C. memorial service. For the American public, it was Oprah's words that ultimately provided the most memorable way to solidify and finalize the legacy of the late Rosa Parks.

Even now, as I complete this research some seven years after her death, if one were to do an online search to find the eulogy for Rosa Parks with the query phrases "Rosa Parks' eulogy," "eulogy Rosa Parks," or "Rosa eulogy," on *Google* or *Yahoo*, the first two search results would yield copies of Winfrey's speech. In mainstream society, Oprah's address clearly takes prominence as the most relevant piece of information

connected to any type of eulogy for Rosa Parks. According to the Pew Research Center's *Internet & American Life Project* 2012 Winter research survey, since 2004, *Google* has been the search engine of choice for those who use the Internet by computer or some other mobile device, with *Yahoo* as a distant second; and this survey also found that 91% of adults who are online use the Internet as their source to find information. (Purcell, Brenner, and Rainie). When considering the current internet query search results for Parks' eulogy alongside the Pew survey findings on search engine use, together, these facts indicate that most individuals today who desire to experience the eulogy for Parks, and use the Internet to locate it, will be first directed to the words of Oprah before anyone else. Search results on all search engine sites are listed according to a ranking of relevancy to the query that is submitted; Winfrey's top of the page ranking as Parks' eulogist indicates the frequent association people make between a eulogy for Parks and Oprah's address, the continued classification of her speech's content as Eulogic in nature, and the importance and impact of the words she shared (Griffiths, Steyvers, and Firl 1069, 1070).

What was it that made Oprah's remarks about Parks so profound, so popular, and so Eulogic? Well, the answer has a lot to do with who Oprah Winfrey was, and still is. Oprah Winfrey is most known for her successful talk show that spanned twenty-four seasons on daytime television from 1986-2011, and her other ultra-successful endeavors that she engaged in while working as a host, including starting numerous charitable ventures and producing her own lucrative magazine and television network, and acting in popular Black American films including *The Color Purple*, *Beloved*, and most recently, *The Butler* ("Oprah Winfrey's Official"). Oprah is consistently listed by the highly

regarded business magazine, *Forbes*, in their rankings as one of the wealthiest and influential women in the world, and she is also a mainstay on their annual list of the most powerful people in modern society (“Oprah Winfrey”). So, when the two monumental narratives of Parks’ and Winfrey’s lives met in the pulpit of the AME church where the memorial was held, that pulpit became a space where a hallowed speech act would take place; for in the space of power within a traditional African Methodist Episcopal church, in one singular address, the annals of history and popular culture would now always have a clear and tangible connection between Rosa Parks, the one Black woman whose bold action is credited with sparking the Civil Rights movement, and Oprah Winfrey, the first Black female billionaire who was born in utter poverty in the back woods of Mississippi, but rose to become a dominant, influential, and inspiring figure to the American public. In addition, by being credited in popular culture as the person who “eulogized” Rosa Parks, Oprah’s remarkable success story enlarged the fascination that surrounds the legend of courage and bravery for which Parks was famous, paradoxically both reifying and revising the ideology of Rosa Parks as a noble heroine who paved the way for others to be emboldened and empowered, such as Oprah herself.

In her address on October 31, 2005, Oprah began it by entering the pulpit of the Metropolitan AME church and declaring that she was there to say a “final goodbye” to Rosa Parks, “a hero” (see Figure 13 on the following page).



Fig. 13. Oprah Winfrey speaking at Rosa Parks' memorial service. "American Rhetoric Oprah Winfrey Eulogy for Rosa Parks delivered at Metropolitan AME Church, Washington DC." Video Image. *Youtube*. Uploaded 28 Nov. 20010 by Ameya B. N. Accessed 19 Feb. 2014.

Winfrey's eulogy transcript is available in Appendix E, and although she made those remarks as only an honored guest at the memorial service, not the scheduled eulogist, the content of her remarks certainly contained all of the four characteristics of Eulogic sermonizing that I previously outlined in Chapter Two. I explained that the first characteristic of Eulogic sermonizing is, 1) the duality of purposes within the eulogy's rhetorical function. Winfrey's initial remarks exemplified this characteristic, as she made it clear from the outset that in delivering her "goodbye" address to Parks, "a hero," she was accomplishing two things at once: the celebration of a heroic individual and the mourning of a life lost.

Oprah then proceeded to reference back to her childhood idolization of Parks and when her father first told her about Parks, the "colored woman" who stood up to injustice. Winfrey relayed with humor that she had pictured Parks as "a hundred feet tall...carrying a shield to hold back the White folks." This humorous admission by Oprah of how she understood the public's image of Parks, but yet pictured her as a larger than life figure when she was a young girl, provided an image that helped her listeners picture the shared battle that all African Americans fought with mainstream White society during

the Civil Rights Movement. Winfrey's descriptive statement about Parks triumphantly "holding back the White folks" reflects her clever application of the second seminal characteristic of Eulogic sermonizing: 2) the power in words left unspoken, or the phenomenon of "silence speaking volumes." Rather than speak explicitly here about how Parks combatted racism, hatred, discrimination, abuse, etc., in her refusal to give up her seat, and how powerful an action that was for a woman of color, Winfrey instead provided the imagery of a giant carrying armor to protect oneself from White folks—"White folks" being used as a generic term to encompass all that was harsh, cruel, derogatory, and destructive that African Americans endured.

Oprah's preference to not name, in her first opening statements, the injustices specifically that Parks combatted also reflects her assumption that the hearers of her remarks, both those in the very church in which she spoke, and those watching the memorial by way of news broadcasting of the two hour service, had an awareness of what those injustices were. It likewise demonstrates that Oprah was conscious of the fact that there were multiple audiences, and that because those audience members were not all solely African Americans, it meant the injustices of racism and discrimination against Blacks would hold a different significance. Winfrey did establish what Parks confronting those injustices meant to her as a child in the South, and by doing so, she provided a glimpse, to the audience, of the magnitude of what it likely also meant for other African Americans during that era. By revealing her ability, even as a child, to grasp just how enormously courageous Parks' actions were, Oprah as a skilled and crafty communicator actually spoke volumes about the real remarkability and power of what Rosa Parks did as a Civil Rights Icon.

As Winfrey stood sharing her very personal story, the wood casket where Parks remains lay sat just below the pulpit. The third characteristic intrinsic to Eulogic sermonizing is 3) symbols and visuals that support the rhetoric being delivered in a speech act. The presence of that casket was clearly an important factor in Winfrey's address as she stood above the body of the late Mrs. Parks and began to discuss how much of an impact Parks made within African American communities. According to the *Washington Post's* article "An Overflowing Tribute to an Icon," the 2,500-seat sanctuary of the Metropolitan AME church was the final stop for the casket of Parks as part of the U.S. Capitol Memorial Tribute to her (Wilgoren and Labbe 1). The image of Oprah from the pulpit, poised atop Parks' polished wood coffin, eloquently sharing an important homage to her, could not be more visually moving—and fitting considering the next segment of Winfrey's address commenced with a series of thanks to Parks for her pivotal existence as a trailblazing role model, particularly for Black young people.

Oprah divulged in her address that when she finally met Parks in person, as an adult, she was overcome with gratitude; "I thanked her then. I said, 'Thank you,' for myself and for every colored girl, every colored boy, who didn't have heroes who were celebrated. I thanked her then." Winfrey explained that she was compelled to demonstrate such appreciativeness to Parks because Parks gave her something to aspire to be, and look up to, as a child. At this point in her eulogy, Oprah solidified the notion to those listening that she was literally standing upon the legacy of Parks by naming her as a major personal influence, and inspiration, in her life. She conceded that who she subsequently became as a role model, celebrity, and social figure herself was directly connected to the significance of who Parks was. The impact upon the listening public of

such support and endorsement of Parks, by Oprah Winfrey, in this passage of her address is not to be underestimated. Winfrey has held great credibility with the American public, and such social capital made her words all the more powerful. Media reporters, social commentators, and pop culture experts routinely highlight just how weighty and effective any words of support or praise from Oprah Winfrey are; the “Oprah effect” is a frequently used term by media outlets to describe her ability to influence public and consumer decisions in American society (“The Oprah Effect”). Winfrey’s popularity has essentially become a cultural force in America for selling goods, popularizing trends, supporting certain social and moral causes, and launching the successful careers of other previously unknown television personalities. Thus, in eulogizing Rosa Parks, what she ultimately said about her—and did not say—was destined to be valued, studied, and often revisited.

I outlined the fourth and perhaps most important characteristic of Eulogic sermonizing as 4) the identity of the eulogist and their chosen rhetoric of the occasion, and as I already discussed the significance and impact of Oprah Winfrey acting as Parks’ eulogist, I will now address the most valuable aspect of this study of Parks’ eulogy: how the crux of what Winfrey shared, the rhetoric of the occasion, reveals the AACCR that she deemed most relevant and beneficial for those listening. Oprah made a very telling declaration at the midpoint of her Eulogic address; “I would not be standing here today, nor standing where I stand every day, had she not chosen to sit down.” That was a bold and direct statement from Oprah, and it revealed that Oprah spoke so adoringly of Parks, not just as a customarily grateful African American citizen who felt indebted to Parks for being able to enjoy certain civil liberties, but also as a modern, Black female who

modeled herself after the “mother of the Civil Rights Movement,” *and* as a public figure who, like Parks, shared in the experience of achieving lasting national notoriety and the unparalleled social responsibility that comes with it. Winfrey was demonstrating that she shared multiple points of connection with Parks, as an African American, as a famous African American, as a woman, and as a famous African American woman. These points of connection were vital to creating the bond that Oprah felt with Parks, and are indicative of how audience members came to develop their bond with Parks as well. Winfrey specifically alluded to her career by referencing where she stood “everyday,” suggesting that in sharing her personal feelings, she wanted listeners to understand her celebration of Parks as a celebration that recognized Parks’ actions had lasting effects that extended beyond the Civil Rights arena, to include the social empowerment of Blacks, and women, as individuals.

Winfrey’s eulogy was centered on a theme of empowerment for greatness, and she conveyed not just a sense of communal bond with Parks along racial lines, but a unique bond of sisterhood and of Black female solidarity born out of their perceived shared experiences. Although Oprah is not famous for one act of nonviolent protest as Parks was, she is set apart, and singularly hailed in history and society, as an African American woman who accomplished an extraordinary feat during her lifetime—amassing unparalleled wealth and cultural agency. To propose or believe that Parks and Winfrey are two similarly iconic women is, in this way, not completely irrational or unfounded. Parks and Winfrey are both highly esteemed for their remarkable social impact, and at the moments in her address when Oprah personalized her connections to Parks, she became

an extension of that legendary persona of extraordinariness and an exemplification, to the audience, of the modern version of the ideals that Rosa Parks represented.

Winfrey, in fact, appeared motivated in her address to negate some of the more archaic and patronizing conceptualizations of Parks that only seem to celebrate, or popularize, the trope of Parks as the timid, poor victim of a woman who was mistreated on the bus, and whose subsequent actions only made a difference in the genre of Civil Rights. She repeatedly used the word “great” to describe Parks and her actions, and although Oprah commented on Parks’ small physical stature and size, calling her “petite” and “almost delicate,” she then in her next series of statements discredited that description by describing Rosa Parks as a public servant who staunchly confronted multiple entities: “the one White man whose seat you took,” “the bus driver,” “the law,” and “history—a history that for 400 years said that you were not even worthy of a glance, certainly no consideration.” In differentiating the entities that Parks had to take on in her refusal to give up her seat, Winfrey highlighted the extent and degree to which Parks’ greatness challenged different segments of society, and ultimately history—the biggest and most behemoth of entities. Oprah’s listing of history last demonstrated that she understands, like the feminist scholars Patricia Hill Collins and Cheryl Glenn, that recognizing and highlighting history being confronted and changed by an extraordinary woman opens the door for the reform, and evolution, of antiquated and repressive belief systems about all women in our society.

