THE STATE OF MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE:

RHETORIC OF CIVIC FEALTY IN MAYORAL ADDRESSES OF MEMPHIS AND SHELBY COUNTY

by

MATT FARMER

(Under the Direction of Bjørn Stillion Southard)

ABSTRACT

Local government plays a key role in the construction of civic identity. Through an analysis of mayoral addresses in 2019, a rhetoric of civic fealty emerges. This thesis situates the implications of such rhetoric in crafting notions of Black conformity or resistance to institutional discrimination. Invocations, introductions, and mayoral speeches shed light on an emerging national conversation about the role of the civic submission to the state.

INDEX WORDS: respectability, Afrocentricity, *parrhesia*, presence, religion, race, Memphis

THE STATE OF MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE:

RHETORIC OF CIVIC FEALTY IN MAYORAL ADDRESSES OF MEMPHIS AND SHELBY COUNTY

by

MATT FARMER

BA, University of Memphis, 2018

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2020

THE STATE OF MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE:

RHETORIC OF CIVIC FEALTY IN MAYORAL ADDRESSES OF MEMPHIS AND SHELBY COUNTY

by

MATT FARMER

Major Professor:	Bjørn Stillion Southard
Committee:	Barbara Biesecker
	Thomas Lessl

Electronic Version Approved:

Ron Walcott
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2020

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank Dr. Bjørn Stillion Southard for his rapid and direct feedback and his constant support and encouragement. Thank you to Dr. Lessl for expanding my mind and helping me realize that the study of religious rhetoric can yield fruitful results. Thank you to Dr. Biesecker for challenging me to produce work that is not merely words on a page, but scholarship that can deepen understanding and offer an impactful contribution. I would not be where I am in my life or in my academic career without the steady and unrelenting support from Dr. Tony de Velasco at the University of Memphis. I also want to thank my entire graduate cohort with particular thanks to Sam Watson, Ashley Clayborn, and Kesha James for listening to me rant about Memphis incessantly for the last two years. Thank you to my family back home and the entire city of Memphis for inspiring me everyday and giving me a reason to do this work. And, of course, thank you to my dog, Chica, I would not have made it without her.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION:

"SOMETHING IS HAPPENING IN MEMPHIS…"[1]

Memphis, Tennessee is a place steeped in history. It is the place where Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his famous "Mountaintop" address from which the title of this introduction is derived. It was home to Robert Church, the South's first Black millionaire. With the likes of BB King, Elvis Presley, Otis Redding, and many more recording albums in Memphis, the city's deep musical history led to the tagline "home of the blues and birthplace of rock 'n' roll."[2] Yet, as rhetorician Antonio de Velasco notes there is a long history of "entwined racial and economic disparities that define contemporary Memphis."[3] For example, the day after King gave that famous address, he was assassinated at a downtown Memphis motel. Despite the 1954 *Brown vs Board* decision outlawing segregation in school, scholar Otis Sanford notes that Memphis did not start to integrate their schools until multiple federal lawsuits against the City finally led to a settlement in 1972, nearly twenty years after integration became the law of the land.[4] This thesis explores the role rhetoric plays in toppling or reinforcing racial disparities in Memphis today.

The city has been rife with racial turmoil for generations, and those issues persist today. Scholar Zandria Robinson asserts that racial identities are important because "race is an organizing and structuring principle of everyday life, a master status that fundamentally shapes one's interaction with the state, social institutions, and others and one's experience of the world."[5] Memphis' history of racial oppression led to a preponderance of discourse that framed Blackness in the gaze of a White imaginary. But progress is being made. Robinson writes of the many activists who are "engaged in remaking the cultural significance of region to racial

identities and in carving new ways of being southern, being Black, and being Black southerners in the twenty-first century."[6] In other words, there are a number of people that have not given up the fight for equity in the face of adversity despite barrier after barrier being constructed to force acceptance as a separate and unequal social class.

Currently, the Memphis metro area is plagued with problems. A recent report listed the city as the second most dangerous area in the nation.[7] It ranks second in the country in both overall poverty and childhood poverty.[8] Almost one in five Memphians is uninsured,[9] an issue only made more complicated by Memphis' ranking as the third "fattest metro area in America."[10] On top of these distinctions, racial segregation and inequality is the norm. A recent study found that "Memphis school segregation is worse than 50 years ago."[11] Income inequality shows Black Memphians averaging about $30,000 per capita, with White Memphians averaging twice that at roughly $60,000, and that gap is widening each year.[12] The groups tasked with resolving these issues are local governments.

The political structure and demographics of Memphis contribute to the rhetorical divisions and political tension concerning race. Memphis is the county seat and largest city in Shelby County, Tennessee. The city and county have separate, non-unified governments. The city has its own mayor who oversees the day-to-day operations within its limits, while the county has a different mayor who manages operations that involve each of the towns comprising the county. Shelby County in made up of seven incorporated towns and cities as well as some unincorporated areas. Although some areas of the government overlap (like a unified school district), others are specific to each municipality (like the police force). Memphis is 66% African American and 25% non-Hispanic White, while Shelby County is 54% African American and 35% non-Hispanic White.[13] The Memphis mayor is a fifty-five year old White man named Jim

Strickland.[14] The Shelby County mayor is a forty-one year old African American man named Lee Harris.[15]

This thesis shines a light on some of those problems, and the rhetoric of local leaders that seeks to combat such issues. Scholars Aram Goudsouzian and Charles McKinney assert, "While it has been long recognized as a major epicenter of Black life, history, and culture, Memphis remains one of the more underresearched (or 'unseen') major cities in the United States. This unfortunate reality belies a rich history worthy of critical intellectual scrutiny."[16] While scholar Lisa Flores asserts "rhetorical studies is fundamentally—at its core—the study of race,"[17] much of that scholarships has been focused in the past. Rhetorical critics like Robert Terrill[18], Bill Yousman[19], and Lisa Corrigan[20] have produced significant work on Malcolm X. Others like James Jasinski and John Murphy[21], Michael Leff and Ebony Utley[22], and Michael Osborn[23], as well as a book of collected essays edited by Carolyn Calloway-Thomas and John Lucaites[24] study the rhetoric of Martin Luther King, Jr. Recently scholars like Maegan Parker Brooks and Davis Houck[25] have turned toward the rhetoric of Fannie Lou Hamer. Studies by these scholars and others like them focus on Black rhetoric in the context of the 1960s Civil Rights era. This thesis seeks to extend the timeline under scrutiny by rhetoricians to the modern moment. It situates some of the strategies and attitudes that were prevalent decades ago and finds them still in action today. Further, this project responds to what rhetorician Lisa Corrigan calls "enduring questions of concern for the rhetorical critic studying race…how has race emerged as a contested terrain of belonging in political as well as popular discourse?...how have activists performed or enacted citizenship?"[26] It also follows Eric King Watts' demand that public address scholarship on race "not merely reflect social change already happening; it should and does produce

alterations in our sense of the significance of 'race' in social life…public address scholarship needs to take stock to the hegemonic relations inciting particular forms of racial identification."[27]

In a broad sense, this thesis is a study of the *rhetoric of civic fealty*. Offering close textual analysis of the pageantry and prose surrounding the State of the City address by the Memphis mayor in January 2019 and the State of the County address by the Shelby County mayor in February 2019, the thesis locates the different commitments to submission and identity made at those events. Civic fealty is a term where both the "civic" and the "fealty" play essential roles. The civic comes to play in people's responsibility to their community. Citizens are expected to participate and be active in their community's politics and culture. Yet the fealty requires submission to certain authorities. This thesis situates the rhetoric of civic fealty, not only as a means of control, but also as a means of resistance. The rhetoric on display in the following chapters situates orators calling for different notions of what is civic and to whom should people be subservient. Race and religion become major factors in this language belying values and identities of self-worth and social responsibility in a civic context. In each speech, certain priorities are centered and made present and others are made absent. In doing so, rhetors reveal ideological commitments that speak to the role of African Americans in society.

The rhetoric of civic fealty contributes to these discussions about race, belonging, and hegemonic relations by studying a number of different traditions, strategies, and ideologies employed in these mayoral events to define the role of African Americans in democratic society. The identities that emerge from the Pentecostal faith tradition and respectability rhetoric make demands on African Americans to conform and submit to authority (chapter 1). Merging the secular tradition of Afrocentricity with the religious tradition of prophetic Black liberation theology through the use of *parrhesia* asserts the civic power of Black Memphians (chapter 2).

The rhetorical strategy of presence within the current discussions of postracism and antiracism demonstrates how the discourse of local leaders participates in a much larger conversation about Black citizenship in daily life (chapter 3). Linking them together through a careful analysis of two related artifacts in Memphis and Shelby County exposes rhetoric in action today. Local political rhetoric has a direct and immediate impact, both materially and psychologically, to conceptions of identity and agency. Each of these strategies offers a lens that reinforces specific conceptions of what it means to be Black in America today.

Review of Literature

The Pentecostal faith tradition plays an important role in the lives of its faithful that extends beyond the church's walls. Rhetorician Martin Medhurst declares, "The primary task of the Pentecostal is to trust and obey."[28] Pentecostals are expected to submit to authority and practice fealty in all aspects of life. This obedience applies to leaders both inside and beyond the church. Rather than focus on material justice or desires, Pentecostals are taught to turn their attention to heaven. As such, they are not permitted a voice in politics. They are taught to trust leaders on earth to handle the day-to-day while they prepare themselves for the inevitable and imminent return of Christ. Medhurst writes that Pentecostals are taught "to be separate from the 'world.'"[29] The Pentecostal faith denies its believers any agency to impact the world around them. This denial of agency seeps into their understanding of self. Communication scholars John Youngblood and Emmett Winn write, "The Black Pentecostal community church…is integral to socialization of its members and, therefore, plays a significant role in their beliefs concerning their self-worth, sense of personhood, and place in their social environment."[30] Always positioned to trust and obey leaders, Pentecostals submit themselves to the power of others instead of actively fighting to enact progress themselves. The kind of inferior notion of self-

worth and socialization preached by the Pentecostal church directly connects to notions of respectability.

Respectability rhetoric calls for an enactment of Blackness that is modeled on a conservative, White ideal. Respectability demands assimilation and conformity. It is a way of conducting the conduct of others and typically exists as an intra-racial conversation. Yet, as race scholar Rasaki Titilayo posits, respectability rhetoric is "enormously concerned with the White gaze and viewed White morals and culture as the normative or proper standard."[31] Communication scholar Allissa Richardson notes, "Respectability was deeply entrenched in assimilationist thought, which reinforced many of the Black stereotypes it sought to annihilate."[32] By framing the conversation from the perspective of the White gaze, those traits that are most often criticized by those outside the race are amplified. Problems within the community become individual flaws rather than being seen as the result of structural oppression. Essentially, respectability moves responsibility away from systemic injustice and put the blame on "unruly and uncouth newcomers" who refused to toe the line.[33] In the words of rhetorician Rhana Gittens, "It was the job of Blacks to remove racist ideas by assimilating to White consciousness."[34] The Pentecostal church preached a message that connected self-worth and socialization to respectability, but in doing so, it sacrificed Black excellence in order to assimilate into an position foisted upon Blacks by White consciousness. Other religious sects took a different approach to race relations.