Close reading and analysis of Oprah’s remarks about Rosa Parks definitely provides evidence for the argument that her address effectively, and ingeniously, eulogized the late Civil Rights icon; it also, more importantly, indicates that the AACCR

of those remarks was revealing the dexterity and transformative nature of Parks' legacy as an inspiration not just for racial equality, but individual empowerment for women and even the non-Black American citizen. Winfrey backed this perspective, and brought closure to her thoughts, by making a final assertion that every audience member listening shared a connection, a bond, with Parks as a member of humanity. They were therefore impacted for the better—regardless of their race—by her one, courageous act. She reverentially stated “And in that moment when you resolved to stay in that seat, you reclaimed your humanity and you gave us all back a piece of our own... You acted without concern for yourself and made life better for us all.” Oprah was crediting Parks with multiple accomplishments in this statement: her being an agent of positive social change for many, her teaching others how to be an agent of change through challenging society's paradigms and conventions, and her proving that despite marginalization or suppression, one can still be an agent of change in their communities. Out of all the things that Oprah said that day, an often quoted statement from her address is “God uses good people to do great things,” and she used both Parks' life and her own storied life, a byproduct of being inspired by Parks, as proof to make the argument that all people, no matter the race or gender, have the capability to rise above adverse circumstances, do something great, and make history.

The paramount piece of knowledge gained from exploring this particular relationship of eulogizer to the eulogized is that as the eulogist, Winfrey—as a secular celebrity with no ministerial affiliation to the Black church like Bishop Winans or the Rev. Al Sharpton—employed rhetoric in a deeply religious setting that successfully deconstructed the traditional, mainstream perceptions of Rosa Parks: perceptions that

revered her as primarily a one dimensional heroine of, to, and for solely African American people. Oprah began her Eulogic address reminding her audience of the significance of Parks' actions to Blacks in America, but ended it by upholding Parks, as an inspirational and motivational figure, for the whole of American society. She very subtly contested the customary veneration of Rosa Parks as the ideal, gentle feminine protestor of the Civil Rights movement, and mounted a convincing argument, throughout her eulogy, for the revision of this point of view and the installation of Parks as an assertive, powerful, and forward thinking figure of American culture and history. Winfrey's fame and celebrity added the necessary credibility to her words for such a stance, and because she took it, the eulogy for Rosa Parks that marks her death will evermore be a potent beginning to the rebirth of Parks' cultural legacy to one that is not considered limited, or solely relevant, to conversations about race.

### **CORETTA SCOTT KING: A KING IN HER OWN RIGHT**

Coretta Scott King was a public figure that also became famous in America during the Civil Rights Movement and her fame was a result of her role as the spouse of the great Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. After his death, however, King successfully transitioned from simply being known as a famous spouse to a respected social leader to an accomplished activist. The fact that she did not fade into obscurity after the assassination of her husband in 1968, and rather remained vocal, and on the forefront of legal, social, and political issues in society, is reflective of just how significant and exceptional her life was ("About Mrs. King"). Long after Dr. King's death, and until her own health began to decline, Mrs. King continued to speak out and champion causes that her husband supported, and she furthered initiatives that were meant to improve life for

minority groups in America and around the world (see Figure 14 below). King was not a conventional housewife by any means, and when taking into account contemporary Black women who had a lasting influence on both African American and American culture in the last fifty years, she is a preeminent individual to consider.

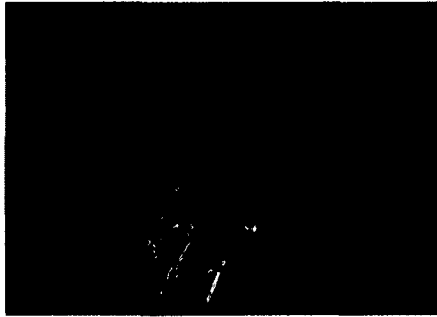


Fig. 14. Coretta Scott King speaking at Stanford University in 1986. "Ms. Coretta Scott King at Stanford on Nov. 6<sup>th</sup> 1986." Video Image. *Youtube*. Uploaded 23 Feb. 2011 by Clayborne Carson. Accessed 19 Feb. 2014.

I asserted throughout my study that the public eulogy, in African American culture, is an indicator of how closed dialogue has become an open practice, and the very personal eulogizing of Mrs. King completed by her daughter, Bernice King, echoes the idea that information and expressions that were once deeply confidential and privileged in the Black community, are no longer self-contained or undisclosed for protection, or fear of retribution, by mainstream society. Thus, the value I find in examining Coretta Scott King's eulogy given by her daughter lies in what it reveals. Her eulogy demonstrates the impact of King's positive representation of Black women upon the mainstream American public's definition of women of color, and what a woman of her social stature and notoriety contributed to how African American women see and identify themselves. The Rev. Bernice King condemned the reality that Mrs. King is considered

as a footnote in the Civil rights movement, when she should be a headline. Mrs. King was married to the man whom many people might consider the most influential African American to ever live; and while her husband's classification does not make her, by default, the most influential African American woman, it did elevate the significance of who she was, what she did during her life, and how she was received by the Black community and beyond. What was said about her, after her death, speaks to the progressive paradigms her life represented and her direct or indirect agency in changing depictions of the Black female.

On February 07, 2006, the Rev. Bernice King delivered the eulogy at the church where she served in ministry, New Birth Missionary Baptist Church, in Decatur, GA; in attendance at the high profile service were several politicians, celebrities, masses of the general public, and the current as well as three former U.S. presidents (Dewan). The same television news networks that covered the funerals of the five Black celebrities I previously discussed broadcasted her six hour funeral service as well; and while I noted that the atmosphere of most of those funerals examined seemed more like a gala event, the video recordings of Mrs. King's funeral show that for her service, there was a more subdued tone of reverence and decorum ("Coretta Scott King"). With a guest list that included dignitaries and world leaders, there was a sense that her homegoing—although complete with archetypal elements inherent at most Black church funeral services—was not the traditional service that you might experience at any African American celebrity's funeral. Mrs. King's legacy and identity demanded that there be a heightened sense of honor, and respect, because of what her life had clearly meant to all those in attendance.

King's eulogy being delivered by her daughter The Rev. Bernice King, who is a lawyer, ordained minister, and social activist as well, was idiosyncratic, as it provided the chance during an important cultural practice, for the audience to encounter two generations of extraordinarily socially conscious African American women. The eulogy was laden with metaphors and references to the symbolic nature of King's womanhood and her belief system. As an ordained minister, biblical allusions were to be expected from the Rev. Bernice, and she wove them throughout the entirety of her address. Unlike Bishop Marvin Winans, who eulogized Whitney Houston, Bernice King did not quote a foundational scripture, but rather let the entirety of her and her mother's Christian beliefs function as a guide and method for her to speak out freely, and confidently, on several somewhat controversial social issues in American society. She took full use and advantage of her mother's passing as an opportunity to provide her perspective on national problems, such as poverty and elitism. The Rev. Bernice's subject matter signifies that she was indeed intentional in using King's broadcasted eulogy as a means for communal instruction—instruction that questioned more than simply the values, beliefs, and lifestyles of Blacks. Her approach to use her mother's eulogy to influence the direction of mainstream society is, yet again, more evidence for how and why this tradition continues to be relevant and beneficial beyond the scope of the Black community.

To introduce the eulogy, Bernice King established her authority to speak at that moment not as her mother's child, but as a child of God. She stated, "The indwelling and the filling of the Holy Ghost gives me the strength to stand even now to speak what thus sayeth the Lord." Like the aforementioned founders of the Black female preaching

tradition—Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Sojourner Truth—the Rev. Bernice expressed that her authorization, right, and confidence to be in the pulpit comes from God or the Holy Spirit (see Figure 15 below). By giving all credit to the divine, it furnished credibility to her position as the speaker in that moment. Although she was not nearly as famous as Oprah Winfrey, who eulogized Rosa Parks, and did not possess the same standing and social capital with the public as Oprah, by conveying that it was God essentially who vetted her, King attempted to give more validation to the content she would disseminate.

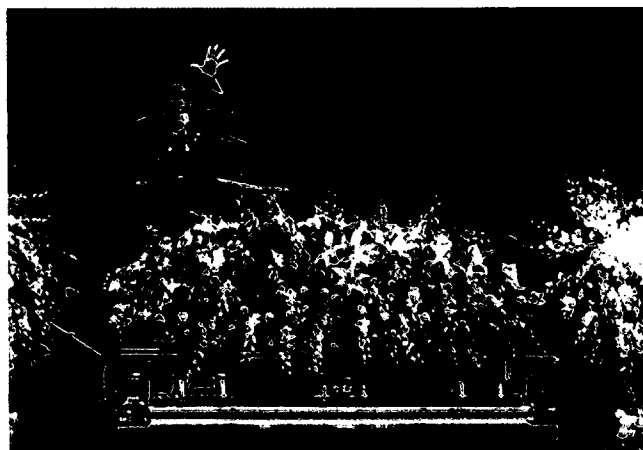


Fig. 15. The Rev. Bernice King actively preaching her mother's eulogy in the pulpit of New Birth Missionary Baptist Church. "Coretta Scott King" Photograph taken by Jason Reed. *Associated Press*. 7 Feb. 2006. *AP Images*. Web. 6 July 2014.

Her need to make the same defense for sermonizing in 2006, over one hundred and fifty years after Lee, Elaw, and Truth existed as preachers in the pulpit—and Lee and Elaw wrote memoirs that stressed the guidance and beckoning of the Holy Spirit leading them into preaching—indicates that Black women sermonizers today still have a ways to

go before possessing equal roles to men in the Black church, and being viewed as equally qualified as male preachers.

After establishing her license to speak, as her preaching predecessors were often compelled to do, the Rev. Bernice acknowledged her tutelage and endorsement by a male figure—an action that once again further certified her role as the speaker. She thanked her pastor, Bishop Eddie L. Long, whom she called a spiritual father, for permitting her mother's homegoing to be held in New Birth Missionary Baptist Church's massive 10,000-seat sanctuary (Dewan). The theme of a "new birth" was a key component in the eulogy that King delivered for her mother and several times in her address she referenced this idea as a play on words knowing that those sitting in the audience, and those watching by broadcast, were aware they were present "in" New Birth just as she was calling for a new birth on a particular subject matter. King made statements like "there's a danger when you become a thing oriented society rather than a people oriented society, and so Coretta Scott King's transition is calling for a new birth;" and "It's time for the world to be born again; It's time for a new birth. It's time for my people to reposition themselves into their rightful places as true kings and that's why he used the life of a King at this set time." The Rev. Bernice did not refrain from social commentary and was not shy about vocalizing her opinions in her oration, and the theme of "new birth" was a method for her to talk about the beliefs or practices in American society that she felt needed to be adjusted or altogether discontinued. Given her fervent and unbridled rebukes and reprimands, it is therefore appropriate to argue that her goal in eulogizing was to strategically communicate social instruction to her hearers in hopes of sparking social conviction and change.

Bernice King established, from the outset, that as a participant in the homegoing service, she was “here to celebrate” her mother’s life. She then listed all the positive things that her mother was as a female, namely “a woman of authority,” “a woman of power” and “a woman of strength.” I find these three particular descriptions significant because they are all traits that usually have masculine associations in society, and she even prefaced the descriptions by calling her mother a “a king in her own right”—not a queen. Once again, employing the clever rhetorical technique of using a word that the audience has multiple associations with to introduce an idea, she called Coretta Scott King a literal king. At that juncture of the address, she asserted that her mother was as authoritative, powerful, and strong, as any male leader. Doing as most other eulogists of the Eulogic Tradition do, she did not openly state this subversive opinion, but through her descriptions she clearly argued for a legacy of her mother in which she is remembered as possessing the same qualities as any other celebrated male public figure, including her deceased husband.

In bestowing upon King the male position of royalty, the Rev. Bernice yielded subtle support, at the beginning of eulogy, towards gender equality. By the time the eulogy was coming to an end, however, she elected to make a statement outright:

God came to Coretta Scott King, said Moses, Martin, My servant is dead. Arise, take this people over the Jordan. See, Joshua was really Coretta. I knew I wouldn’t get too many claps, cause sexism is still alive; and sexism is not only just from men, it’s from women too...we missed the fact that the one who really caught the heart and spirit of Dr. King and would not let us forget time and time again...that it’s either non-violence or non-existence, that was Coretta Scott King.

Expecting a less than stellar reception to her claim by those in attendance, King still asserted that her mother was a victim of sexism, from both men *and* women, and consequently overlooked as the true successor to her father. Sociologist Patricia Hill

Collins remarks in her book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* that “African American women as a *group* remain oppressed within a U.S. context characterized by injustice. This neither means that all African American women within that group are oppressed in the same way, nor that some U.S. Black women do not suppress others” (9). Collins’ statement reflects the multiple methods and forms of subjugation that Black women are forced to contend with if they are to survive or prevail in society. This intersectionality of injustices is reported and examined in the scholarship of Black feminists like bell hooks and through the efforts of Critical Race Theorists like Kimberle Crenshaw who work to stop lawmakers from “essentializing” the plight of Black women to only a singular, easily mended problem of discrimination (358). The Rev. Bernice King brought awareness to the widespread issue of intersectionality when she argued that recorders of history, influencers of mainstream society, and fellow women, must acknowledge that Mrs. King was an indispensable component to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. achieving his victories through activism, and moreover, that Coretta Scott King should be considered the heir apparent to his work of social justice.

Remaining unafraid to credit her mother with ascending to that role, Bernice King alluded to the biblical story of the Israelite exodus from ancient Egypt—a common allusion in African American literature—and labeled King as the Joshua character: the man who was the male successor to the Israelite exodus leader Moses. Such a designation stood in stark contrast to her mother’s more conventional, mainstream image as the doting and supportive wife to an influential and driven husband. Nevertheless, the Rev. Bernice was unambiguous, and refused to reify any image of her mother that lessened her

accomplishments as a champion against injustice, or weakened her impact upon society as an agent of change after Dr. King's abrupt death. She challenged any sexist beliefs that could not, or would not, receive her mother as having been acceptable or deserving of such an acknowledgement. In doing so, King was condemning African Americans, mainstream American society, and the Black church, all at once, for continuing to marginalize women and perpetuate gender stereotypes through the memory of her mother. Her words justified the rewriting of King's legacy in society so that it does not focus singularly upon a persona of ladylike delicateness and mothering. The Rev. Bernice's words also substantiated the critiques made by scholar Dolan Hubbard about liberation theology failing to benefit and improve the social condition of African American women.

Black liberation theology became prevalent in the nineteenth century when Christian philosophies dominated American values and most Black leaders supported the assimilation of such philosophies and values. Wilson Jeremiah Moses writes in his book *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925*, that "Afro-American religion...provided an extra-rational basis for a belief in the future ascendancy of Blacks," and he explains that interpretations of Christian principles by abolitionists and anti-slavery activists during slavery were always centered around themes of freedom and advancement through devout practice of one's faith (77). History professor Dr. Sterling Stuckey notes that African American abolitionist writers like David Walker were fiercely resolute in spreading their belief that an individual could not truly be Christian if he or she did not support the freedom and equality of Black people (133).

The rhetoric of liberation theology abounded during the Abolitionist Movement to end the institution of slavery, and this was also the case decades later during the Civil Rights Movement to end segregation. Dolan Hubbard argued that what is oft overlooked with Black liberation theology, however, is that the celebrated freedoms gained for Blacks through Christianity largely benefited the Black male only, and failed to significantly alter the plight of Black women (2). Acclaimed Harvard University Professor and African American Studies historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has also confirmed, in much of her scholarship, that within the Black Church, “Male biased traditions and rules of decorum sought to mute women’s voices and accentuate their subordinate status vis-à-vis men” (3). Thus, the encouragement to revise and rewrite the history and legacy of Coretta Scott King in Bernice King’s Eulogic oratory is proof that Black women, as participants in the African American Christian tradition today, are still required to do the work of procuring agency, independence, and autonomy with their respective community, as much as they must, with mainstream society.

King’s eulogy signifies one attempt at dismantling the established tradition that fails to empower the Black female subject. It also calls into question the customary misrepresentations that result in very few, if any, women of color being adequately characterized as leaders, or fairly identified in history for their contributions in society, despite marginalization. Scholar Kwok Pui-lan, author of *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, has pointed out that “To recover Black foremothers as strong, resourceful, and enduring is to rewrite a tradition to live by, and to celebrate Black women’s audacity of creating a way out of no way” (34). The Rev. Bernice was astute in recognizing that for the generation of today—accustomed and habituated to racial

integration and individual liberties—her mother is very much a foremother, an icon for the cause of civil rights and a trailblazer for women holding leadership roles. Therefore, to push to amend the narrative of her life and legacy was to argue for the truth that women exist as indispensable shapers of communities and community members.

King cited her mother's creation of the nationally known King Center, a nonprofit institution in Atlanta, GA that is currently a National Historic Site and frequent destination for both tourism and educational visits, to bolster her argument for King's rightful, due, and unbiased recognition (King Center). She asserted:

It's why she could build, as a woman, the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Non-Violent Social Change against the wishes of so many men who told her to stay at home and raise her children. But she was a woman who built a multi-million dollar facility that would be an epicenter for this kingdom of God, non-violence, and she did it because she was holy...Holy means having our lives yielded to God. She didn't do it for fame. She didn't do it for fortune. She did it because it was the will of God and she yielded to it.

This passage of the eulogy takes obvious contention with the notion that females are incapable of performing needed societal functions outside of their roles as mothers or wives. The Rev. Bernice quoted the common, sexist rhetoric circulated by patriarchy and misogynists that professed women belong in the domestic sphere, and then summarily rejected it. Defiant and bold, she proudly made it known that her mother went “against the wishes of so many men” in facilitating the formation of the family's nonprofit organization.

As if her statement was not rebellious enough, King then both celebrated and legitimized her mother's choices as divinely ordained, repeating for effect her use of the word “holy” twice, and explaining that King was not motivated by greed or materialism—two evils she mentioned verbatim earlier in the eulogy as rampant in the

American government. Being that all levels of government are run by a male majority, and have been since the inception of the nation<sup>7</sup>, the Rev. Bernice also ingeniously discredited the nation's patriarchal hierarchy in this key passage of her address, for its perceived moral failures and corrupted value system. In fact, throughout her eulogy, the aim of the AACCR she shared was towards society as a whole and the powers that be. Bernice King made no substantial differentiation between Black America and the rest of society when sharing such fierce social commentary, or even when proselytizing for the Christian faith. It was as if she did not consider her greatest responsibility, in eulogizing her mother, to be solely addressing the African American community about processing through the meaning of that moment for them culturally, but rather warning America as an afflicted entity—with Black Americans as part and parcel of that affliction—to be awakened to its domestic perils.

In what I would consider the climax of King's eulogy, she declared this admonishment:

Repent! For the kingdom of God is at hand...you gotta change your mind now, because all of the systems that you have created, all of the traditions that you have come through, they are failing and they are fading and they are doing it very fast and very quick...

The Rev. Bernice's call for conversion was the ultimate point of the oratory, the reason behind the AACCR, and her voice on the audio recording rose to a yell during that crucial moment. Likewise, video shows her head and hands moving vigorously with each expression. She aggressively compelled audience members, with her words, to reject old

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<sup>7</sup> According to the Center for American Women in Politics based out of Rutgers University, as of 2013, only 18.3 percent of seats in Congress are held by women and women make up only 22.8 percent of statewide elective executive offices; although at the federal level women have been appointed to positions in presidential cabinets since 1933, America has yet to have any woman be a ballot candidate for election to the office of the President of the United States.

ways of believing. According to her assessment, modern society was ready and even urging for change, and she beckoned them to embrace a fresh approach to flawed cultural practices, beginning with the establishment of Coretta Scott King to her rightful place, no longer relegated to the margins of history in terms of cultural importance, social influence, and political power.

King knew that this eulogy was a chance for her to share information that she perceived could be life changing and mind altering, and so she labeled her mother's eulogy as a *kairos* moment: a moment in which every person that could and would hear her voice could and would experience something unique, special, divine, and impactful. Her words, her rhetoric, had the potential to persuade people from different races, ethnicities, genders, economic class, political associations, and religious affiliations, all because they were united in one extraordinary period of time out of respect and appreciation for Coretta Scott King. Resolved not to let the American public waste their opportunity for both self-examination and self-empowerment as a community, she informed them of the importance of such an occasion:

There's a thing called *kairos* moments when God interjects himself in time like he did back in 1955, fifty years ago, to move this nation into another place and here he goes again, in a *kairos* moment. It would be neglectful of us if we miss this moment and treated it like we were attending some funeral or home-going service and paying condolences and respect and then we allowed ourselves to return to life as usual and not stop and listen and hear the voice of God.

Bernice King articulated so well in this passage that her mother's eulogy—and in my perspective, the eulogies of Whitney Houston, James Brown, Michael Jackson, Luther Vandross, and Rosa Parks as well—had the privilege of being a *kairos* moment in American culture. The significance of these eulogies rests in their ability to create periods, in an ever changing society, in which African Americans can come together to

engage in a tradition that serves to maintain and strengthen the bonds of community, all the while informing the American public about Black culture on their terms, and critiquing the beliefs and practices in mainstream society that were, are, or could be damaging to individuals or communities.

Of all the eulogists' this project has examined, the Rev. Bernice King was the one eulogist whom I would classify, alongside the Rev. Al Sharpton, as the most resourceful with their Eulogic oratory. Although a woman, she did not appear to be overwhelmed or hindered by women's past history and tradition in the margins. King spoke wisely to honor her mother Coretta Scott King, and yet boldly and aggressively in order to change the people of America. She seized the chance to deliver AACCR and asserted her mother's eulogy was a *kairos* moment to make a paradigm shift, removing her mother's legacy from its traditional place in the margins of her father's civil rights story.

***LET THE CHURCH SAY AMEN: THE INTERCULTURAL IMPACT  
AND IMMINENT FUTURE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN EULOGIC  
ORATORY***

All of the eulogies studied in this dissertation reveal that contemporary eulogies delivered to, and designed for, primarily African American audiences are carefully crafted orations that provide targeted commentary about social issues such as substance abuse among Black adults and youth, racism and discrimination from White America, the breakdown and/or transformation of the Black family, poverty and classism in African American communities, and the acceptable social roles of the Black man and the Black woman. The Eulogic Tradition is consequently more than a mere custom that accommodates the constant reality of human death; it is as an evolving cultural practice that facilitates changes to African American communities through sermonic exploration and revision of communal norms, traditions, and paradigms. The messages that are conveyed within African American Eulogic oratory are shared to provide information on culturally relevant subjects that the deceased experienced or had a connection to; and although the deceased's experience or connection may not be obvious or known by a eulogist's audience, the eulogist is nevertheless afforded the opportunity through Eulogic oratory to speak on such subject matter because the deceased's life functioned as an access point or entry way.

Maximizing this opportunity to inform and share memorable social commentary is therefore a skill possessed by those who deliver influential and empowering eulogies. In this dissertation, I argued that in the last ten years, Bishop Marvin Winans, the Reverend Al Sharpton, Patti Labelle, Oprah Winfrey, and the Reverend Bernice King are

all Black public figures that effectively communicated to fellow members of their communities as engaging Eulogic orators for famous Black Americans who died. Their six publically broadcasted eulogies discussed in this dissertation exist as meaningful cultural artifacts because those orations capitalized upon the four foundational characteristics of Eulogic oratory: having a duality of purpose in both celebrating life and mourning death, leaving unspoken key opinions related to the deceased to allow that silence to speak powerfully, using essential constituents of funeral proceedings like visuals and symbols to buttress the preached word, and incorporating their identity as the eulogist and their chosen theme, or rhetoric of the occasion, as tools to speak to shifts in cultural paradigms and relevant social issues within their addresses. It is the consistent presence of these seminal characteristics of Eulogic oratory in every one of their eulogies—and in most eulogies that make up the Eulogic Tradition—that ensures Eulogic addresses to Black communities will serve as a continued means of celebration, communication, and impartation.