The tradition of prophetic Black liberation theology stands firmly against the passivity posited by Pentecostals. Rhetorician David Frank explains that the prophetic tradition worships "an active God, working with humans who desire justice. The distinction between worship and practice in this tradition is collapsed, with the social gospel taking priority…[It] pairs anger with

hope, refusing to adopt either a resigned psychological affect or a theology of fatalism."[35] In other words, where Pentecostals remove themselves from the world and turn their attention to the afterlife, the prophetic Black liberation theology demands that focus shift to the immediate. It requires believers to take action to make the world better on earth. Theologian James Cone declares that the primary task of this tradition "is to analyze the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the light of oppressed Blacks so they will see the gospel as inseparable from their humiliated condition, and as bestowing on them the necessary power to break the chains of oppression."[36] For practitioners of this faith, the gospel demands material action to be taken to correct earthly injustices. The faith does not promote fealty to any earthly leader; rather it pleads for undying submission to the cause of justice now. The faith envisions Jesus as a Black man and extends a range of value and merit to the lived experience of Blackness. The prophetic Black liberation tradition requires material action be taken on earth. It centers its understanding of Black self-worth in Black power rather than respectability. The centering of the Black condition in this faith directly correlates to Afrocentric rhetoric.

Afrocentricity focuses on the Black perspective. Founding theorist Molefi Asante writes, "Afrocentricity argues that African people, concepts, and ideas, must be viewed from a subject rather than an object position."[37] For theorists like Asante, rhetoric plays a unique role in regards to Afrocentricity. He writes that Afrocentric rhetoric "is the productive thrust of language into the unknown in an attempt to create harmony and balance in the midst of disharmony and indecision."[38] To put another way, the centering of Blackness through rhetoric is a deliberate act intent on disrupting the racial hierarchy that has settled over society. While it centers the Black experience, Afrocentricity does not posit Black as above all other experiences. Rather,

Afrocentric rhetoric seeks to make visible a perspective that for far too long was pushed to the shadows. Asante theorizes:

> Without paying attention to African ownership of values, knowledge, and culture, it is impossible to ferret out the manifold ways that a text can be interpreted…Rhetoric must transcend ideologies, whether political or racial, in order to perform the task of continuous reconciliation.[39]

For Afrocentrists, the goal is not Black supremacy. Instead, the goal is that ever-elusive reconciliation of races, but, unlike those who encourage respectability, Afrocentrists are not willing to give up their racial identity. Racial identity is essential to Afrocentricity, but racial superiority is different. Afrocentrists posit race as a tool for locating and amplifying the voices of those left out. Blackness is centered as an equal, but not elevated as an ideal. In order to see this vision come to fruition, Afrocentric prophetic Black liberation theology engages *parrhesia*.

Parrhesia has been studied by rhetoricians in many ways. G. Thomas Goodnight calls *parrhesia* "the rhetorical figure of dissent par excellence."[40] Bradford Vivian notes two different understandings of the concept: one as "ethical event," the other as "rhetorical technique."[41] Yet Joshua Gunn and Mark McPhail ask whether *parrhesiastic* intelligibility is "even possible when the specter of race haunts our deepest fantasies about identity and difference."[42] This thesis contributes by offering religion as a source of *parrhesiastic* intelligibility. David Ikard and Martell Teasley declare that "activist black churches" and their pastor's "propensity to 'act up' in the pulpit and speak truth to power as it concerns struggling black communities…[are] an asset rather than an obstacle to African American empowerment in the twenty-first century."[43] This effort to demand change from the pulpit is a way of using common Christian religion as a source of credibility in order to make *parrhesia* palatable for the insider audience to whom the outsider

preacher speaks. Pastors and other civic activists often convey *parrhesiastic* messages through their sermons and prayers. Public invocations are unique opportunities to speak truth to power. In order to make the most of *parrhesiastic* opportunities, rhetors must be very careful in what they choose to amplify in their messages.

One rhetorical tool frequently associated with such amplification is the theory of presence. Presence refers to the rhetor's choices of what to bring before the audience and what to omit. Kenneth Burke explains that nothing can be expressed in its entirety, so a process of selection and deflection frames the reality that the audience experiences.[44] Presence is the process by which those selections take form for the audience. Hailed by Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca in *The New Rhetoric*, presence is "an essential factor in argumentation and one that is far too much neglected in rationalistic conceptions of reasoning."[45] Rhetorician Robert Tucker describes presence as "the property given by a speaker to a particular semantic 'shape' at the expense of the available others."[46] Communication scholars Ralph Cintrón and Jason Schneider refer to presence as "a heuristic for interrogating the relationship between lived experience and rhetorical invention; or…as a construct for illuminating the ways that rhetors must respond to and strategically negotiate the relationship between the symbolic and material realms."[47] When considered in this light, there are significant ontological implications. Through presence, rhetors have the opportunity to take what is theoretical and make it material; they can turn notions into reality. The selective realities portrayed by rhetors allow them to position certain expectations of fealty in their audience. Depending on what concepts are made present, the audience may submit themselves to the will of the leader; other times, they may submit to a cause of greater good. When applied to race, presence has particularly interesting implications. Orators can emphasize negative stereotypes, as in some of the side effects of respectability, or

they can emphasize more positive aspects of race, as in the agency located through Afrocentricity. However, sometimes presence uses its mirror image of absence to make race simply disappear.

Postracism is a term that gained a lot of traction in the early 2000s. The election of Barack Obama signified to many people that America had moved beyond its racist past. Theorists Marouf Hasian and Fernando Delgado describe postracism as a kind of "historical amnesia" that denies the reality of ongoing systemic and structural racial exclusion and oppression.[48] Postracism's denial of contemporary racism forecloses any opportunities to address or resolve some of these systemic imbalances that fuel its continuation. Race scholar Ibram Kendi asserts that such "denial is the heartbeat of racism." [49] Rhetorician Mark Orbe writes that postracial rhetoric "erases the specific forms of oppression that are bound up in anti-Black racism."[50] This erasure is a kind of absence that is the antithesis of presence. Rhetors deny issues of racial inequity in order to make present other ideas that cast them in a better light. Communication scholars Jessy Ohl and Jennifer Potter assert, "Post-racial discourses actively undermine racial accountability for the White majority."[51] Color-blind postracism allows orators to make race absent and to make White innocence present. Like respectability rhetoric, postracism thrusts blame on an individual's personal shortcomings rather than acknowledging the thriving reality of institutional racism. Although recognizing that racial difference existed in the in the past, rhetorician Thomas Dunn explains that postracism "obscures race's *still* intimate place in our social, economic, and political fabric and inhibiting racial forms of political subjectivity that address these ongoing oppressions" (emphasis mine).[52] One such racial form of political subjectivity is embodied in antiracism.

Antiracism is a counterstrategy to postracism. Antiracism is an active and committed effort to acknowledge the prevalence of racism in society, to oppose the spread of racist ideas, and to fight for a more equitable present. Race scholar Ibram Kendi defines an antiracist idea as "any idea that suggest the racial groups are equal in all their apparent differences—that there is nothing right or wrong with any racial group. Antiracist ideas argue that racist policies are the cause of racial inequities."[53] The intentionality of antiracism is at its heart. It is not a passive belief. Antiracism calls for immediate attention. Where postracism situates race as a subject of the past, antiracism views race as a world-defining present that finds the past alive in the now. As Kendi writes, "To be an antiracist is a radical choice in the face of this history, requiring a radical reorientation of our consciousness."[54] Race theorist David Theo Goldberg explains antiracism "requires historical memory, recalling the conditions of racial degradation and relating contemporary to historical and local to global conditions."[55] One of the struggles of antiracism is how deeply racism is embedded in society's consciousness. Rhetorician Abraham Khan writes "anti-racist grievances are easily heard, but also quickly evaporate."[56] Particularly in an environment where ideologies of postracism are prevalent, racist ideas have become such an unstated undercurrent to any number of material situations such that while an antiracist objection may be noted, it must be repeated and followed persistently to have a lasting effect. Antiracists acknowledge that no one individual can topple such hegemonic forces. Their fealty is not a single leader, but to a grand idea of equity.

Outline of Chapters

Chapter 1 provides a reading of the invocation offered by Rev. Ivory Jackson of Faith Temple Ministries Church preceding Memphis Mayor Jim Strickland's State of the City Address on January 28, 2019. In that prayer, the Pentecostal minister turns a blind eye to issues of the

world and directs his congregation to support the mayor at all costs. He bases his rhetoric in his religious beliefs that demand earthly interests be ignored in favor of heavenly salvation. Jackson's prayer is full of respectability rhetoric that situates African Americans in an inferior position than their White counterparts, particularly to their White mayor. Jackson's rhetoric of civic fealty calls for civic separation, not civic involvement, and for earthly submission to the mayor, as the pastor's flock should deny the material in favor of heavenly salvation.

Chapter 2 offers an analysis of the invocation by Rev. Dr. Earle J. Fisher of Abyssinian Missionary Baptist Church preceding Shelby County Mayor Lee Harris' State of the County Address just three weeks later on February 15, 2019. Fisher delivers a prayer that merges the secular tradition of Afrocentricity with the religious tradition of prophetic Black liberation theology to assert the civic power of Black Memphians. He empowers and affirms Black life and dignity. He calls for structural change to bring equity to his congregation. His rhetoric forms a link among *parrhesia*, Afrocentricity, and prophetic Black liberation theology in order to locate agency for his audience. It calls for deference to ideals, not idols. This invocation promotes a rhetoric of civic fealty that focuses on social justice not submission to any one man. It demands immediate civic action and participation in building a better material reality for African Americans.

Chapter 3 analyzes the mayors' speeches as well as the pageantry that occurs before those speeches. Each mayor relies on rhetorical presence and absence to craft identity and agency for the Black community that they serve. The Memphis mayor constitutes a postracial society in which racial inequities have vanished. The Shelby County Mayor constitutes an antiracist society that is honest about discrimination and strives to affirm Black life. Both mayors' speeches extend the rhetoric of civic fealty presented in their respective invocations and their preceding

pageantry. Their policy proposals and economic agendas either elevate their own personal standing or they seek to grow the community from the bottom up. They offer competing visions for what counts as citizens and to whom or what their audience should submit.

The conclusion ties together these various theories to posit a way forward for understanding the intersection of race, religion, rhetoric, and politics. It calls for more research on rhetoric of civic fealty. Locating the commitments made through language exposes a social hierarchy that tacitly, or even sometimes explicitly, organizes society. Studying the intersections of the "civic" and ideas of "submission" helps to situate ruptures that can lead to greater social equality. The political alliance between the Black religious community and political structures needs to be analyzed further in order to find ruptures where rhetoric empowers or disables these important community institutions. Lastly, the conclusion situates this local example of rhetoric in action within an increasingly relevant national redefining of civic fealty and Black identity.

---

[1] Martin Luther King, Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop," The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, Last Updated March 27, 2019, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/ive-been-mountaintop-address-delivered-bishop-charles-mason-temple.