The content of the eulogies for Whitney Houston, James Brown, Michael Jackson, Luther Vandross, Rosa Parks, and Coretta Scott King—all delivered between the years 2005 and 2012—confirms the Eulogic Tradition's customary function as a regulator of the ideas and beliefs upheld in Black culture. Houston's eulogy, delivered just two years before this dissertation's publication, and watched live by millions in 2012, reinforced the Christian religious notion that it takes faith—faith in God, faith in self, and faith in one's heritage or upbringing—to achieve remarkable professional goals in society. Pastor Marvin Winans, as Houston's eulogist, used Houston's life to warn his listening audience of the dangers and consequences of negative lifestyle practices like illegal drug use. The

eulogy of James Brown, shared six years earlier than Houston's in 2006, and with a much smaller television and internet audience, advocated and praised a traditional view of Black masculinity by suggesting that Brown's life and career proved that overcoming adversity and challenges caused by racism are possible through an unapologetically "cool" and self-empowered masculine personality. Brown's eulogist, the Rev. Al Sharpton, pointed to the combination of James Brown's astute social consciousness as a Black man, and his unique identity as a performer, as the reason for his lasting career and lasting cultural relevance. Three years later, in 2009, the Rev. Sharpton delivered another highly publicized eulogy for Michael Jackson at a memorial attended by 17,500 fans, and in this address he conversely chose to highlight Jackson's non-polarizing persona as a musical artist rather than the power of his Black masculinity. Jackson was a public figure who, according to Sharpton, connected and unified different races and ethnicities through music and performances that uncharacteristically ventured outside the artistic bounds of Rhythm & Blues music that Black singers traditionally stayed within. Sharpton also encouraged the audience at Jackson's memorial to never forget the power of having a dream, as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once shared, nor underestimate the power of a dream being fulfilled.

The eulogies of Houston, Brown, and Jackson clearly focused on subject matter regarding individual and collective social responsibility and uplift. The dogma shared within those orations, for the most part, reified conventional conservative morals. The eulogies of Luther Vandross, Rosa Parks, and Coretta Scott King, however, were for three public figures whose identity in the public included a reputation for being nontraditional in such a specifically definitive way that their difference determined their

social distinctiveness. For Luther Vandross, as a regular singer of R&B love ballads, his queer representation of Black masculinity created overwhelming public speculation and intrigue about a possible queer sexual orientation. The remarks of Patti Labelle, a close personal friend to Vandross and fellow famous R&B artist, proliferated in the media after the funeral in 2007 and because of popular culture's positive response to them, Labelle's oratory lives on as the quintessential eulogy for Luther Vandross. Her address, however, never answered the question of Vandross' sexuality, and perhaps this fact reveals that AACCR in Eulogic oratory—although accommodating dialogue in a safe space towards Black men and women—does not accommodate space for the Black LGBT community to vocalize or speak. As such, Labelle chose instead to inform Vandross' funeral audience about the importance of Black families loving and accepting their family and community members regardless of their differences, even if they challenge entrenched cultural and religious beliefs.

Like Labelle's eulogy for Vandross, I also determined for this dissertation that for Rosa Parks, I would choose to study as her eulogy the remarks at a memorial service that were not designated as the service's official "eulogy." This choice was once again due to the public's clear affinity for, and overwhelming support of, those remarks more so than what was said in the service's designated eulogy. In 2005, at Parks' Washington D.C. memorial service held shortly after her death, billionaire talk show host Oprah Winfrey reminded the millions that were watching her by broadcast that Rosa Parks was an iconic American figure, not just for being a Black American who stood up to injustice at the hands of White Americans, but for being a courageous Black woman who bravely rejected the notion of female weakness or powerlessness by refusing to give up her seat;

and in doing so, she also refused to remain in the historic margins of womanhood.

Winfrey's Eulogic oration conveyed that great women like Parks, and even herself, deserve not only recognition in society, but continued opportunities "to do great things."

Coretta Scott King's eulogy delivered in 2006, like the eulogy of Rosa Parks, celebrated the importance of validating the work and accomplishments of female public figures. King's eulogist, the Rev. Bernice King, who is also her daughter, asserted that her mother's legacy could only be respected and advanced by this generation through the persistent development and production of future leaders—female leaders especially—in Black communities. The eulogies of both Rosa Parks and Coretta Scott King highlight that those two women were avant-garde trailblazers of the Civil Rights Movement who actively championed social justice while existing in stark contrast to the prevailing norms and gender stereotypes concerning women during that historical era and beyond.

The prolific nature and instructive content of the six eulogies examined in this dissertation demonstrate that in Black communities, the stories of people's lives—the background history, the choices, and the actions that constitute the narrative of their existence—actually work as crucial didactic resources for the collective social education of the African American public; and it is the publicizing, or national and international broadcasting, of these celebrities' eulogies via television and the Internet that reflects the modern phenomenon of African American Compound Collective Rhetoric at work. AACCR is what I termed oratory delivered through mass dissemination or group distribution that contains concepts and ideas that build upon or refine previously accepted beliefs. Eulogic oratory delivered to African Americans in the twenty-first century readily employs AACCR in an attempt to govern aspects of Black culture and maintain, or

improve, the identities of Black communities in American society. Although the fame and prominence of the deceased is the primary reason that the sharing of AACCR I studied occurred on such a massive scale, it is the shared commonalities of the content within each eulogy that reflects the core components of the Eulogic addresses that take place every day in Black communities.

The Black community I grew up in produced the very moving and inspirational eulogy for my disabled aunt that I referenced in the first lines of this dissertation's introduction. This fact speaks to one of the most significant findings that resulted from my research of the Eulogic Tradition, which is that every time a eulogy is delivered, Black culture is influenced and may potentially be altered in some way. As follows, it is presently justifiable and valid for me to assert that contemporary historians, analysts, and researchers who desire to determine and assess the weighty subjects and issues of Blacks in America should now begin to look to eulogies delivered by African Americans, for African Americans, as legitimate sources of such information. My research contends that this type of eulogy is a relevant and suitable supplier of knowledge about the beliefs and customs of Blacks; and because the African American Eulogic Tradition centers upon the effectual delivery of performative and engaging oral communication, the consistent scholarly study of the exchange of information and expression of ideas within such communication can yield valuable data on the intercultural diffusion of a wide range of past, current, and even future communal ideological perspectives and social conventions.

It is interesting and illuminating to also reconsider one fact, in this conclusion: while all Blacks in the U.S. who were the audience members of these eulogies did not all literally know each other, many likely believe that because they share the same racial

identity, they are connected. Benedict Anderson states in his work, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, that such a belief system or paradigm of being invisibly linked together as part of an “imagined community” manifests because “members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members... yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). The term “community” within African America usually invokes themes of unified protest and resistance that were intrinsic to the communion of Blacks in American history and follow the narrative of the rise from obscure origins and the effects of slavery and Jim Crow laws. Likewise, because communities form due to notions of kinship, and not necessarily physical or territorial links, in my study of the Eulogic Tradition in Black communities I discovered that the struggle against racial oppression continues to unite many diverse and unique Black Americans today.

This continual struggle against oppression was extremely significant to my work because by looking at how Black Americans have connected with one another during the delivery of eulogies in the last decade, I have examined the shared experiences of racism, classism, and gender inequality that frame the open spaces where AACCR is currently shared. All deceased celebrities and eulogists I’ve examined not only profess an African American identity, but they all also came from economic backgrounds that range from extreme poverty to working class. They all shared narratives of economic perseverance and survival, and these shared experiences help to compose the “Blackness” that underpins the affiliation or interconnectedness that Blacks of all heritage and nationality can choose to collectively unite around in the U.S. Consequently, my research leads me to believe that if I examined the burial traditions of the dispersed people all over the

world who identify as Black and are removed the geographic origin from Africa, I would still find that a theme of “shared identity from shared oppressive experiences” could be intrinsically woven into the funeral service and its important requirement of collective, communal participation.

At present, the diplomatic atmosphere of the African diaspora throughout the world facilitates a much broader conceptualization of ethnicity, where vast definitions of what it means to be Black exist while at the same time highlighting the shared experiences of oppression that draw Black people all around the world together. In the contemporary global community, the taut vestiges and residue of years of oppression have the power to unite those who suffered and the AACCR in the eulogies of Houston, Brown, Jackson, Vandross, Parks, and King that address the social issues of marginalization and rejection in a Eurocentric American society, epitomize an instance of Black people’s stalwart resistance to such “influences and infiltrations,” and provide different examples of how Blacks have responded to these conditions and exposed or subverted them for their own individual and communal benefit.

In the twenty-first century, the nationally and internationally publicized homegoing services of varied African American public figures encourage people of African descent to continue to refute stereotypical and monolithic representations of what a Black man or woman is and can and become, and thus they help to redefine the terms and conditions of what being Black “is” and what it “means” in a modern, global sense. Sociologist and Professor Paul Gilroy, who is Black British, confirms in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* that the multiple Black diaspora identities present in the world today do share a historical and cultural connection to slavery in the

West and that slaves who had to endure and overcome the “slave experience” were the first, truly modern peoples to exist in the nineteenth century (221). Gilroy’s assertions indicate that cultural conceptions of what it means to be “Black” in a global sense were indeed shaped by the existence of the transnational trade of slaves, and that a common kinship of suffering and overcoming that suffering impacts the diverse, “imagined” community that exists for Blacks all over the world today. Benedict Anderson explains that the idea of being a community or nation is a particular cultural thing and how any nation “comes into being” is important to the understanding of it (4). There must be awareness, therefore, that the oppressive forces that have asserted their power upon Black people and contributed to the development of the imagined community or nation of the African diaspora resulted in complex and dissimilar notions of identity amongst Blacks—and this awareness is quintessential if one is to fully understand and exist within paradigms that will recursively define and redefine the character, personality, and distinctiveness of Black people as a singular community or people. Along this same line of thinking, French speaking philosopher and poet from Martinique, Aimé Césaire, cautions against exoticism as Blacks simultaneously recover their past and chart their future, for he writes in *Discourse on Colonialism*, that we are to retreat from “utopian and sterile attempts” to “revive the past,” and instead create a “new society” that is “rich with all the productive powers of modern times, warm with all the fraternity of modern days” (52).

One of the most positive and affirmative aspects of African American communities and the larger African Diaspora is the beautiful legacies of traditions like the Eulogic Tradition. All who desire access can be educated or inspired by the unique,

distinguishing—and even hidden—narratives that result from the work and devotion of amazing Black people who committed to demonstrating that Blacks are not powerless, but rather resourceful and courageous, through moving cultural customs and acts. As I neared the end of writing this very conclusion, famed South African leader and human rights defender Nelson Mandela passed away on December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2013, at the age of ninety-five (Zuma). Although Mandela is not a member of the African American community, African Americans, as members of the larger African Diaspora, are showing an outpouring of support and love to him and celebrating his role as a resourceful, courageous, and powerful colored man who shared in the all too familiar battle of having to overcome White oppression. South Africa's long held racial segregation system of apartheid prevented its African population from having the very freedoms that Blacks were also prohibited of through the institution of Jim Crow Laws and "separate but equal" ideology (Zuma). Accordingly, Nelson Mandela as a public figure means to indigenous South Africans, in many ways, what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. means to African Americans; and in 1990, when Mandela was released from a twenty-seven year imprisonment by South Africa's ruling White party and later elected as the first democratically elected president of South Africa in 1994, Blacks all around the world could share in it as a victory against White oppression, even if it was not the oppression that they themselves actually experienced.