[2] Wayne Risher, "Memphis Tourism Aims To Boost Visitor Count with Soulful New Calling Card," *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), June 21, 2018, https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/money/business/development/2018/06/21/memphis-home-blues-soul-rock-n-roll-memphis-tourism-new-catchphrase/715058002/.

[3] Antonio de Velasco, "'I'm a Southerner, Too': Confederate Monuments and Black Southern Counterpublics in Memphis, Tennessee," *Southern Communication Journal*, 84, no. 4 (2019): 234.

[4] Otis Sanford, *From Boss Crump to King Willie: How Race Changed Memphis Politics* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2017), 119-145.

[5] Ibid. 12.

[6] Zandria F. Robinson, *This Ain't Chicago: Race, Class, and Regional Identity in the Post-Soul South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 5.

[7] Jacque Masse, "Memphis Ranked Second Most Dangerous City, According to New Study," *FOX13Memphis.com* October 25, 2019. https://www.fox13memphis.com/top-stories/memphis-ranked-second-most-dangerous-city-according-to-new-study/1001649257/.

[8] Jennifer Pignolet, "Memphis Area No Longer No. 1 in Overall, Childhood Poverty," *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), September 13, 2018, https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/news/local/2018/09/13/memphis-area-no-longer-1-overall-childhood-poverty/1291444002/.

[9] Ana Leech, "The Widening Crisis of Access to Health Care," *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), January 14, 2019, https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/opinion/contributors/2019/01/14/widening-crisis-access-health-care-opinion/2568693002/

[10] Dave Jenkins. "Memphis Named 3rd Fattest Metro Area in America," *WMCActionNews5.com*, March 25, 2019, https://www.wmcactionnews5.com/2019/03/25/memphis-named-rd-fattest-metro-area-america/.

[11] Laura Faith Kebede, "Memphis School Segregation Worse Than 50 Years Ago," *Chalkbeat* (Memphis, TN), March 29, 2018, https://chalkbeat.org/posts/tn/2018/03/29/memphis-school-segregation-worse-than-50-years-ago/.

[12] Elena Delavega, "2019 Poverty Fact Sheet" *School of Social Work at the University of Memphis*, https://www.memphis.edu/socialwork/research/2019povertyfactsheet.pdf.

[13] Ibid.

[14] "Mayor's Office," MemphisTN.gov, 2019, https://www.memphistn.gov/government/mayor_jim_strickland/mayor_s_office.

[15] "About the Mayor," ShelbyCountyTN.gov, 2019, https://www.shelbycountytn.gov/213/About-the-Mayor.

[16] Aram Goudsouzian and Charles W. McKinney, Jr. *An Unseen Light: Black Struggles for Freedom in Memphis, Tennessee* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2018), 4.

[17] Lisa A. Flores, "Between Abundance and Marginalization: The Imperative of Racial Rhetorical Criticism," *Review of Communication*. 16, no. 1 (2016): 6.

[18] Robert E. Terrill, "Protest, Prophecy, and Prudence in the Rhetoric of Malcolm X," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 4, no. 1 (2001): 25-53.

[19] Bill Yousman, "Who Owns Identity? Malcolm X, Representation, and the Struggle Over Meaning," *Communication Quarterly*. 49, no. 1 (2001): 1-18.

[20] Lisa Corrigan, "50 Years Later: Commemorating the Life and Death of Malcolm X," *Howard Journal of Communications*. 28, no. 2 (2017): 144-159.

[21] James Jasinski and John M. Murphy, "Time, Space, and Generic Reconstitution: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 'A Time To Break Silence' as Radical Jeremiad," in *Public Address & Moral Judgment: Critical Studies in Ethical Tensions*, eds. Shawn Parry-Giles and Trevor Parry-Giles (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2009), 97-126.

[22] Michael Leff and Ebony A. Utley, "Instrumental and Constitutive Rhetoric in Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'Letter from Birmingham Jail," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 7, no. 1 (2004), 37-51.

[23] Michael Osborn, "Rhetorical Distance in 'Letter from Birmingham Jail,'" *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 7, no. 1 (2004), 24-35.

[24] *Martin Luther King, Jr, and the Sermonic Power of Public Discourse*, eds. Carolyn Calloway-Thomas and John Louis Lucaites (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1993).

[25] Fannie Lou Hamer, Maegan Parker Brooks, and Davis W. Houck, *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To Tell It Like It Is* (Oxford, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011).

[26] Lisa Corrigan, "Blackness in the Rhetorical Imaginary," *Southern Communication Journal*, 81, no 4 (2016), 189.

[27] Eric King Watts, "The Problem of Race in Public Address Research: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Conflicted Aesthetics of Race," *Handbook on Rhetoric and Public Address*, eds. Shawn Parry-Giles and J. Michael Hogan (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 380, 391.

[28] Martin J. Medhurst, "Filled with the Spirit: Rhetorical Invention and the Pentecostal Tradition," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs,* 7, no. 4 (2004), 567.

[29] Ibid. 560.

[30] John D. Youngblood and J. Emmett Winn, "Shout Glory: Competing Communication Codes Experienced by the Members of the African American Pentecostal Genuine Deliverance Holiness Church," *Journal of Communication*, 54, no. 2 (2004), 358.

[31] Rasaki Titilayo, "From SNCC to BLM: Lessons in Radicalism, Structure, and Respectability Politics," *Harvard Journal of African American Public Policy* (2016), 33.

[32] Allissa V. Richardson, "Dismantling Respectability: The Rise of New Womanist Communication Models in the Era of Black Lives Matter," *Journal of Communication*, 69, no. 2 (2019), 196.

[33] Joan Rhodes, "Pedagogies of Respectability: Race, Media, and Black Womanhood in the Early 20th Century," *Souls*, 18, no. 2 (2016), 202.

[34] Rhana A. Gittens, "'What If I Am a Woman?': Black Feminist Rhetorical Strategies of Intersectional Identification and Resistance in Maria Stewart's Texts," *Southern Communication Journal*, 83, no. 5 (2018), 313.

[35] David A. Frank, "The Prophetic Voice and the Face of the Other in Barack Obama's 'A More Perfect Union Address, March 18, 2008," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 12, no. 2 (2009), 173.

[36] James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019), 5.

[37] Molefi Kete Asante, "Intellectual Dislocation: Applying Analytic Afrocentricity to Narratives of Identity," *Howard Journal of Communications*. 13, no. 1 (2002), 105.

[38] Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998), 46.

[39] Ibid. 181-183.

[40] Gladys Thomas Goodnight, "Parrhesia: The Aesthetics of Arguing Truth to Power," *OSSA Conference Archive*, 51 (2007), 2.

[41] Bradford Vivian, "Parrēsia and the Problem of Rhetorical Speech," Forum on Arthur Walzer's "Parrēsia, Foucault, and the Classical Rhetorical Tradition," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly,* 43, no. 4 (2013), 373.

[42] Joshua Gunn and Mark Lawrence McPhail, "Coming Home to Roost: Jeremiah Wright, Barack Obama, and the (Re)Signing of (Post) Racial Rhetoric," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (2015), 16.

[43] David Ikard and Martell L. Teasley, *Nation of Cowards Black Activism in Barack Obama's Post-racial America (*Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 60.

[44] Kenneth Burke, "Terministic Screens," *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966) 45.

[45] Chaïm Perelman, Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, John Wilkinson, and Purcell Weaver, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 116.

[46] Robert E. Tucker, "Figure, Ground, and Presence: A Phenomenology of Meaning in Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 7, no. 4 (2001), 411.

[47] Ralph Cintrón and Jason Schneider, "Things of the World: Migration, Presence, and the Arts of Presencing," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 52, no. 2 (2019), 116.

[48] Marouf Hasian Jr. and Fernando Delgado, "The Trials and Tribulations of Racialized Critical Rhetorical Theory: Understanding Rhetorical Ambiguities of Proposition 187," *Communication Theory* 8, no 3 (1998), 257.

[49] Ibram X. Kendi, *How To Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World Books, 2019), 9.

[50] Mark Orbe, "#AllLivesMatter as Post-Racial Rhetorical Strategy," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 5, no. 3-4 (2015), 98.

[51] Jessy J. Ohl and Jennifer E. Potter, "United We Lynch: Post-Racism and the (Re)Membering of Racial Violence in *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*," *Southern Communication Journal* 78, no. 3 (2013), 188.

[52] Thomas R. Dunn, "Playing Neoliberal Politics: Post-Racial and Post-Racist Strategies in 'Same Love,'" *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 13, no. 3 (2016), 273.

[53] Kendi, 20.

[54] Ibid. 23.

[55] David Theo Goldberg, *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism* (Malden Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell Manifestos, 2009), 21.

[56] Abraham Iqbal Khan, "A Rant Good for Business: Communicative Capitalism and the Capture of Anti-Racist Resistance," *Popular Communication* 14, no. 1 (2016), 41.

CHAPTER 1

"FOLLOW THE LEADER, O GOD:"

THE RHETORIC OF CIVIC FEALTY AS SUBMISSION IN THE INVOCATION OF REV. IVORY JACKSON

Memphis Mayor Jim Strickland's January 28, 2019 "State of the City" address was more than just a routine speech. This address was unique because it unofficially kicked off of Strickland's re-election campaign. As local news station WREG noted, "Pamphlets were given out showing a list of the mayor's achievements in his first years in office,"[1] as opposed to traditional "State of the City" address where a mayor might recount a few accomplishments of a single year and, then, put forth a plan for the future. The local daily newspaper reported, "Greeting audience-members on their seats before Monday's address were glossy packets that proclaimed 'Memphis Has Momentum,' an oft-uttered phrase by Strickland as he launches his official re-election run."[2]

The administration held the event in a reception room at the Links of Whitehaven public golf course. City employees, community residents, and members of the media comprised the audience. This audience is of particular note as they are a group likely to support, rather than challenge, any ideas proposed by the mayor. Obviously, city employees are likely to think that they are doing good work and believe in the mission put forth by their mayor, but also the local residents of Whitehaven were likely to be equally satisfied. The Whitehaven neighborhood in Memphis has historically been home to Memphis' highest concentration of African American middle class families. One local news source describes the neighborhood's deep pride "in home

ownership and college education in Whitehaven."[3] The neighborhood's strong economic status situates it in favor of the status quo. Its City Council representative has been a strong advocate for the Mayor and endorsed him for the election that Strickland promoted with his State of the City address. By locating the talk in Whitehaven, Strickland's team assured a friendly and supportive crowd to receive his message.

Support from the African American religious establishment that holds so much sway in the community is one of the key facets of a successful election campaign in Memphis. Scholar Melissa V. Harris-Lacewell asserts, "Sunday morning visits to large, influential Black churches have been a standard strategy of Democratic office-seekers for more than fifty years. Black churches are a site of organized, well-networked, partisan faithful who can be influenced and mobilized by adept candidates."[4] Strickland's choice of an influential Black pastor to deliver the invocation prior to his speech was no mere happenstance. It was a deliberate political decision and one that was based in a thorough foreknowledge of the kind of prayer that preacher would offer. As scholar Kerry Pimblott notes, "Black political ideologies were thus intimately connected to the ideational world of Black churches."[5] In other words, Strickland was able to capitalize politically from the ideas emanating from the church, but not without risk.

Selecting the right pastor was a major political decision. Strickland needed to find a preacher that would curry favor among the city's religious community. Had Strickland chosen a more activist preacher, the invocation could have antagonized certain political stances the administration took. Strickland needed to find a pastor that would either align with the mayor's agenda or, at the very least, take the focus off local politics. To make such an alignment politically prudent, the campaign had to understand the kind of message the pastor would likely

deliver to his flock. The focus of this chapter is the invocation delivered by Pastor Ivory Jackson of Faith Temple Ministries Church.

This chapter argues that Jackson's Pentecostal faith and reliance on respectability rhetoric constructs a rhetoric of civic fealty that urges the audience to submit to Mayor Strickland. Pentecostal Christianity has a history of promoting respectability rhetoric that encourages believers to conform to an imagined White ideal. The intersection of faith and political subservience are the core of Ivory Jackson's message. Strickland understood that the message the pastor would deliver would not challenge the mayor's agenda but would keep the focus on unity and cohesion. Putting distance between faith, politics, and racial inequity in the city, Jackson's invocation fails to address a number of issues that his congregation faces; instead, he keeps the focus on supporting and submitting to the mayor despite any grievance. The notion of civic fealty is the primary theme of Jackson's prayer. He posits a citizenry without agency in respect to local politics. That lack of agency is not a point of contention; rather it is deliberate. Jackson preaches civic distance and fealty to earthly leaders. The Strickland administration secured a pastor whose faith would foreclose any consideration of local politics.

This chapter proceeds in multiple parts. First, the connection between Ivory Jackson's Pentecostal faith and civic participation is dissected. Next, a review of respectability rhetoric situates an underlying ideology in Jackson's discourse. From there, a close reading of the invocation offered prior to Strickland's address locates the ways in which Jackson uses religion to create a soft landing for Strickland's policies. Studying Jackson's prayer with an ear for respectability and its implicit endorsement of the assumptions of a racial hierarchy reveals a nuanced message meant to silence the Black community from challenging the mayor. I conclude

by building on these theories and calling for more research into their entanglement, particularly noting the role of some religious sects in permeating an unrealistic vision of a postracial society.

Faith Temple Ministries Church and Fundamentalist Pentecostal Society

Understanding the history of Pentecostal activism, or its perceived lack of activism, is important to understanding why Strickland selected this particular pastor to deliver the invocation before his address. Reverend Ivory Jackson is the pastor of the fundamentalist Pentecostal-affiliated Faith Temple Ministries Church in the Whitehaven neighborhood of Memphis. Pentecostals have long been criticized for their submission to authority and their passivity in matters of civil rights. While the research of a few scholars like Cheryl Townsend Gilkes[6] in African American Studies and Christopher House[7] in Communication Studies works to nuance this impression, the general perception is that Pentecostal leaders are more concerned with the afterlife than the daily life. Race scholar Julia Kirk Blackwelder writes

> Fundamentalists within and without the South believed civil disobedience was contrary to God's will…Blacks as well as Whites found fundamentalist theology a barrier against civil rights activism. Fundamentalists believe that personal salvation is the only means to the elimination of social problems and therefore place their energies in evangelism.[8]

Rhetorician Christopher House describes a "preoccupation of Black churches with 'prosperity gospels,' color-blind theologies, and a strong focus on its communal and priestly functions [that] has largely inhibited faith-based political action."[9] Even at the height of the American Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, fundamentalist publications were issuing statements like "he who sets himself up against authorities resists what God himself appointed and arranged in divine order."[10] The attitude of the church can best be summarized by one Pentecostal pastor's

reflection on the funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr.: "Civil rights legislation cannot, I believe, meet the basic needs of the ghettos, but the gospel can."[11]

Black Pentecostal preachers tend to preach a message that is fixed to an assimilationist mindset. Scholar Cornel West writes that this approach to preaching asserts "*a rejection of Afro-American culture and total assimilation into American society*. It assumes that the universal must wipe clean all particulars."[12] He critiques this philosophy as "a rash reaction" that "overlooks the possibility of cultural vitality."[13] Religious scholar Mark Chapman calls these preachers "Negro theologians" instead of "Black theologians" indicating a more anachronistic mindset.[14] He explains that these Negro theologians do not consider themselves "*black* theologians. Their approach to religious experience and commitment to the ideology of integration led them to think of ethnic and cultural background as *incidental*" (emphasis from author).[15] So-called Black theologians situate their belief "on the *particularity* of the gospel (that) stemmed from a growing nationalist consciousness that glorified Blackness and stressed racial unity."[16] Ivory Jackson's religious commitments obliged him to foreclose Black pride rhetoric in favor of a broad integration movement. Pentecostal preachers did not intentionally work to hurt the equality movement; rather then took a slower, broader approach. These preachers believed that the best way to find equality was to disappear into the larger society rather than to stand as distinct. The result is a religion preaching racial respectability and fealty in place of racial pride.

Resistance to activist leanings has long been a foundation of the Pentecostal faith, particularly in the American South. Their "prioritization of racial reconciliation over Black advancement" led to contentious debate within the community.[17] Historian Kerry Pimblott writes "activist ministers risked alienating their own members, who in some cases threatened to halt financial contributions if they disagreed with the church's activities,"[18] and many Pentecostal

worshippers held "moral condemnation of the uprising, provoking important intraracial fissures rooted in class, generation, and theology."[19] These "intraracial fissures" are another way to describe divisions through respectability.

Faith Temple Ministries Church continues this traditional separation from activism. Responding to the Civil Rights Era, many African American religious sects shifted to a more activist and tangibly relevant role in the lives of their faithful (see Chapter 2), but Faith Temple stayed the course. The welcome message from Pastor Ivory Jackson that appears before anything else on the church's website states, "For 50 years, we have stood firm on the belief that soul winning is the primary business of the church. We are walking out our God-given calling and purpose to minister love, forgiveness and acceptance, and to invest in our community."[20] The "Our History" section of the website lists nothing about community activism. The church was founded just one year after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. It was a time of turmoil and upheaval in Memphis, yet the history omits any connection to the greater community's struggles for justice. Under the "Our Vision" section, the website states the following as its purpose:

> To be a place where the hurting, the depressed, the frustrated, and the confused can find love, acceptance, help, hope, forgiveness, guidance, and encouragement; to invest in our community and help assist those with needs in our community so that we might model the character and nature of Christ for the express purpose of glorifying God.[21]

Faith Temple's relationship with community outreach deals exclusively with evangelization and "investment." The language of investment is particularly important because it emphasizes

economics over social policy and justice. There is no sense of activism, resistance, or organizing. Instead, ideas of acceptance and hope dominate the discourse.

In selecting the pastor from Faith Temple to deliver the invocation, the Strickland team ensured that the prayer would fall in line with its goals. Associating with a fundamentalist Pentecostal view of church and state relations meant avoiding any sense of pushback. Instead, eternal salvation would demand more attention than any earthly affairs. Accepting the status quo and praying, rather, than acting or resisting, would drive the preacher's words. Strickland trusted that the rhetoric of civic fealty would foster civic distance and featly to local leaders, and Jackson preached exactly that kind of message. Just as with his church's website, Jackson's prayer made no mention of systemic injustices oppressing the Black community. In fact, neither the words "African American" nor "Black" appear once on the website or in the invocation prayer despite the church's operating in what has historically been the bedrock of the Black middle class in Memphis. He offered a prayer rooted in respectability politics and submission. His words called for the audience to fall in line. To understand precisely what is meant by fall in line, the next section gives background on the state of respectability rhetoric in the field.

Respectability Rhetoric

Respectability has always been connected to racial conformity. The historical implication of "respectability" was first explored by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in 1992.[22] She refers to respectability as a strategy of racial uplift and political advancement through assimilation and conformity to the dominant culture. Scholar Rhana Gittens asserts, "The respectability politics theory presumes that the more closely Blacks modeled Whites in their habits, White opinions of them would rise."[23] While developed as an academic concept in the 1990s, the practice of preaching respectability predates the American Civil War. Higginbotham traces it to the Black

church in the 1840s that preached against "the expressive culture of the 'folk,' for example: sexual behavior, dress style, leisure activity, music, speech patterns, and religious worship patterns."[24] Respectability became a term that was associated with those trying to distant themselves from popular culture and guide people to a more "respectable" kind of life.

However, respectability was always a point of contention within the Black community. Famously, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois critiqued each other's notion of proper Black identity and behavior. Washington's stance as an assimilationist trying to work alongside a system of White dominance in his 1895 "Atlanta Exposition Address" serves as a hallmark of turn-of-the-century respectability.[25] Critiquing the speech for its deference to a White power structure that continued to exploit Black people, Du Bois writes that Washington's speech "practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the Negro races."[26] Their public dispute brought the subject of respectability to a broad audience of African Americans.

During the Jim Crow era, respectability rhetoric moved beyond the pulpit and began to register on a national scale, but not without some resistance. Theorist Brittany Cooper explains that prominent African Americans like Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell "rejected uplift politics as the sole or primary path to Black freedom. Both women believed in insistent and sustained agitation to bring about social change."[27] This "agitation" is a reference to disruptive protest. The question, again, arises of how best to gain acceptance from the broader society. Should African Americans try to model themselves on White culture in order prove their worth so as to a bigoted society, or should they "agitate" and stand up for themselves without changing to fit into their oppressor's idea of what they should be? What is lost in the attempted assimilation? These questions have been a major part of the dialogue within the Black community ever since.

A troubling reality of respectability is that even those that sacrifice their culture for the White ideal typically still fail to find acceptance. Rhetorician Kirt Wilson explains that despite respectability efforts for African Americans to assimilate into White mainstream society, White intellectuals continue to move the markers of how inclusion would be measured. He writes of White societal leaders arguing that "Black imitation was a primitive instinct that did not signify the individual's intellect or promote the race's development."[28] Wilson goes on to posit, "When associated with African Americans, imitation connotes the desire to be White, to escape Black identity and assumed inferiority."[29] Wilson's contribution to respectability is important because is asserts that regardless of how much a marginalized culture mimics the dominant culture, it will likely never be fully acceptable as equal.

Respectability discussions primarily occur intra-racially within the Black community. Typically, the more structured (read: conservative) elements determine what is deemed proper. Scholars Nadrea Njoku, Malika Butler, and Cameron Beatty situate these structures in specific authoritative locations: "the dissemination of Black respectability politics was through the Black church and HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities). These institutions were some of the earliest educative spaces for Black Americans at the turn of the century."[30] The pulpit has always been a hub for the dissemination of respectability rhetoric. The issue at the heart of the debate over respectability, however, is that the demand for respectability only furthers stereotypes and discrimination by condemning fellow participants in the struggle against oppression. Again, Cooper warns of "the worst kinds of racial respectability politics that unwittingly upheld the logics of White supremacy,"[31] and Njoku et al posit, "In many instances, Black respectability politics was alarmingly problematic because it maintained complicity within

White supremacy, racism, sexism, and capitalism."[32] Cultural leaders struggle with critiquing the community without merely mirroring the false stereotypes created by their oppressors.