A reflection piece published on the Black culture website *theGrio* days after Mandela's death recounted how warmly Mandela was greeted by African Americans when he visited after his release:

After Mandela was released in 1990, he embarked on an eight-city tour, with crowds filling up stadiums to see a man who had made history... And he received

a hero's welcome by the thousands in attendance. For the African-Americans and others in the crowd, it was an emotional experience. Nelson Mandela was returning home in a sense, home to an African-American community that embraced him as one of their own (Love).

The response and reception by Blacks in America to Mandela, at that time and now at the time of his death, reveal that Black communities in America have a sense of shared experience with their global racial community due to persistent injustices in Anglo-European societies and their use of colonizing forces against Black people. The very idea that Mandela could be considered "home," as stated in *theGrio* article, when he arrived in the U.S.—national home of African Americans—speaks to the capability of shared experiences to unite and empower Black peoples; and so his memorial service that aired from Johannesburg, South Africa on Dec. 10, 2013, fittingly included the first African American President of the United States and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, speaking the following words:

It is hard to eulogize any man—to capture in words not just the facts and the dates that make a life, but the essential truth of a person—their private joys and sorrows; the quiet moments and unique qualities that illuminate someone's soul. How much harder to do so for a giant of history, who moved a nation toward justice, and in the process moved billions around the world...Like King, he would give potent voice to the claims of the oppressed, and the moral necessity of racial justice...In the arc of his life, we see a man who earned his place in history through struggle and shrewdness; persistence and faith. He tells us what's possible not just in the pages of dusty history books, but in our own lives as well.

President Barak Obama's Eulogic address for Nelson Mandela, broadcasted live from Africa to America on the same multitude of media networks that aired Whitney Houston's funeral two years earlier, makes a clear reference to the African American civil rights leader Dr. King. In a eulogy that, like all six of the eulogies examined in this dissertation, fits the categorization of being by a Black person, for a Black person—at the global level—President Obama connected Nelson Mandela and Dr. Martin Luther King,

two influential Black public figures, by the narrative “arc” of their lives’ work to end segregation and eradicate racism. In that statement, President Obama communicated to Black people of color around the world that they are members of a community with great social leaders of whom they can be proud and inspired. Invoking history, President Obama reminded Africans and members of the African Diaspora that not only are the future and the past effected through every brave and conscientious action taken today, but that it is every Black person’s right and responsibility to take such action.

That the African American Eulogic Tradition can be utilized as a frame for understanding a worldwide cultural event like Nelson Mandela’s memorial service indicates the substantial research capabilities and critical scholarly impact of exploring this sustained communal practice. This dissertation, as an academic research project, establishes that eulogies delivered in Black communities for extremely influential people are indispensable oratorical and literary texts, and consequently, deserve a place as President Obama described, “in the pages of dusty history books;” but my research also strongly supports the hypothesis that eulogies for the common Black man or woman, when examined, would too yield results that reveal the kinds of strategic communication being shared in Black communities and its various degrees of significance and impact. Consequently, this dissertation on the empowering discourse of publicized Eulogic oratory for Black cultural figures ends at a point where other scholars will hopefully begin: pointing researchers towards unstudied segments of the African American Eulogic Tradition to include the eulogies of the common man or woman, as meta-eulogies for Black ideals and ways of life, and the unexplored eulogies of the African Diaspora as

measures for cross-cultural continuity and the connection or kinship of the global Black community.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Eulogy for Whitney Houston by Pastor Marvin L. Winans New Hope Baptist Church, Newark, NJ February 18, 2012

*Marvin Winans:* Let's go to the word of the Lord. I can assure you that this is not a speech. I'm getting ready to preach. Someone – lawyer called my office to see if I wanted the property rights on what I'm going to say. I don't know how I could do that because all I'm going to preach is the word today.

[Singing] I heard of a lamb, in a faraway strand  
Tis a beautiful home for the soul  
Built by Jesus on high  
Tis a land where we won't die  
It's a land where we will never grow old  
I just want to say one time we'll never grow old  
We'll never, never grow old  
There is a land where we'll never, we'll never grow old

The word of the Lord from Matthew the 6th chapter, the 25th verse. Jesus says these words, "Therefore I say unto you, take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat and the body more than raiment?" So for are the scriptures.

I want to concentrate our thought on the B clause of this text. Is not the life more than meat and the body more than raiment? In order for us to expedite this process, I am looking for my amen corner. Sounds like it may be coming from over here somewhere and I try to tell folks in the little church where I pastor that if you say amen I'll get through this sooner. If you don't, I'll feel like you don't understand what I'm saying and I'll have to reiterate some things. But if you want to leave here with a subject, everyone repeat after me. Prioritize.

*Congregation:* Prioritize.

*Marvin Winans:* Now that's what we want to talk about today. Somebody lied on Jesus and I just want to set the record straight. There is this untrue, this misrepresentation, that living for the Lord is somehow boring, dull, ho-hum, unfulfilling, second rate, un-impactful, dissatisfying, wait until you have one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel sort of existence when nothing could be further from the truth.

Jesus said in John 10:10, "The thief cometh not, but for to steal, to kill, and to destroy." But he speaks of himself and said, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." The apostle Peter speaks out of his experience in 2nd Peter 1 and 3 and says, "According as his divine power hath given us all things that pertain unto life and godliness." Prioritize.

Prioritize simply means to arrange in order of importance. In other words, setting up your life based on things that really matter. And in this discourse, that's exactly what Jesus was trying to teach. This is the Sermon on the Mount known as the Beatitudes. And it starts, according to Mark's account, in the 5th chapter and ends in the 8th.

So I would suggest you read it and pay specific attention to the 6th chapter. But at the end of the 8th chapter, it says that the people were astonished at his doctrine because he spoke with such authority. In other words, he talked as if he knew God. And it amazes me – see, I'm getting loud. I'm starting ...

[Cheering]

It amazes me how ambiguous the believer is about God, when in fact we ought to know him. I'm going to preach in a moment. Just stay with me. And the only way to know him is to have him included in what you do, not excluded. And Jesus says here, "Take no thought." That word in the Greek, it's a verb, which simply means don't be careful or don't be anxious. Don't get nervous about life. "Psuche" which simply means to breathe or to have the psyche or mind of an individual. Don't get nervous about life because the life, the breath, is more important than what you eat. What you put on cannot equate to life itself.

And so Jesus says, "Take no thought for your life." In no way is he suggesting that one lives a life aimlessly without dreams or aspirations. He is not saying, "Let life happen and just accept what comes your way." He's actually saying the opposite.

I want you to understand that our salvation was not given to Christ. He had to buy it. And Jesus came with purpose and fought to obtain our deliverance. Salvation is free, but it isn't cheap.

One of the qualities of faith is expectation. Now faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen. So if you find someone without expectation or hope, that individual is void of faith because faith always expects and faith always moves towards its goal. So don't think that the church is for somebody that doesn't want anything. Don't think that the church is for somebody that can't get a gig anywhere else.  
[Applause]

Don't think that the church is for people that do not have hope or cannot make impact. As a matter of fact, that is the opposite. It diametrically opposes what Jesus is about. John writes and says, "But I would above all things, that thou mightiest prosper and be in health, even as your soul prospers."

But what we're dealing with is the misappropriation of what's important. And the devil wants you – and I said the devil. The devil wants to use your circumstance against you by making you become anxious when things don't happen on your timetable. He wants you to assume responsibility in that you become the master of your own fate and trust in your abilities to make things happen and thereby abdicating your faith in Jesus.

But Jesus is saying, “I don’t want you to become anxious about life. I don’t want you to feel as if life happens without purpose. For I want you to understand according to Ephesians the first chapter that God works all things after the council of his own will. To understand that you are not a mistake, that you are not a mishap. But God had a purpose before he ever created a person. And that your existence on Earth has significance.”

You all got to help me preach here. Look at somebody and say, “I’m significant.”

*Congregation:* I’m significant.

*Marvin Winans:* So, when you recognize that you did not just show up, but that God had purpose for you. I like to use this analogy that everyone buys a new car; and when you buy that car, there is an owner’s manual in the glove compartment.

Now most of us because we have our license and have had it for some time, we do not even go through the owner’s manual because it tells us how often we should take it in for a tune-up and the oil we should use and the gas we should use. I had a car that I used to put just mobile premium in, but these gas prices ran me to regular right quick fast and, you know, everything gets regular now.

But the owner’s manual for the car doesn’t tell you where to drive. It doesn’t tell you who to let in your car. But it tells you how to get the best performance and when people look at the Bible, they look at it from the wrong perspective. Because this is the owner’s manual, and the things that God has set up is so that you can get the best performance out of – I don’t hear nobody talking but me. So that you can get the best performance out of your life. So let’s take another look at what Jesus said. And I’m finished.

If we read this text in its entirety, Jesus says some wonderful things. He says no man can serve two masters. In other words, somebody has to be in control. Someone has to be subservient to the other. Either you love God or you will serve money. But you can’t serve money and God. Somebody holler back at me, “Prioritize.”

*Congregation:* Prioritize.

*Marvin Winans:* I don’t want anybody to leave here thinking that God wants anybody here broke. And I just need to say this since I have your attention. We have a lot of folks that say, “Well, you know, I don’t agree with the prosperity gospel.” I don’t know what other gospel there is. And if God wants somebody to be broke, would you tell me who that is? Who’s volunteering?

I can’t get no hands here. Please, I just believe the Bible. You have to understand that this manual gave us examples and testimonies of how we should live and when God brought Israel out of Egypt, everybody came out with something. I don’t hear nobody talking to me.

[Congregation responds]

For you to believe that somebody has to be broke is to say that God doesn't have enough sufficiency to supply it for everybody. I'll talk about that on another day. I'll be – you know, folks have been coming to the church and wanting to hear me. What are you going to say? What are you going to – I'll be there Sunday. Come Sunday, all the people that was trying to hear me preach today: come Sunday. I'll be there.

All the news agencies, you know, what are you going to – just come Sunday. I do this every Sunday. So I want you to understand that what God desires for everyone is that everyone would be healthy and prosperous. And so he says, you don't have to worry about it because I – I want to say it in the vernacular of today—He says, "I got you."  
[Applause]

I know that may not be proper English but certainly the text seems to emphasize the fact that if I'm not going to worry, Bishop Jakes, about what's going to become of me, then God says, "I got you."

So He says, "Here's the priority for the believer," because sometimes the world is afraid of church folk. As one Muslim said, he wished he had met Christ before he met the Christian, because sometimes we are believers behaving badly. But Jesus, Jesus says that, "I'm going to give you the order of how this should go." And in that same text he says, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." Now you got to put that in there before we go to the all.

Seek ye first the kingdom. In other words, the first thing that comes to our mind when we begin to do things would be, "Is this consistent with kingdom living?" We want to get the proverbial cart before the horse, and we start seeking things before we seek the kingdom. But seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. In other words, with everything I do, I want to remain in right standing with God. I'm getting ready to preach now. I want to remain in right standing with God. In other words, I want my life to please Him. The gifts that we have are God's gift to us but the life that we live is our gift to God.

And God says, "I got you." So if you seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, then all these things shall be added. See, that's the part that allows you to work the foundation of your faith, to allow God to take you through a wilderness area knowing that He's going to make you the better for it. And that when I get in the middle of the valley, that is not a time for me to leave my faith but to trust that God is still with me. And that if He has me in the middle of a sunny afternoon, then He has to have me in the middle of a dark night. Look at somebody and say, "He got you. He got you."

*Congregation:* He got you.

I want us to recognize that our faith in God must not be something that we attach to the end of our lives, but that we must prioritize. That you make your decision based on your faith. That you walk according to what you believe. Knowing that you can never say yes to God and God make you ashamed. That you can never put God first and God forget and

leave you. I'm finished. Thank you.  
[Applause]

C sharp. Every head bowed. Father, we thank you for this life of Whitney Elizabeth "Nippy" Houston. We thank you that she was a dear friend and we echo the sentiments of all that have come to show their love. But Father, I pray, by the power of the Holy Spirit, that you would give all that are under the sound of my voice the thought to prioritize, to make you first, for us not to talk about you but for us to live for you.

Let us leave here, recognizing that Whitney left too soon. Let us leave here impacted by her life, saying that I want to finish what God has started. Let us make You first. I pray that you would lift up Mike and Gary and Pat and Bobbi Kristina. Lift up Cissy. Lift up Aunt Bay. Lift up Dionne. All of those that are touched, all of us that are hurting, that you would lift us up. And Father, we will not leave here bitter or upset.

[Singing] But let the church say amen.  
Let the church say amen.  
God has spoken  
so let the church say amen...

**Appendix B: Eulogy for James Brown by Rev. Al Sharpton**  
**James Brown Arena, Augusta, GA**  
**December 30, 2006**

*Al Sharpton:* Thank you. Thank you very much. To the Brown family, to all of you that are gathered here today, today is the end of a long journey and the beginning of a new journey. We come to thank god for James Brown. Because only God could have made a James Brown possible. And only god can give James Brown rest. Many years ago in the early 1970s, I met a young man in New York. I was leading the youth division there of operation red basket under Reverend Jackson. A young man came to New York named Teddy Brown to go to college.

He was unfortunately killed in a car accident. Several months later Hank Spahn and Bob Law said his father wanted to do something with our youth group. They brought me to Symphony Hall and I met James Brown. James Brown told me if I did what he said, he would help us. Two weeks later he brought me and put me on "Soul Train" to speak to young people. I was 16 years old. You know to be on "Soul Train" at 16 in the '70s is like being on three "Meet the Presses" and one "Face the Nation" in the same day. He became the father I didn't have. I became, he said, his oldest child. And throughout the years, I've seen him up and down. I've seen good days and bad days. But I never saw him shaking. I've never seen him back down. I've never seen him bend, buckle or bow.

James Brown was a man's man. And he stood up like a man. He lived like a man. And on Christmas Day, he died like a man. You don't understand James Brown until you've been down to Georgia-Lina, like he said. You have to be here and understand how he was born, not at zero but below zero. Because you judge not the distance of a man but where he is but where he begins. And nobody started lower and went higher than James Brown did.

[Applause]

We used to ride around somewhere between Beech Island and Bamberg. And he'd tell me, Reverend, I was born out in these woods. He said "I shined shoes on Broad Street." he said, "but the reason I'm not bitter is god blessed me and he gave me a talent. And I didn't let anyone tell me how to use my talent. They called me names. They persecuted me. They set me up. They framed me. They locked me up. But they couldn't lock me down." there was a god. There was a god that was with me all the way. And he said "no matter what, I know that there's a god, and I believe in god, and I believe god believes in me." So he sung his song and he danced his dance, but he wasn't just singing for himself. He sung for us. He danced for us. He screamed for us.

Common people, working people, poor people. We didn't have a star till we had James Brown. James Brown wasn't smooth and wasn't acceptable. He wasn't tall and light-skinned with good hair. He looked like us. And he made the whole world see how good we could be. So we come to stand with his family, to thank god for you, Mr. Brown. There are going to be others today -- and I'm not going to prolong my eulogy, but I want to share his family's tribute and conclude mine. But I want to say this, if I could be so

arrogant. I sent a message, children, to St. Peter this morning. I told Peter to open the gates wide, not that James Brown is that tall, but he swaggers and he likes a lot of room to walk in. You need to open up the gates for the godfather. He's a little short in height. He'll be swinging his arms. You'll know him because he'll be walking to the beat of a different drummer. He'll be humming a tune you never heard before.

When we first met him, music was only 24. He cut it into a 1/3. And the whole world changed a beat because of James Brown. Rap started from James Brown. Hip-hop started from James Brown. Funk started from James Brown. We got on the good foot because of James Brown. And, Peter, if you don't consider it too arrogant, I don't know too much yet about what you do in heaven. But if you have Sunday morning service, you ought to let James Brown sing tomorrow morning. I know you got angels that could sing, but they never had to shine shoes on Broad Street. They never had their heartbroken. They've never been to jail for doing nothing wrong. They never had to cry because their friend betrayed them. They need to let James Brown sing tomorrow. He's got a song that he can sing about what god brought him through. He came up the rough side of the mountain. Nobody helped him up. But he kept on climbing. And on Christmas night, he stepped from mortality into immortality. They need to let James Brown sing in heaven tomorrow.

Last thing he told me about a week ago, Ms. Hogan called me and said, Reverend Sharpton, Mr. Brown is trying to reach you. And we talked about every week. I sometimes would wait till the next day to call, because you need a good half hour to put aside to talk to James Brown. You never could cut him off.

[Laughter]

He would just keep talking. But Mr. Bobby called me about two hours later and said, you need to call him, he wants to talk to you. It was the last conversation we had. He said to me, Reverend, he said, "I've been watching you on the news. I want you to keep fighting for justice. But I want you to tell people to love one another. I want you to fight to lift the standards back." He said, "What happened to us that we are now celebrating from being down? What happened we went from saying I'm Black and I'm proud to calling each other niggers and ho's and bitches?" He said, "I sung people up and now they're singing people down, and we need to change the music."

[Standing Ovation of Applause]

He said, "I want you to stay with your teacher, Reverend Jackson, don't get so big headed you can't stay with your teacher, y'all got to clean it up." Then he said to me, "Reverend, have you talked to Michael?" I said, "no, I think he's out of the country." He said, "Tell him I love Michael. Tell him don't worry about coming home. They always scandalize those that have the talent. But tell him we need to clean up the music and I want Michael and all of those that imitated me to come back and lift the music back to where children and their grand mommas can sit and listen to the music together."

I didn't know that would be our last conversation. But, Mr. Brown, all through the 35 years I knew you, you used to tell me if you died first you wanted to go out with dignity.

When I got the call from Mr. Bobby, I got with Yama, Deanna flew in, who is my new boss now. Lisa, Larry, Terry, Darryl, all the Brown children. We took you to New York where they lined around the Apollo one more time. We brought you home to the church. Now we brought you to the James Brown arena. We tried to do what you asked us to do.

**Appendix C: Eulogy for Michael Jackson by the Rev. Al Sharpton  
Staples Center, Los Angeles, CA  
July 7, 2009**

*Al Sharpton:* All over the world today people are gathered in love vigils to celebrate the life of a man that taught the world how to love.

People may be wondering why there's such an emotional outburst. But you would have to understand the journey of Michael to understand what he meant to all of us. For these that sit here as the Jackson family – a mother and father with nine children that rose from a working class family in Gary, Indiana – they had nothing but a dream.

No one believed in those days that this kind of dream could come true, but they kept on believing and Michael never let the world turn him around from his dreams. I first met Michael around the 1970 Black Expo, Chicago, Illinois. Rev. Jesse Jackson, who stood by this family till now, and from that day as a cute kid to this moment, he never gave up dreaming. It was that dream that changed culture all over the world. When Michael started, it was a different world. But because Michael kept going, because he didn't accept limitations, because he refused to let people decide his boundaries, he opened up the whole world.

In the music world, he put on one glove, pulled his pants up and broke down the color curtain where now our videos are shown and magazines put us on the cover. It was Michael Jackson that brought Blacks and Whites and Asians and Latinos together. It was Michael Jackson that made us sing, "We are the World" and feed the hungry long before Live Aid.

[Applause]

Because Michael Jackson kept going, he created a comfort level where people that felt they were separate became interconnected with his music. And it was that comfort level that kids from Japan and Ghana and France and Iowa and Pennsylvania got comfortable enough with each other until later it wasn't strange to us to watch Oprah on television. It wasn't strange to watch Tiger Woods golf. Those young kids grew up from being teenage, comfortable fans of Michael to being 40 years old and being comfortable to vote for a person of color to be the President of the United States of America.

[Applause]

Michael did that. Michael made us love each other. Michael taught us to stand with each other. There are those that like to dig around mess. But millions around the world, we're going to uphold his message. It's not about mess, but it's about his love message. As you climb up steep mountains, sometimes you scar your knee; sometimes you break your skin. But don't focus on the scars, focus on the journey. Michael beat 'em, Michael rose to the top. He out-sang his cynics, he out-danced his doubters; he out-performed the pessimists. Every time he got knocked down, he got back up. Every time you counted him out, he came back in. Michael never stopped. Michael never stopped. Michael never stopped.

I want to say to Mrs. Jackson and Joe Jackson, his sisters and brothers: We thank you for giving us someone that taught us love; someone who taught us hope. We want to thank you because we know it was your dream too.

We know that your heart is broken. I know you have some comfort from the letter from the President of the United States and Nelson Mandela. But this was your child. This was your brother. This was your brother. This was your cousin. Nothing will fill your hearts' lost. But I hope the love that people are showing will make you know he didn't live in vain. I want his three children to know: Wasn't nothing strange about your Daddy. It was strange what your Daddy had to deal with. But he dealt with it...He dealt with it anyway. He dealt with it for us.

[Standing Ovation of Applause]

So, some came today, Mrs. Jackson, to say goodbye to Michael. I came to say, thank you. Thank you because you never stopped, thank you because you never gave up, thank you because you never gave out, thank you because you tore down our divisions. Thank you because you eradicated barriers. Thank you because you gave us hope. Thank you Michael. Thank you Michael. Thank you Michael!

**Appendix D: Eulogy for Luther Vandross by Pattie Labelle**  
**Riverside Church, New York, NY**  
**July 8, 2005**

*Patti Labelle:* There are no sad faces here today. It's not a mournful service, I'm celebrating. Woop Woop.  
 [Applause]

I'm celebrating because Luther would want us to. Um, no pity parties around here. I got this dress made for Luther; I could hardly walk up the step it's too long but he wanted me to look like this all the time [laugh] so...  
 [Laughter]

I talked to mom, who is Mary Ida. She said to me some years ago after my mother passed, don't call me Mrs. Vandross, don't call me Mary Ida. I'm your mother. So she is my mother for sixteen years and aunt Helen is my real aunt.

These ladies, they've embraced me into their lives. I've always been in Luther's life, but when he, two, two years ago when it happened, I started taking care of my girlfriends, my mother and my aunt. And when I couldn't, my friend Danielle Triplett did and Serita and all of the family did. So when she asked me to, first she asked me to sing. Then she said, called me back, "No daughter, I don't want you to sing. I want you to read a poem that I wrote for Ronnie." And we all know who Ronnie is, so here's this big old piece of paper honey. I'm going to read mom.

And then she rehearsed me last night four times. She said, "Now that's good enough." She made me read in front of her and then she treated me like a student and said, "That's not good enough." She said "Try a little more, with a little more emotion, the way you sing your songs." So I said, "Okay mom."  
 [Laughter]

So the poem is written by Mary Ida Vandross to her son Ronnie. The poem is entitled "You Kept Your Promise." She said he never told her anything...if he said he was going to bring a dozen eggs at two o' clock on Tuesday, two o' clock Tuesday he would be there with those eggs. He was a wonderful man, so I'm going to start reading now mom okay? Alright.

Ronnie, my son, you kept your promise.  
 You said you would protect me, and keep me from harm  
 As long as we lean on God's strong arms.  
 You kept on believing, then began receiving, because he hears every word.  
 He knows our heart. We thrive to be like god. He keeps his promise.  
 When we trust God, nothing can harm us.  
 You kept your promise, never to cause me to cry.  
 You said you'd take care of your mama 'til the day I die.  
 You kept your promise.

This path you've taken, it's not your choice darling.  
 God gave you a talent, a sound,  
 And a mighty, mighty, mighty, mighty, great voice.  
 God gave you love to sing to the world.  
 Son you sang...

Not sing or sang, you sang gladly whew yes you did you sang

Gladly and the whole world heard  
 You brought out love in some, joy in others,  
 And you truly made many happy mothers

Oh god you did [laugh]. So many people have babies because of Luther Vandross. That's not in here, but I know that. You go boy!  
 [Applause]

Then she says,

Luther you gave the whole world what God gave you.