Respectability is not only an issue of the past, but also it remains relevant today. A number of prominently publicized respectability messages occurred in the last two decades. Bill Cosby's infamous 2004 "Pound Cake" speech at the NAACP's ceremony celebrating the fifty-year anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education* gained particular notoriety. In the speech, Cosby shames absentee fathers, high school graduation rates, and personal clothing style in the Black community. He exclaims, "It's not what they're doing to us. It's what we're *not* doing" (emphasis mine).[33] Respectability rhetoric is an internal struggle that pits two sects of the same community against each other. It has a way of "other-ing" and dehumanizing the alternative style. For example, Cosby asks, "Who are these sick Black people and where did they come from and why haven't they been parented to shut up?...We're raising our own ingrown immigrants. These people are fighting hard to be ignorant. There's no English being spoken."[34] Cosby request "to shut up" and fall in line with the mainstream culture is quite similar to Ivory Jackson's request to silence critiques of Jim Strickland's policies in the Memphis community.

Respectability rhetoric in the pulpit found the national stage again quite recently with the nationally televised funeral of Aretha Franklin in August 2018. Reverend Jasper Williams delivered a eulogy that again pitted the Black community against itself. He berated the culture for a legacy of poor parenting, drug use, and laziness. Continuing respectability's tendency to dehumanize, he critiques those that do not fit his mold of ideal Blackness as "walking around like zombies."[35] It is this "other-ing" and dehumanizing that so often becomes the consequence of internalizing respectability rhetoric.

Respectability denotes an inferiority that can only be overcome by denying one's self. Rhetorician Annette Madlock Gatison explains "the term respectability refers to culturally defined rules for Black women and other, marginalized people to follow in order to *earn* respect in White Eurocentric patriarchal/mainstream culture" (emphasis from author).[36] This belief that respect is something that may be *earned* implies that it is not inherent to each individual. Her critique continues as she concludes, "A group cannot unify to fight oppression if some members of the group internalize oppressive ideology."[37] Jackson's Pentecostal faith allows respectability to thrive in his invocation. By enabling believers to distance themselves from the physical world, it encourages people to submit to the inferiority and the "other-ing" that racism delivers.

Racial inferiority and dehumanization is the inevitable result of the internalization of respectability. Rhetorician Eric King Watts describes Black positionality: "The Black occupies a coordinate that marks a fundamental structural antagonism with the West, with Whiteness, and indeed, with the Human."[38] For Watts, Blackness becomes a way of labeling that which is not White in order to make Whiteness distinct. Scholar Frank Wilderson writes, "Without the Negro, capacity itself is incoherent, uncertain at best."[39] Watts compares Black existence to that of a Zombie with an "undead existence."[40] He theorizes that while Zombies may not be fully human, they operate in a borderland with elements inside and outside of White Western intelligibility.

This other-ing is the result of a White society's scapegoating of African Americans. Theorist Frantz Fanon describes a "notion of *collective catharsis*. In every society, in every community, there exists, must exist, a channel, an outlet whereby the energy accumulated in the form of aggressiveness can be released."[41] Fanon claims that this "sadistic aggressiveness [is targeted] toward the Black man."[42] In such a framework, African Americans are always already positioned as targets of White rage regardless of how respectable they may appear. The hostility

is baked into society and cannot be escaped through respectability's conformity or even through time.

Rev. Jackson does not describe a world in which the predominantly African American congregation to whom he preaches plays an active role. Scholar Brittney Cooper puts forth a notion of racial hierarchy where "Black people are either alternately outside of the bounds of time or stuck in the past."[43] She describes African Americans being viewed as "space-takers rather than world-makers."[44] The idea of space-takers instead of world-makers is a prominent subtext of Jackson's invocation. His congregation has an identity of space-takers. The bodies that they posses on earth are just holding cells until they reach their true form in the afterlife. They are undead others who do not have the agency to stand up to some of the divisive or damaging policies of Mayor Strickland. Instead, his audience must simply lift up the mayor and offer obedience to any ideas presented. Ivory Jackson's calls for conformity and unquestioned loyalty to the mayor are presented as respectability rhetoric, but they are seeded in a foundation of racial inferiority driven by a religious withdrawal from the world.

The rhetoric that Jackson employs in his invocation promotes a vision of Black identity that is lesser than the White majority. His rhetoric suggests such an internalization of that inferiority is embodied through his frequent elevation of Strickland. That persistent praise and acclaim makes this social stratification appear even greater. His erasure of Black agency and disavowal of dissent, as well as his uplift of Strickland, present a post-racial society. The respectability fueled by his religious beliefs endorses this appeal, yet the reality is much different. Jackson preaches a prayer of civic fealty to a congregation that does not care about the civic and must serve the leaders before them.

Civic Fealty as Submission in Ivory Jackson's Invocation[45]

Jackson's prayer rhetorically situates his audience at the bottom of the social order. He commands his audience to submit to leaders and to be of the world, but not in the world, so that their focus can stay on God. While the first two sentences of the prayer thank God for enabling the listeners to wake up and to experience the day, the next lines situate the true receiver of his blessing to be Mayor Jim Strickland. The opening lines, dedicated to God, conclude with "God we just want to say thank you for that." He then takes a pause and moves to the remainder of the speech—focused on loyalty to Strickland. Using the qualifier "just" and the pause before transitioning to the rest of the speech creates an attitude of dismissal to this section of the prayer. Jackson seemingly gets the religious part of the prayer out of the way before moving to an ode to Strickland. While this might seem counter to the Pentecostal tenets described earlier, in fact, the way that Jackson proceeds to praise Strickland actually negates the agency of the constituency and thus removes them from the political process. In doing so, he reinforces fundamentalist Pentecostal beliefs separating the faithful from civic interests.

The first full section of the speech is entirely focused on elevating Strickland, a move that creates a hierarchical distance between the White leader and the Black community. Jackson prays to God, "We thank You for this grand occasion where we can come and sit and listen and hear from our mayor, our CEO of the City of Memphis, a city of legacy, a city, O God, of great history. And, Father, we thank You for the City of Memphis." That first sentence positions the audience as fortunate and lucky to have the opportunity to be addressed by the mayor. The rhetoric situates the audience as passive observers to the active mayor. The pastor is already constructing a power relationship with the White mayor hovering above the mostly Black audience. This relationship is reinforced when the mayor is called the "CEO of the City of Memphis." Again, creating a social stratification in which the mayor holds authority over all

citizens, Jackson's invocation denotes the audience to be subservient to the whims of Strickland. When he speaks of Memphis' history, he calls it "great" and thanks God for the city. While Memphis does have a proud and lasting legacy in American history, Jackson's whitewashing of some of Memphis' more negative moments erases the labor and lives of many who have been victims of that history's bleaker moments.

This erasure plays into a mindset of racial hierarchy and culture of submission that pervades the speech. Such a framework connotes that Black history does not carry the same weight as White history and therefore may be ignored. For Jackson, Memphis' great history does not seem to include its role as a central hub of the slave trade and its reliance on the cotton industry during the antebellum years. It does not seem to include the lynchings witnessed by Ida B. Wells or the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at the Lorraine Motel. It does not seem to include the White flight that fueled suburban sprawl as segregation became the law of the land emptying the city of resources and wealth. Those are but a few of the most notorious moments in Memphis history. Erasing those moments and the persistent contemporary mistreatment of African Americans in Memphis positions Black history as inferior to White history. While it could be argued that a State of the City address may not be the most appropriate place for those darker moments in history to be addressed, Jackson's rhetorical choice to highlight the "great history" all but eliminates those other moments from the city's public memory.

The next section of the prayer is one of the two most important blocks of the invocation. Here, Jackson defers all authority to the mayor. Strickland no longer becomes a representative of the people; instead, Jackson's language situates Strickland as a representative of God. Jackson begins this paragraph with the seemingly innocuous line, "Now, Father, we pray for our leader;

we pray, God, for his vision." This line could be the kind of generic phrase that may be found in any prayer before a large audience; however, what follows is where Jackson starts to slip into respectability. The pastor prays:

> We pray, God, that You will give us understanding and that You will give us patience. We pray that You will cause us to work together in unity. For You said that a house divided among itself will not stand, so God let us come together. Let us support this one man, the vision of our city. Let us put aside our own personal agendas and follow the leader, O God. There is a blessing when we support, celebrate another man's vision. And, God, we thank You for it tonight.

Jackson again uses language to place the community in a position of fealty to the mayor. His prayer for God to grant "understanding" and "patience" to the audience as they pray for Strickland's" vision" denotes a group of citizens that is too simple to understand the complex machinations of Strickland's agenda. Jackson continues to elevate Strickland by pleading that listeners "support this one man, the vision of our city." With this line, Jackson continues his path of erasure and civic distance. He holds Strickland as the embodiment of all people in the city. Strickland is transformed to the "one man" whose vision must be endorsed. The rhetoric posits Strickland as infallible and the community as at fault for not supporting him more fervently. Jackson then calls for an end to division and protest. He pulls in biblical support paraphrasing Matthew 12:25-26 with "a house divided among itself will not stand." Jackson's conflation of the biblical narrative with community resistance to mayoral policy is borderline heretical. This conflation essentially names disputes over policy as a spiritual sin. In fact, if one were to continue a few verses in that same passage of Matthew, one would find the line "He that is not with Me is against Me…it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to

come."[46] Carrying Jackson's biblical allusion to fruition suggests that those who are not in full-throated support for the mayor are not only living in sin, but they are committing an unforgivable sin that will result in eternal damnation. Following Jackson's language, either audience members submit to the mayor or they are damned to Hell.

The pastor continues pleading for the audience to "follow the leader" with more biblical allusions. His reference to the blessing that comes from celebrating another man's vision refers to Luke 12. This connection reinforces some of the themes addressed earlier. That passage is about how man is incapable of serving two masters and that the faithful should blindly obey the vision of those earthly leaders. Otherwise, involving themselves with civic leaders would mean that those faithful have a greater interest in tangible possessions than deference to God. Jackson dismisses those activists concerned with systemic injustices, police brutality, and civic corruption as merely worrying about "personal agendas." The pastor is situating anything but strict fealty as a selfish desire for personal gain. Further, he is aligning any form of resistance to the government with sins against God. This rejection of resistance falls into line with the message of respectability that Jackson is preaching. He wants his audience to go unnoticed by the larger authorities and to dissolve into the rest of society. He is condemning those that object and protest. Those resisting the mayor are not part of the faithful community to whom Jackson preaches. He admonishes any civic struggle as a move against God and a subversion of the beloved community. Such actions are to be exiled and exorcised. Jackson's respectability rhetoric is bounded by his belief that the community should defer to its leader because the truly faithful should only be concerned with heavenly salvation, not earthly delights.

In the next section, Rev. Jackson acknowledges a number of dignitaries in the room, but, again, he puts Strickland on a higher pedestal. He offers a prayer of thanksgiving for "our judges,

our police officers, our court officials, and all of our city officials." Jackson makes no reference to the systemic over-policing of African American neighborhoods, the over-incarceration of Black youth, and the inequitable funding proposals that flood affluent White neighborhoods with resources while leaving the coffers of the needier Black neighborhoods dry. Beyond those omissions, Jackson names only those positions of power rather than giving thanks for those community members in the audience that make up the larger constituency of Memphis. This erasure denies any agency and power to the citizenry. Next, Jackson offers thanks "for a mayor, that's Dr. Jim Strickland, God, who is mayor of our city." Notably, Jim Strickland has not been conferred at doctorate degree. Jackson's bestowal of "Dr. Jim" further evinces his consistent elevation of Strickland beyond the mayor's true position as an elected representative of the people of the city and creates a hierarchy between the White mayor and Black audience. This section of the prayer closes with an important line "And, Lord, I thank You for every clergy member that's here and that we will continue to uphold and uplift our mayor in prayer as he leads this city." With this line, Jackson instructs fellow pastors to follow his lead and endorse the mayor's agenda. "Uphold and uplift" tolerates no deeper nuance, reflection, or criticism; instead, such rhetoric only leaves room for praise and adoration. Jackson is praying that influential pastors across the city line up behind the mayor, again striking tones of respectability by making those that step out of line appear as outsiders.

The important final section of Jackson's address reinforces his entire purpose. He starts the section by dismissing arguments that cut down the mayor's agenda. He then elevates the mayor again and uses God to attack those that resist Strickland's policies:

> It's easy to say what we will do and how I would do it, but until you are in that position, you really don't know how it is to be the mayor of a city, so, God, we

> pray for strength; we pray for unity; we pray for wisdom: You said if a man lacks wisdom, let him ask the Father. But, God, I pray that as we surround this mayor and uphold his hands in Jesus' name, we thank You. And we will be the better because, Father, Your word admonishes us to dwell together in unity, and, Lord, we are better together. We are better together. We come against division; we come against those things that tend to pull us apart, but, God, we thank You that You will not allow it to come among us but that we will come together and work with our CEO, work with our mayor of this city Jim Strickland. In Jesus' name we pray. Thank God, Amen and Amen.

Jackson rejects those dissidents arguing against the mayor as simply being ignorant and inexperienced. His claim that "it's easy to say what we will do" derides criticism as a lazy way of calling for a more just and equitable government. His allegation that "until you are in that position, you really don't know how it is to be the mayor" suggests that even those dissidents would act in the same way as Strickland if only they could see all the different factors behind the scenes. Again, Jackson is employing respectability rhetoric. He is crafting an ideal image of how the constituency should relate to the mayor and society more broadly. For Jackson, they should be silent and accept Strickland's decisions. As Jackson calls on the community to "surround this mayor and uphold his hands in Jesus' name," he again makes a scriptural reference positioning the mayor as a biblical hero. This time Jackson calls on Exodus 17 in which Moses' raised hands prevent the Israelites from being destroyed, but as Moses grows weary, his hands must be uplifted by the community so as to ensure their safety. Though this conflation, Jackson positions the community as relying on Strickland's wisdom and strength to provide security and guidance in the midst of a war for freedom. He situates community members as helpless and defeated

without Strickland's steady hand. It is interesting to note that in this story, the leader's hands are not, in fact, too steady on their own and must rely on community's faith and support in order to prevail. Such a dependence on the civic might evince some of the resistant aspects of the rhetoric of civic fealty addressed in Chapter 2, but not for Jackson.

Jackson reiterates his call for unity and communal submission to the mayor in this section. He calls on Psalm 133 with his line demanding the community to "dwell together in unity." He aims to stifle resistance by praying for the citizenry to act "against division; we come against those things that pull us apart." Repeating this call against division over and over again through the prayer posits Strickland as a frequent victim of senseless derision and attack. Jackson's rhetoric crafts two versions of Strickland: one, the strong and mighty king acting on behalf of God; and two, the meek and merciful victim being berated by attacks from all sides. In reality, the activist community in Memphis is relatively small. Strickland operates with twenty-four hour police security both for himself and his home. His interaction with the activist community is minimal and completely at his discretion.[47] Yet, Jackson's rhetoric emphasizes these disputes to such a degree that one might think Strickland is plagued by harassment at every turn.

The invocation closes with Jackson's submission to the will of God and another elevation of Strickland. In order to defeat the aforementioned plague, Jackson pleads that God "not allow it to come between us but that we will come together and work with our CEO." Jackson's Pentecostal faith calls him to fully submit to the will of the leader and disassociate himself from any civic concerns. He leans on God to stitch the community together in order to support the mayor. Again, calling Strickland the "CEO" of the city, Jackson situates the constituency as employees meant to serve the will of the boss. For the pastor, those employees are denied any

agency of their own. They are to uplift and uphold the leadership of the mayor and leave the rest to God.

The visual performance of the prayer is an embodiment of Jackson's beliefs. He approaches the dais with no notes in hand and calls on the audience to bow their heads. Jackson closes his eyes seemingly with great effort and squeezes them tightly closed throughout the whole invocation. Jackson is literally enacting a blind faith. He does not want to be concerned with daily political life, so he cannot spend time planning remarks ahead of time; instead, his unprepared remarks seek divine inspiration to offer the proper words for such an occasion. In addition to placing a blind faith in God, Jackson's closed-eye prayer embodies turning a blind eye to the many problems that he so easily glosses over or omits in his prayer. He chooses not to see any injustices performed by the mayor's administration. Jackson's tone toggles between admonishment and awe. He condemns those that stand in the way of the mayor, and he reveres the man himself. He preaches blind fealty to the man and civic distance from resistance.

Conclusion

In the days following the invocation, local press failed to make any mention of Rev. Ivory Jackson's invocation, but that was the whole point. Strickland did not select Jackson because he wanted a preacher who would make headlines. His team chose Jackson because they knew based on his religious background that Jackson would be the kind of preacher that would shun such controversy. Jackson's prayer was one that preached fealty to power. His call for unity behind the solitary leader was one that was predictable and quiet. Throughout the prayer, Jackson relies on respectability rhetoric built on an acceptance of notions of racial hierarchy. The message that he delivers is meant to facilitate the passivity of his audience. He wants his audience to submit fully to the leadership and agenda of Mayor Jim Strickland. His Pentecostal

faith instructs that God has commanded such fealty to civic leaders because the faithful should only be concerned with matters of heavenly salvation rather than immediate justice. Jackson does not tolerate personal agendas, protest, or disruption. He expects a community that has no motive other than uphold and uplift for the man, not any agenda for equity. For Jackson, these activist ideas are not part of his beloved community. They are rabble-rousers that disrupt and distract the faithful from keeping their focus on God. In the pastor's view, man has no agency on earth because earth is only a holding place until the true eternal life begins in the afterlife. It is only God's will that can act.

This lack of agency holds a deep connection to the pastor's Pentecostal beliefs. He preaches that the material should not inspire worry from among believers. His trust that God will handle the affairs of the world and that believers can only prepare themselves for the afterlife takes away any ability for his congregation to enact change in the present. Jackson's respectability creates a distance between the Black community that makes up over 60% of the Memphis population and the White mayor that governs them. Jackson never mentions race or any of the inequities facing African Americans in the city. His rhetoric erases those struggles. In that erasure, he denies them a voice or agency for change. This dismissal further reinforces underlying notions of social invalidity by making such problems simply disappear. By repeatedly instructing Memphians to come together in unity rather than embrace those things that pull us apart, Jackson is essentially telling Memphians to grin and bear the injustices that they see because the mayor is inherently superior. Jackson spends a great deal of time elevating the mayor to a standing higher than he truly merits. If viewed from the other perspective, instead of lifting up the mayor, Jackson could be considered holding down those inferior people whose ideas are less vital to the mayor's vision. He envisions a population with no agency, one that is

incommunicable with the mayor because it cannot understand all the machinations that drive decisions until they "are in that position." He further dehumanizes the population by explaining that anyone who resists the mayor is committing an unforgivable sin. The pastor portrays those that stand up to the mayor and resist certain policies as acting against God and on behalf of the evil. He is literally demonizing certain community members.

The connection between respectability rhetoric and racial hierarchies needs further research in the Communication Studies field. Too often do scholars situate theories of racial inferiority in the past, and in failing to acknowledge that these issues are still alive today, a postracial vision of America is able to permeate still today. That inferiority is internalized in respectability rhetoric and is given an audience in many religious institutions. While respectability has progress as its goal, it offers only an individual a step ahead via conformity to an ever-changing White standard, rather than disrupting a system of oppression that discriminates against a whole class of Black people in any number of ways. When ideas of inferiority become internalized, respectability rhetoric processes and redistributes those ideas through language about personal wardrobe, vocalics, and conformity. The problem is that the conformity is to a system that was designed from its start to oppress and control certain groups. Respectability offers a façade that audiences see as critique of themselves rather than of a system. It places the blame on the marginalized individual rather than institution that is infatuated with self-replication and maintaining the status quo.

Jackson's audience in the room, and in Whitehaven more broadly, does not wish to critique those institutions of power. The system is treating them just fine as successful middle class families and bureaucrats. The people in the room are not the ones being demonized. The other-ing that takes place in Jackson's invocation is for another group, those not in the room, but

in the streets protesting and marching. The audience in Whitehaven is filled with supporters of the mayor and members of the Black middle class that are satisfied with their place in the world. Jackson's immediate audience buys into his message because they are in certain positions of privilege and power that allow them to hold such beliefs. In fact, many in the audience went on to endorse the mayor and support his campaign. The next chapter looks at a different perspective. The preacher delivering that message comes from a small and impoverished community that is struggle to make ends meet. It is led by one of the mayor's chief antagonists, and the message delivered by him is quite oppositional.

---

[1] WREG Staff, "Mayor Strickland Gives 'State of the City' Address in Whitehaven," *WREG.com*, January 28, 2019, https://wreg.com/news/live-mayor-strickland-gives-state-of-the-city-address-in-whitehaven/.

[2] Jamie Munks, "Strickland Announces Community Catalyst Fund To Spur Development," *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), January 28, 2019, https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/news/2019/01/28/memphis-mayor-jim-strickland-delivered-his-state-city-address-whitehaven/2667029002/.

[3] Erica Horton, "More Than Graceland: Whitehaven's 200-Year History," *High Ground News* (Memphis, TN), January 11, 2018, https://www.highgroundnews.com/features/WhitehavenHistory.aspx.

[4] Melissa V. Harris-Lacewell, "Righteous Politics: The Role of the Black Church in Contemporary Politics," *CrossCurrents* 57, no. 2 (Summer 2007), 180.

[5] Kerry Pimblott, *Faith in Black Power: Religion, Race, and Resistance in Cairo, Illinois* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2017), 20.

[6] Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "Together and in Harness: Women's Traditions in the Sanctified Church," *Signs*, 10, no. 4 (Summer, 1985), 678-699

[7] Christopher A. House, "Crying for Justice The #BLACKLIVES MATTER Religious Rhetoric of Bishop T.D. Jakes," *Southern Communication Journal* 83, Issue 1 (2018), 13-27.