And she's talking about love, love, love. He gave so much love.

And now I know your dancing with your father.

And then she says

Son, you kept your promise.

And then it says Mary Ida Vandross, July 8, 2005. And then it went into,

[Singing] I don't feel no ways tired.  
 Oh you've come too far from where you've started from.  
 Luther nobody told you that the road would be easy.  
 I don't believe he brought you this far,  
 no I don't believe he brought you this far,  
 I don't believe he brought you this far to leave you.

**Appendix E: Eulogy for Rosa Parks by Oprah Winfrey**  
**Metropolitan AME Church, Washington, DC**  
**October 31, 2005**

*Oprah Winfrey:* Reverend Braxton, family, friends, admirers, and this amazing choir: I -- I feel it an honor to be here to come and say a final goodbye. I grew up in the South, and Rosa Parks was a hero to me long before I recognized and understood the power and impact that her life embodied. I remember my father telling me about this colored woman who had refused to give up her seat. And in my child's mind, I thought, "She must be really big."

[Laughter]

I thought she must be at least a hundred feet tall. I imagined her being stalwart and strong and carrying a shield to hold back the White folks.

[Laughter]

And then I grew up and had the esteemed honor of meeting her. And wasn't that a surprise. Here was this petite, almost delicate lady who was the personification of grace and goodness. And I thanked her then. I said, "Thank you," for myself and for every colored girl, every colored boy, who didn't have heroes who were celebrated.

I thanked her then.

[Applause]

And after our first meeting I realized that God uses good people to do great things.

[Congregation responds]

And I'm here today to say a final thank you, Sister Rosa, for being a great woman who used your life to serve, to serve us all. That day that you refused to give up your seat on the bus, you, Sister Rosa, changed the trajectory of my life and the lives of so many other people in the world. I would not be standing here today nor standing where I stand every day had she not chosen to sit down.

[Applause and Cheers]

I know that. I know that. I know that. I know that, and I honor that. Had she not chosen to say we shall not -- we shall not be moved.

So I thank you again, Sister Rosa, for not only confronting the one White man who[se] seat you took, not only confronting the bus driver, not only for confronting the law, but for confronting history, a history that for 400 years said that you were not even worthy of a glance, certainly no consideration. I thank you for not moving.

And in that moment when you resolved to stay in that seat, you reclaimed your humanity and you gave us all back a piece of our own.

[Applause]

I thank you for that. I thank you for acting without concern. I often thought about what that took, knowing the climate of the times and what could have happened to you, what it took to stay seated. You acted without concern for yourself and made life better for us all. We shall not be moved.

I marvel at your will.

I celebrate your strength to this day.

And I am forever grateful, Sister Rosa, for your courage, your conviction.

I owe you -- to succeed.

I will not be moved.

**Appendix F: Eulogy for Coretta Scott King by the Rev. Bernice King  
New Birth Missionary Baptist Church, Lithonia, GA  
February 7, 2006**

*Rev. Bernice King:* First and foremost, I wish to honor the spirit of Jesus Christ in this place today...

[Applause]

...and I thank God for the indwelling and the filling of the Holy Ghost that gives me the strength to stand even now to speak what thus sayeth the Lord.

I give honor and respect to my spiritual father and my pastor, Bishop Eddie Long...

[Applause]

...and on behalf of my entire family, thank you, for allowing us to share my mother's homegoing celebration from this place. It is so prophetic and I will be speaking to that in just a moment, that we would be here on this, uh, afternoon, at the five o'clock hour, the hour of grace.

I also wish to thank each and every person that participated on this program on behalf of my family. We thank you for your sacrifice and for shifting your schedules to be here to share with us on today.

And in some strange and weird kind of way, I want to apologize—to the masses of people, who in some form or fashion had words in their hearts they would like to speak in honor and reverence to Coretta Scott King. It is a daunting task to put together a homegoing celebration for a woman as such, because she's touched so many lives in so many different, unique, and peculiar ways; but I thank all of you for your love and your understanding and your patience and your kindness. We ask for forgiveness—because we know that there was no way humanly possible to get everybody who needed to say something, to say something. One thing I learned in these last five months, after my mother's stroke, is the value of moments; because in many ways we take for granted each and every hour of the day and each and every moment that God gives us with anybody, and in particular, our family. We kind of say hello casually, we say goodbye uh casually, we say see you later casually, we get in arguments and slam doors and walk away, not realizing the value of every moment that we have with a person.

Because it is in those moments, that an exchange takes place, in such a way that when that person transitions into the next dimension of eternal life, that we can rest in the peace and in the assurance that I deposited everything that God would have me to deposit in their life, and they did the same. And so when I come to the homegoing ceremony or the celebration, I'm just here to celebrate. I don't have to say a word. I'm just here to celebrate. So let everything right now that have breath praise ye the Lord for the life of Coretta Scott King...

[Applause]

—a stalwart, a beacon of hope, a king in her own right, a woman of authority, a woman of power, a woman of grace, a woman of essence, a woman of strength, a woman of dignity. We praise the Lord for Coretta Scott King and her example of life.

I would be remiss if I did not also just thank you for your prayers over the last five months. We've been in this process for nine months. My mother first entered the hospital the day before her 78<sup>th</sup> birthday last year, April 26<sup>th</sup>; and since that time, uh, the life of Bernice and Yolanda and Martin and Dexter were forever altered. And getting to this moment, we're weary—and we're tired and we just solicit your continued prayers as we continue to process and try to understand and get questions answered. And perhaps questions being answered having to be amended as we seek God to bring complete closure, because one thing that is so critical is that we don't hold on to our mother as we long as we held on to our daddy. Because the way we hold will prohibit and inhibit the destiny that God has inside each and every one of us. And so we thank you for all of your prayers over all of those months. And we all prayed for her healing, but, you know, she's perfectly healed now.

[Applause]

When you pray, you always pray as Jesus Christ did in the Garden of Gethsemane. Father, not my will, but thy will be done. Not that you don't have and the assurance by Jesus' stripes that she is healed. But he healed us in such a way that we can have eternal life and experience the presence of God in such a way that we don't even have to face all of the things that we face in this earthly dimension. And so we thank each and every one of you for your prayers and your well wishes and your visits and things of that nature.

And finally, but not last, I want to just recognize and thank from the bottom of our heart my mother's caretakers, who were so lovely and so caring and so sacrificial in the time that they spent releasing us from the burden of having to do it literally as a caretaker. We did it in other form and in another fashion. But I want them to stand now just so that we might give them applause and thank God for them: Lysia Carter, Kimberly Judd, Evelyn Dudley, Joy McKinnis, Wanda Hunter, Kelly McCaskel, and Jewel Davis.

[Applause]

Are they here? Oh, they're right back there. I love you. I appreciate you. On behalf of Dexter, Martin, Yolanda and myself, the rest of the family—and we know that although this assignment is over, God still has even greater assignments for you, that God made deposits in your life through the life of Coretta Scott King, and you had to make a stop by and be introduced to her spirit. That you might take that spirit that lives inside of her and begin to share with so many other people in your next assignments. God bless you. And we thank you and we praise God for you.

[Applause]

Before I uh, um, uh deliver these last words, I don't want to—I don't like the word "eulogy," even though I know what it means. I just want to acknowledge the fact that uh Reisa, Michelle, and Nelson Mandela sent a letter uh, to us, as well as Bishop Desmond

Tutu. And we do not want to go on without recognizing and acknowledging their condolences at this very difficult time.

[Pause] As I was trying to prepare what I would say to the people today, it dawned upon me that many of us perhaps are here to honor the life and the legacy of Coretta Scott King. We did change our schedules to be here to pay our condolences. But if I might be honest with you this evening, those who are still here, you really didn't have a choice, because before the very foundations of the earth were laid, god ordained that people would be drawn from the East and the West and the North and the South and to this place called New Birth for such a time as this. God makes no mistakes. He's a God of perfect timing.

And there's a thing called *kairos* moments when God interjects himself in time like he did back in 1955, 50 years ago to move this nation to another place. And here he goes again in a *kairos* moment. And it would be neglectful of us if we missed this moment and treated it like we were attending some funeral or homegoing service and paying condolences and respect and then we allowed ourselves to return to life as usual and not stop and listen and hear the voice of God. So God drew you in here today, even the four presidents of the United States of America because God had a word that he needed the nations to hear.

And as I was sitting there and I was vacillating back and forth, the lord brought back to my remembrance the very way that my mother left this place. I remember on Friday, January 27, as I was with her down in Mexico, somewhere around the 8:00 hour—eight is the number of new beginnings—my mother started groaning, moaning for three straight hours. And Evelyn can attest to the fact, because she was the caretaker that was with me, that it was literally three straight hours without a break. And I asked my mother, I said, "Are you in pain? Is your stomach hurting? Is your head hurting?" I asked her different places and she said, "No," because she could still talk up until the time that she transitioned.

So she went on and on and on and on. And I couldn't figure what could we do. And I called on the doctors there. There are medical doctors there, contrary to the reports that you may read. Be careful what you read in the papers, please. Be intelligent; be critical. And they brought something to try to help relieve her. But in the midst of that, I said, "Mother, are you uncomfortable?" And she said, "Uncomfortable." Now, she said she wasn't in pain, but she said she was uncomfortable. And that word "uncomfortable" doesn't—doesn't always mean what we think it means, because god gave me a revelation at that moment that my mother really was wrestling with god as Jacob wrestled with God.

And I looked at my mother and I said, "Mama, are you wrestling with God?" She didn't say a word to me. Because I believe in that very moment she was making a decision as to whether it was worth staying here in the earth to continue some more work or whether she had to transition to be with God. And I think the glimpse that she got at that moment was a glimpse that told her that unless a seed falls into the ground and dies, it abides alone. But if it dies, it produces much fruit.

In other words, I think she got a glimpse to understand that there was a moment in God's calendar that if she did not make the transition that she made, that there was some things in the earth that could not be released to the people in the nations. Oh, my God. And so her death was much greater at that moment than she was—than it would have been for her to hold on to life. And so for the next three days—remember, Christ, was crucified. And on the third day, he was resurrected. For the next three days she went in and out of consciousness. There were moments when she was very clear, and there were other moments when she was just sleeping herself away in the arms and the peace of God. And I've never seen my mother in so much peace. And even though I knew I did not want to accept it in my flesh, that this was perhaps it, I was still believing for a miracle.

And that Monday, Pacific Coast Time, around the 8:00 hour again—eight being the number of new beginnings, as I remind you again—I was laying in the bed next to my mother not as the paper said. I did not find her dead. I was there with her to the last moment. I was laying in the bed next to her, and around 8:25 Pacific Time, our mother took her last four breaths. It wasn't the stroke that took her in the natural sense of the word, but it was the complications from ovarian cancer which cause respiratory pneumonia, that took her.

And the Lord had me to look back on that. And he took me to scripture, where a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, came to Jesus at nighttime. And he said, Rabbi, we know that you're a teacher who come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God was with him. And Jesus answered, and said to him, most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot, she cannot see the kingdom of God.

And I said, God, why are you taking me there? He said, because it's no accident and mistake that the very thing that took your mother out here, ovarian cancer, is the very—is—is a message that emerges from that—that kind of death for people all over the nations for such a time as this.

For you see, her cancer, in other words, was concentrated in the reproductive area, the reproductive system. And God took me back to there. And he showed me how—how the cancer was just growing in that reproductive area. And it was beginning to affect other organs in—in that vicinity. And—and he reminded me. He said, your mother passed away of complications from ovarian cancer, respiratory pneumonia, because, right now, my Earth, my world, my—my nations are on the verge of—of losing it, and dying, and being overtaken with respiratory pneumonia failure, because of complications from reproductive cancer.

[Applause]

And those complications are hindering the ability for a new birth.