[8] Julia Kirk Blackwelder, "Southern White Fundamentalists and the Civil Rights Movement," *Phylon* 40, no. 4,1(979), 341.

[9] House, 15.

[10] Arthur H. Townsend, "Obedient Under Authority," *Church of God Evangel*, June 1965, 7.

[11] L. Calvin Bacon, "Eyewitness at a Funeral," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, no 2827 (July 1968), 20-21.

[12] Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002): 80.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Mark L. Chapman, *Christianity on Trial: African-American Religious Thought Before and After Black Power* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1996): 4.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid. 8.

[17] Kerry Pimblott, *Faith in Black Power: Religion, Race, and Resistance in Cairo, Illinois* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2017): 101.

[18] Ibid. 79.

[19] Ibid. 101.

[20] Ivory Jackson, "Welcome to Faith Temple Ministries Church," FTMC.us. 2020, https://www.ftmc.us/.

[21] "Our Vision," FTMC.us, 2020, https://www.ftmc.us/our-vision.

[22] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[23] Rhana A. Gittens, "'What If I Am a Woman?': Black Feminist Rhetorical Strategies of Intersectional Identification and Resistance in Maria Stewart's Texts," *Southern Communication Journal* 83, no. 5 (November 2018), 313.

[24] Ibid. 272.

[25] Booker T. Washington, "Cotton States Exposition Address," In *American Rhetorical Discourse*. eds. Ronald F. Reid and James F. Klumpp (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2005), 504-508.

[26] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York, NY: Bantam Classics, 1989): 36.

[27] Brittany Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017): 63-64.

[28] Kirt H. Wilson, "The Racial Politics of Imitation in the Nineteenth Century," *Quarterly Journal of Speech,* 89, no. 2 (2003), 90.

[29] Ibid. 104-05.

[30] Nadrea Njoku, Malika Butler, and Cameron C. Beatty, "Reimagining the Historically Black College and University (HBCU) Environment: Exposing Race Secrets and the Binding Chains of Respectability and Othermothering," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 30 no. 8 (2017), 786.

[31] Cooper, *Beyond Respectability*, 64.

[32] Njoku, Butler, and Beatty, "Reimagining the Historically Black College and University (HBCU) Environment," 786.

[33] Bill Cosby, "Address at the NAACP on the 50th Anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education," *American Rhetoric*, Delivered May 17, 2004, https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/billcosbypoundcakespeech.htm.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Jasper Williams, "Rev. Jasper Williams Jr. Delivers Eulogy at Aretha Franklin's Funeral," YouTube.com, September 4, 2018, https://youtu.be/y_Shz3ADsYU.

[36] Annette Madlock Gatison, "Michelle Obama and the Representation of Respectability," *Women & Language* 40, no 1 (Winter 2017/2018), 102.

[37] Ibid. 103.

[38] Eric King Watts, "Critical Cosmopolitanism, Antagonism, and Social Suffering," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 10, no. 1 (2015), 276.

[39] Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010): 45.

[40] Watts, "Critical Cosmopolitanism, Antagonism, and Social Suffering," 277.

[41] Frantz Fanon, Richard Philcox, and Anthony Appiah, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 124.

[42] Ibid. 155.

[43] Brittney Cooper, "The Racial Politics of Time," *TedWomen2016*, October 2016, https://www.ted.com/talks/brittney_cooper_the_racial_politics_of_time/discussion?language=en.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ivory Jackson, "Invocation," YouTube.com, Delivered January 28, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDmaB8FXIj8, unless otherwise noted, all Jackson quotations are from this source.

[46] Matthew 12:30-32.

[47] Antonio de Velasco, "Can Memphis' Mayor Honor MLK While Taking Stands MLK Would Have Opposed?," *MLK50* (Memphis, TN), February 23, 2018, https://mlk50.com/can-memphis-mayor-honor-mlk-while-taking-stands-mlk-would-have-opposed-62a389170787.

CHAPTER 2

"AMEN AND ASHE:"

THE RHETORIC OF CIVIC FEALTY AS RESISTANCE IN THE INVOCATION OF REV. DR. EARLE J. FISHER

While Memphis Mayor Jim Strickland used his State of the City address to launch a re-election bid, Shelby County Mayor Lee Harris faced no such political battle looming beyond his February 13, 2019 address. In fact, the speech that Harris delivered was the first State of the County update that the freshly elected mayor offered during his tenure. Still, Harris' election carried certain community expectations. Just six months into his term, Harris bore the weight of being the face of Black politics in the region. On a national level, White senators and White congressmen represent the area, while more locally, White Mayor Jim Strickland led the City of Memphis. Harris had a legacy as an advocate for minority citizens and issues particularly in his role as Minority Leader of the Tennessee State Senate immediately prior to his election to mayor. With that weight on his shoulders, the mayor's selection of Rev. Dr. Earle J. Fisher to deliver the invocation prior to his first State of the County seemed apt and intentional.

Fisher is the pastor of an activist church that rhetorically centers Blackness. While the Abyssinian Missionary Baptist Church does not have a stand-alone website, it has a very active Facebook page that proclaims it be to "The Blackest Church in Memphis and Shelby County."[1] Photographs on the page show Rev. Dr. Fisher preaching in traditional West African dashikis. The "About" section of the page marks a strong contrast with Ivory Jackson's church. The first point describing Fisher's church reads, "We are committed to the cause of social justice through

Christ Jesus on behalf of the least, the last and the lost."[2] A final note exclaims "we are committed to the uplift, education and empowerment of the family and local community." The page describes the congregation as a "'growing church' in a 'declining church' culture. We are becoming a gifted, innovative, inspired and informed congregation." The page offers readers post series like "#BlackHistoryFactOfTheDay" and a "#WomanOfTheWeek" who has contributed to African American progress in one fashion or another. Abyssinian Missionary Baptist Church stands in stark contrast from Faith Temple Ministries Church because of its commitment to immediate and material social justice and its embrace and celebration of Black culture. These positions not only differentiate the church from Jackson's, but also they embrace a kind of radical prophetic Black liberation theology found in the teachings Albert Cleage, Jr. and James H. Cone. Those liberating tenets are the foundation of Fisher's ministry, and he puts them in practice both inside and beyond his sanctuary's walls. Fisher and his church clearly prioritize civic responsibility over notions of fealty to local leaders.

Fisher may be better known in Memphis as a racial justice activist than as a pastor. Alongside County Commissioner Tami Sawyer, Fisher led the campaign to remove Confederate monuments from Memphis's public parks, [3] Fisher is also the "lead organizer" of local voter turnout operation #UpTheVote901.[4] The pastor has gained perhaps the widest visibility through his multiple opinionated-editorials featured in Memphis media outlets like *MLK50*, *The Daily Memphian*, *The Tri-State Defender*, and the *Commercial Appeal*. Notably in these editorials, Fisher makes Memphis Mayor Jim Strickland and his leadership circle a frequent target of critique.

The two men have quite the adversarial relationship. Fisher has written of Strickland's implementing a policy of:

> Sociopolitical gerrymandering [that] does not care about increasing accountability, access to voting power, and public participation. Sociopolitical gerrymandering does not give a damn about democracy. It is only concerned about what is politically advantageous for a particular group, party or individual. It taxes the majority but represents the minority.[5]

Fisher frequently critiques the Strickland administration and its treatment of activists along racial lines: "There have been a series of events, of protests, where we have seen law enforcement treat protestors with a high level of violent aggression. But we only see this when the protestors are predominantly people of color."[6] Regarding the mayor's failure to act swiftly to remove Confederate monuments, Fisher lambasted the administration as "with each passing day, leaning closer and closer toward White supremacist apologetics and sympathizers."[7] Fisher's repeated comments have drawn a strong reaction from the mayor. The mayor placed him on a "blacklist" requiring an escort and restricting access to City Hall and other publically owned property (which led to a messy and public lawsuit that found the City at fault).[8] Strickland responded to some of Fisher's publicized comments with what one local news source called "a sternly worded rebuke."[9] In that statement, Strickland called Fisher's comments "divisive, empty rhetoric…a lie at best. At worst, they are an attempt to divide this city with the kind of racial politics that we should all reject."[10] Shelby County Mayor Lee Harris' decision to include Fisher as a prominent participant in his first major public event was one that situated him firmly on the side of the activists as opposed to Strickland's postracial vision.

Fisher's construction of civic fealty builds from a foundation of Afrocentricity and Black liberation theology to empower his audience to speak truth to power, to use *parrhesia*. The audience at the Harris event was quite different from the Strickland audience that witnessed

Jackson's invocation. Harris' event was held at the swanky Halloran Centre in downtown Memphis. The modern theater space is located in the county's central business district and seated over 350 people. Locating the ceremony next to prominent businesses rather than in a residential neighborhood gave the event an opportunity to speak to a radically different kind of audience. Where Jackson spoke to a community of everyday citizens, Fisher preached to the wealthy elite, not only of Memphis, but of the surrounding suburbs as well. Further, such an audience offered an opportunity for Fisher to utilize his invocation as a kind of *parrhesia* to the region's power brokers. The pastor's invocation upends Ivory Jackson's rhetoric of civic fealty. Fisher's calls for submission to no one person. Rather, the pastor urges commitment to the civic cause of racial justice and equity. The only fealty Fisher demands is to ideals not idols.

This chapter proceeds in multiple parts. It begins by offering a review of scholarly conversations about *parrhesia*, Black liberation theology, and Afrocentricity. Next, it presents a close textual analysis of Rev. Dr. Earle J. Fisher's invocation that precedes Mayor Harris' State of the County. Finally, it details implications of how such an analysis can provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between the rhetoric of the Black church and local government.

Parrhesia

The idea of *parrhesia* dates back to fifth century BCE, but it was revived in academic circles with Michel Foucault's 1983 lectures that were published in 2001 under the title *Fearless Speech*.[11] In that book, Foucault describes *parrhesia* as speech that is distinct in its frankness, truth, criticism, danger, and duty.[12] In practice, *parrhesia* is an attempt at critical truth-telling spurred by a moral obligation that supersedes any risk of harm. Rhetorician Hamilton Bean describes how *parrhesiastic* speech "comes from 'below' and is directed 'above.' In other words, elites generally cannot speak *parrhesia* to common citizens because it is not 'dangerous' for the

powerful to criticize the less powerful."[13] In order to offer *parrhesia*, a rhetor must be in some jeopardy. As such, Foucault argues, "Real *parrhesia*, in its positive, critical sense does not exist where democracy exists."[14] He explains that in democracy there is no such true risk, and that the any speech that challenges the demos will be unintelligible. However, rhetorician David R. Novak counters "*Parrhesia* can exist in a democratic society and…should be a quality emulated by current speakers and demanded by those who listen."[15] He explains, "*Parrhesia* ought to be a standard for democratic discourses."[16] The choice of "ought" in Novak's writing implies that such a practice of *parrhesia* is not yet, in fact, the reality of today's democracy as evinced by Ivory Jackson's failure to call out systemic failures during his invocation.