[Applause]

See, what God is saying to us today, through the—through the transition of Coretta Scott King, is that we, here in this world, right now, are suffering from a—complications of cancer, from materialism, and—and greed, and—and selfishness, and arrogance, and elitism, and poverty, and racism, and perversion, and obscenity, and misogyny. and idolatry, and violence, and militarism.

[Applause]

It's a cancer that's eating away at the very essence and the nature of what God created human—humankind to be, for, he created us to have rulership in and dominion in the earth, and not allow the earth to dictate to us. But, now, what has happened...

[Applause]

...is that the very earth, the very creation that he put us in charge of, is now controlling us. And instead of us reproducing other people who look like God, who talk like God, who act like God, who think like God, who do business like God, who govern like God, who entertain like God...

[Applause]

...we're not reproducing anything, because the cancer is eating away at us.

[Applause and Cheering]

He's saying, roles have reversed. Creation has become your king, instead of you being the king, he said, because the very trees that I created for you, instead of you having dominion and authority over them, they are now dictating how your families look, how your friendships look, how your governments look, how your media and entertainment industry look, how your youth population looks, because, in fact, money is made from trees.

[Applause]

And the Bible says that the love of money, not money itself—see, God didn't have a problem with leaving us riches and—and wealth—of—of materials and resources. He doesn't have a problem with billionaires and millionaires. In fact, God has left enough for everybody to be a billionaire, in fact. What he has problem with is our affinity to, our loyal to, our soul tied to money in such a way that the love has overtaken us, and now we have escalating divorce rates. And now we have people doing violent things in the street. He's saying, now we have people that their only preoccupation is, how can I make more money? And he interjected Martin in time to tell America, there is a danger when you become a thing-oriented society, rather than a people-oriented society.

[Applause]

So, Coretta Scott King's transition is calling for a new birth. You're not sitting in this church just because it was logical to be here. Of course, discussions on where to have it went into play. Should we have it at Ebenezer? Should we have it at the Civic Center? Should we have it New Birth? And, of course, logic would dictate, so that so many of you could be here today, that we come to one of, if not the largest congregations in Atlanta, not any choice of ours. God just ordained it to be this way.

[Applause]

And I said, God, why? Why here? He said, because it's time for world to be born again.

[Applause]

It's time for a new birth. It's time for my people to reposition themselves into their rightful places as true kings. And that's why he used the life of a King at this set time, because he said, we're on the verge on losing credibility, even before the creation and the animals and the fishes of the sea, because the whole creation is groaning. And that is why Coretta was groaning on that night. She was groaning because there's an earnest expectation, there's a waiting for the manifestation of the sons of God. And that's not masculine...

[Applause]

...but those who move and operate in the spirit and in the heart of God, and who know they were created in the image and after the likeness of God, and that God placed them here to reproduce life, and even life more abundantly.

[Applause]

And, so, God says, today, you must be born again, because the way you have been operating as nations in this world is contrary to what my will was for the Earth. You have allowed this Earth to be contaminated with poverty, as Martin Luther called the triple evils of racism and militarism. And I'm now raising up a people who hear the voice of God, saying it's time to emerge and take your proper place as kings in the Earth and begin to rule in your territories according to the spirit of God, whether you're an entertainer, or whether you're a politician, or whether you're or whether you're entrepreneur, or whether you're an actress, or whether you're a businessman, or whether you're a mechanic, or whether you're a pastor. It doesn't matter whether you're a student. God has called you to be a king in this time...

[Applause]

...to rule and to exercise influence for the kingdom of God. The first sermon that Jesus preached, he wasn't inviting—inviting people to church, even though we do that well. We invite people to come to our various churches to visit. That wasn't it. God wasn't interested in getting us into church, because church had crippled us and created traditions of men that entrapped us and kept us from exhibiting the true spirit of God, which is unconditional love, which Coretta Scott King exhibited time and time again, and Martin Luther King Jr.

So, Christ said, repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand. He was saying, you got to change your mind now, because all of the systems that you have created, all of—of the traditions that you have come through, they are failing, and they are—are fading. And they are doing it very fast and—and very quick. And that's why you see right now, there's a diminishing of some things, if you haven't noticed, lately. And God is elevating his spirit in the earth.

So, he says, the way you have been trying to work it out, it ain't working no more. It's time for you to get free. It's time for you to take off the shackles, because we have moved into another dimension now. When she passed, she caused an earthquake of a magnitude of eight in the earth.

[Applause]

And the reason that she couldn't pass in Atlanta, Georgia, and why God had to fly her to over to the West Coast from the East Coast, and drop her over the—over the—over the—the line, is because she was not just a national figure. She was a global leader.

[Applause]

And God wanted this world to not just recognize her, but recognize the spirit in which she lived and moved and had her being, out of that unconditional love. But the interesting thing is, she couldn't go conventional...

[Applause]

...when she should have gotten conventional treatment, because, if she had gotten conventional treatment, she would have—she would have lived. I don't think so, because, when it's God's time, it's God's time.

[Applause]

The reason why we make decisions in the natural that sometimes appear to be wrong decisions, until you step back and realize, first, the natural, then the spiritual, you begin to understand that this was a really a spiritual move, because, in many ways, God was trying to say that the conventional way that you have been doing things in this world, especially through militarism and —and war and things of that nature, are not working. They are not representative of my heart and my nature and my character and my essence. And, so, I had to take her to something that looked like an alternative thing, because, when Martin came along, he introduced an alternative. And that was called nonviolence.

[Applause]

And Coretta—Coretta captured those words. And, when Martin died, I thank God for the revelation that he gave to our bishop. God came to Coretta Scott King, said, Moses, Martin, my servant, is dead. Arise and take this people over the Jordan.

[Laughter]

See, Joshua was really Coretta.

[Applause]

I know I wouldn't get too many claps...

[Laughter]

...because sexism is still alive.

[Applause]

And sexism is not always just from men. It's from women, too. And we missed it. We missed the fact that the one who really caught the heart and the spirit of Dr. King and wouldn't let us forget time and time again, as you saw on the video, that it's either nonviolence or nonexistence; that was Coretta Scott King.

[Applause]

She held it down. God gave her the grace to be able to live as long as she did. And, when she transitioned, she transitioned to a better place. But she left us, as Joshua did with the children of Israel, with this question, or statement: Choose ye this day.

[Applause]

And, if I might abbreviate for her; which way you going to live? Are you going to live according to the world's system and the traditions and the conventional methods, or are you going to live according to radical and the revolutionary, transforming way of God, through nonviolence, which is the kingdom of God? Now is the time for the saints of the most high God to rise up and possess the kingdom and move in everything that God has ordained for us to move in.

[Applause]

And I close with this. God has been waiting on us a long time to get it together. And, if we miss this one, we're going to miss one of the greatest opportunities to demonstrate God in the earth. We have got to cease from our division divisions. We got to cease from our politicking.

[Applause]

We have got to cease from the exploitation and the insecurities, because God is not looking for another Martin Luther King or Coretta Scott King. The old has passed away.

[Applause]

There is a new order that's emerging. And, in this new birth, God's going to raise up a remnant of people who are determined to position themselves, that the kingdoms of this world might become the kingdoms of our lord and of his savior, our savior. It's time for us to birth out righteousness...

[Laughter]

... equality, true justice, true freedom, and true holiness, which, at the end of the day, when you think about holy, it just simply means, what she demonstrated and lived every day of her life is why she could build, as a woman, the Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, against the wishes of so many men, who told her to stay at home and raise her children.

[Applause]

But she was a woman who built a multimillion-dollar facility...

[Applause]

...that would be an epicenter for this kingdom-of-God nonviolence. And she did it because she was holy. She had –holy means having our lives yielded to God. She didn't do it for fame. She didn't do it for fortune. She did it because it was the will of God. And she yielded to it. And that's why she could lay aside her music career. That's why she could push back her first desires. And if we would just begin to do that, this whole worth –world would be transformed, as my father said, into an oasis of freedom and justice. Thank you, mother, for your incredible example of Christ-like love and on obedience. We're going to miss you. But, as I was laying on that floor, talking to you, Yolanda, and we were praying, and I went in tongs, I started praying in another language. I felt a transfer take place. There's a mantle that has fallen. And we're going wait and see what God does through the seed of Martin and Coretta. God bless you.

### Appendix G: Footnotes Catalog

1. *Kairos* is a rhetorical concept that describes a right or opportune time to communicate an idea or perform an action; in Christian theology it also carries the meaning of the “the appointed time of God.” During a eulogy in the Black church, the moment can be valued as an instance of “*kairos*,” one that is divinely inspired and renders the speaker that much more effective and influential (Herrick 36).
2. Scholars have called the lack of computer or technical literacy among minorities the *digital divide*. In her book, *Crossing the Digital Divide*, Barbara Monroe explains that “the metaphor of a divide serves as a reminder that a vast gap does indeed separate rich and poor in this country, and that gap is at once economic, racial, discursive, and epistemological in character” (5). This metaphor of a divide symbolizes how technology and cyberspace—and the computer literate—are on one side, and those that are foreign to it, remain on the opposite side, with very little agency to cross.
3. An article published in 1997 in the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* looked at the celebrity of Black academics and found that in 1996 Dr. Dyson was listed at no.12 for the top Black scholars being written about in popular media; but also noted that where he received 144 overall mentions, that same year entertainer Bill Cosby received 4,193 (43).
4. Gabriel Prosser was a literate slave in Richmond, VA, owned by tobacco farmer Thomas Prosser. He attempted to organize a revolt in 1800 with 25 other slaves and was caught before the revolt took place and hung along with his conspirators (Aptheker 220).
5. Music is important to the vernacular tradition of Black culture; Early African Americans used distinctive melodies, rhythms, and tones, along with words, to compose music that tells stories, expresses emotions, and entertains. Such music is credited with later creating blues, jazz, gospel, R&B, funk, rock and roll, and hip hop, all of which eventually became mainstream pervasive musical genres in American culture (Gates 3,6).
6. During the nineteenth century, White middle class European and American women were subject to strict rules of femininity and womanhood; scholar Elizabeth Langland explains that this belief system upheld the home as “the haven” for women to develop and maintain values of submissiveness, purity, and domesticity (291).
7. According to the Center for American Women in Politics based out of Rutgers University, as of 2013, only 18.3 percent of seats in Congress are held by women and women make up only 22.8 percent of statewide elective executive offices; although at the federal level women have been appointed to positions in presidential cabinets since 1933, America has yet to have any woman be a ballot candidate for election to the office of the President of the United States.

## VITA

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### EDUCATION:

Old Dominion University (ODU) Norfolk, VA

- Ph.D. in English, 2014. Specialty: Rhetoric & Textual Studies

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- M.A. in English, 2009. Specialty: Literature

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) Richmond, VA

- B.A. in English, 2005. Specialty: Literature

### ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE:

Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA, 2009-2014

- Joint Advanced Warfighting School Graduate Thesis Tutor, 2013-2014

-Assist senior level military officers in writing their Master's Theses

- Assistant Director of Composition Studies, 2012-2013

-Clerical support to the Composition Studies Director; oversaw scheduling

- Composition Instructor, 2009-2012

-Created syllabuses and taught composition courses of ENGL 110 and 211

Tidewater Community College, Chesapeake, VA, 2010-2011

- Composition Instructor

-Prepared and taught freshman composition courses of ENGL 111 & 112

ECPI University, Newport News, VA, 2010

- Composition Instructor

-Instructor for ENGL 110, 120, & Critical Thinking 210 courses

### CONFERENCES:

- 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Family Enrichment Conference, Norfolk State University, Norfolk, VA, 2011

-Workshop presenter on overcoming adversity and professional success

- 31<sup>st</sup> Annual Spring Conference on the Teaching of Writing, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA, 2010

-Workshop presenter on incorporating technology in the writing classroom

### TALKS:

- US Customs & Border Protection Women's Luncheon: Keynote, 2012
- Access Scholarship Foundation Annual Founder's Luncheon: Talk, 2011