The effort to make that ideal reality materialize demands a unique approach. Rhetorical scholar Kelly Happe captures what might be a middle way between Foucault's incommunicable democratic *parrhesia* and Novak's idealistic *parrhesia*. She describes an ethical *parrhesia* that "is coincident with a mode of life that can open up possibilities for frank speech not dependent on conventions of intelligibility, which is to say, possibilities that will transform, not alter, and so can open up to an other way of life. It is speech that will overcome ideology and fear."[17] She expands her reasoning to posit "*parrhesia* is, then, not frank 'speech' in the conventional sense as much as it is an opening up, a rupture."[18] For Happe, *parrhesia* becomes an opportunity to be heard and to be recognized. It creates a possibility for intelligibility that might otherwise be foreclosed. *Parrhesia* delivers a way of presenting that which may be invisible and gives voice to a multitude of perspectives.

Parrhesia offers rhetors an opportunity to reveal that which is ignored or denied by those in power. The moral obligation to stand up for what is right fuels this act of frank speech. Among the key elements of *parrhesia* are the power dynamics and the ability to break with the standard

or create a rupture that makes space for intelligibility. In his invocation, Rev. Dr. Earle Fisher uses his platform to create such a rupture. While he is, in the words of Bean, "below" the government leaders to whom he speaks, Fisher introduces a truth that has been obfuscated or denied by government leaders. *Parrhesia* refuses fealty to leaders. In its true form, it is always an act of resistance. In order to find that rupture and make his message intelligible to this audience, Fisher uses the language of religion; however, Fisher uses a type of religion that empowers those that excluded by those in power.

Parrhesia stands in contradiction to conformity, demanding material, earthly action. In that way, it was not a tool available for a preacher like Ivory Jackson. Philosophy scholar Carlos Lévy notes *parrhesia* "can't be dissociated from desires: a *paresiastes* is a man who never suppresses his desires and who expresses them without any censure."[19] These desires demand an immediate satisfaction. *Paresiastes* are unwilling to wait until the afterlife for change. In this way, Jackson's Pentecostal theology forecloses *parrhesia* while Fisher's prophetic Black liberation theology demands it. Orators offer frank speech because they witness an injustice. The speech is delivered to power from a lower position because it finds root in a moral outrage that must be corrected. Much like the way that rhetorician Jonathan Rossing[20] explains that orators often frame *parrhesia* in comedy in order to make its demands more palatable to their audience, preachers frame their *parrhesia* in a religious context in order to give their moral outrage a broader ethos. Religion becomes the vehicle to make the message understood.

Prophetic Black Liberation Theology

Prophetic Black liberation theology has existed in the pulpit for many decades, perhaps most notably in the teachings of Albert Cleage, Jr.,[21] but it entered academic conversations with James H. Cone's 1969 *Black Theology and Black Power*.[22] Rhetorician Andre E. Johnson writes

"since then, many have followed Cone's example by extending the liberation ethos and the reclaiming of agency to those who have been oppressed and marginalized."[23] Religious scholar Dwight N. Hopkins declares that the book "symbolized a radical shift in theological studies and started the first generation of Black theologians in the contemporary period of African American religious scholarship."[24] Cone describes the mission of the work to be an "initial attempt to identify *liberation* as the heart of the Christian gospel and *Blackness* as the primary mode of God's presence."[25] This iteration of Black liberation theology overlaps with the African American prophetic tradition that Johnson describes as "discourse grounded in the sacred community and rooted in a community experience that offers a critique of existing communities and traditions by charging and challenging society to live up to the ideals espoused while offering celebration and hope for a brighter future."[26] Such characterization of the role of faith falls directly in line with Rev. Fisher's focus on social justice and the immediate materiality of faith in action. For practitioners of prophetic Black liberation theology, the message must connect to the circumstances that the faithful encounter in daily life.

One of the primary emphases in the rhetoric of prophetic Black liberation theology is the *kairotic* nature of the rhetorical situation. Rhetorician Gareth Pauley defines *kairos* as "a timely response to the situation…fitness for the occasion…[or] the opportune moment or timeliness of discourse."[27] This relevance to the moment is essential in prophetic Black liberation theology because there is a need to recognize the challenge at hand. In order for Christianity to be theorized as an answer, it must first recognize the constraints and problems facing its followers today. Cone defines the task of the theology as "one that speaks from within the covenant community with the sole purpose of making the gospel meaningful to the times in which men live."[28] He later theorizes that "to follow means that the Church is more than a talking or

resolution-passing community. Its talk is backed up with relevant involvement in the world as a witness, through action, that what it says is in fact true."[29] Cone is describing the *kairotic* nature of prophetic Black liberation theology: it must be relevant and timely in order to be effective. For these believers, fealty to God demands action in civic life.

Much of Black liberation theology focuses on an accusatory disavowal of the status quo and the inherent racism of existing religious and governmental institutions—both White and Black. Cone argues, "If the Church is to remain faithful to its Lord, it must make a decisive break with the structure of this society by launching a vehement attack on the evils of racism in all forms. It must become *prophetic*, demanding a radical change in the interlocking structures of this society."[30] Communication scholar David A. Frank asserts that the liberating prophetic tradition "presumes that anger is a proper mood to adopt in the face of injustice."[31] The underlying assertion is that complacency and passivity have corrupted the true meaning and intent of the faith, and those two allowances can no longer be tolerated. To further emphasize the wayward opinions on race within the church, Cone posits that Jesus Christ was Black.

The belief in a Black messiah is a necessary and empowering component of the African American prophetic liberation theology that grants African Americans broader agency. This claim finds roots in Cone's belief that "the Black community is an oppressed community primarily because of its Blackness; hence the Christological importance of Jesus must be found in his Blackness. If he is not Black as we are, then the resurrection has little significance for our times."[32] In a later book, Cone writes, "Black theology believes that is not only appropriate but necessary to begin the doctrine of God with an insistence on God's blackness. The Blackness of God means that God has made the oppressed condition God's own condition."[33] Cone finds that having a Black God "means that the essence of the nature of God is to be found in the concept of

liberation."[34] By identifying Jesus as Black, Cone and his followers situate a distinct agency and worthiness that is denied or made subservient to an otherwise White conception of Jesus. In other words, the African American prophetic liberating tradition preaches a theology that promises a full range of access to Black believers. It denies traditional iconography of a White Jesus and, instead, provides representation in the holiest and highest levels of Black potentiality. This rhetoric of prophetic Black liberation theology moves the position of African Americans away from the intra-racial hierarchy assumed by respectability politics and into a fully realized celebration of Black excellence through the rhetoric of Afrocentricity. Afrocentricity is the tool that preachers use to insert a message of racial advancement and equity into the moral language of religion. Preachers practice *parrhesia* to reveal the society's failure to reckon with its mistreatment of African Americans. Placing that message in the context of religion lends the argument an ethos that means dismissing Black excellence equates to dismissing Christianity altogether. As such, fealty to a racialized social stratification is not only a civic sin, but also a religious one. Blackness must be centered.

Afrocentricity

Afrocentricity correlates directly to prophetic Black liberation theology. It is the rhetorical strategy that finds voice in the *parrhesiastic* language of liberation theology. Communication theorist Molefi Asante defines the notion of Afrocentricity as "a mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values, and perspectives predominate….Afrocentricity seeks to enshrine the idea that Blackness itself is a trope of ethics. Thus, to be Black is to be against all forms of oppression."[35] Scholar Karen Strother-Jordan describes Afrocentricity "as a rhetorical redefinition of history that promotes liberation and self-worth among African American thought."[36] Asante's critiques of Christianity share frequent

overlap with Cone's liberating beliefs. Asante writes "the most crippling effect of Islam as well as Christianity for us may well be the adoption of non-African customs and behaviors, some of which are in direct conflict with our traditional values."[37] This claim runs parallel to Cone's description of the White theology being thrust upon African Americans and his critique of moderates who simply chose to overlook the fault of the religious structure and the way that it continues to oppress and divide.

Afrocentricity posits a stark contrast in African American consciousness. Asante explicitly describes "two aspects of consciousness: (1) toward oppression, and (2) toward victory."[38] This assertion also connects with prophetic theology. Cone, through Alvin Poussaint, describes the strong connection between a Black theology and Black power explaining, "Integration, as commonly understood is nothing but 'a subterfuge for white supremacy'…This means Blacks accepting the white man's view of himself, Blacks saying, 'Yes, [we are] inferior.'"[39] Black power lives in Black pride, and Afrocentric rhetoric is the root of that pride. Neither prophetic Black liberation theology, nor Afrocentricity, tolerates equivocation or racial subservience.

Afrocentric rhetoric allows for new bases of definition. Communication scholars Felicia Walker and Deric Greene note, "Afrocentric rhetoric reflects self-definition and contributes intellectually to the world's history as a component of multicultural realities."[40] This self-definition resists the conformity and assimilation of respectability rhetoric. Rhetorician Cecil Blake asserts the functionality of Afrocentric messages offers the Black community a "self-identity [that] is restored to the point that they do not need to imitate the oppressor in order to gain freedom."[41]As Walker and Greene note, "In essence, Afrocentric discourse is deliberate in its intent and inextricable from its African roots. Often assessed harshly against hegemonic

standards because of its elements of Black communication, the style in Afrocentric discourse persists and continues to represent, sustain, and reflect African and African American culture."[42]

Afrocentricity is inherently rhetorical in nature. Asante situates "liberation from captivity of racist language [as] the first order of the intellectual. *There can be no freedom until there is a freedom of the mind*."[43] The theory is centered on a reimagining of identity through language. It stands in contrast to the conformity of respectability by citing that the "enslavement of the mind is the most pernicious kind of enslavement because the person so enslaved will never be able to see clearly for himself or herself. Such a person runs after assimilation as if it will resolve all mental problems; it is the beginning of mental death."[44] The sacrifice of self that undergirds respectability is incompatible with the pride and self-worth that derives from centering the Black perspective instead of the White.

Afrocentricity has been a subject of contention in the field of rhetoric. Scholars like Celeste Condit and John Lucaites find Afrocentricity to be too essentializing by taking "the principle of multiculturalism to its furthest extreme."[45] They go on to assert, "Afrocentrism is fundamentally a critique of other cultures…Afrocentrists have not yet fully spelled out the solution to the problem."[46] Mark McPhail acknowledges Condit and Lucaites point but seeks to reframe Afrocentrism beyond the essentialism that they describe by instead noting that "the most *essential* ground of the Afrocentric perspective [is] the recognition of complementarity as the foundation of human thought and action."[47] McPhail calls not for a superiority of African Americans, but for a recognition of the "essential *coherence* of human thought, language, and action that transcends differences of identity and culture."[48] This vision of Afrocentricity extends the invitation beyond a narrow, African-only perspective; instead, it views Afrocentricity as a source of pride and a method by which equality can be realized. Fisher's invocation embodies

this broader vision because it does not speak exclusively to African Americans; rather it seeks to validate an African American existence in the face of White hegemony and posits all people as equal. Afrocentricity's critique of other cultures is not one that is without merit. The reason that Afrocentricity finds footing in the community is that it acknowledges a tradition of decentering and dehumanizing Blackness. Rather than forego Black culture, Afrocentricity celebrates it. The solution posed by Afrocentricity is not Black above all else. Instead, Afrocentricity is one method of centering a marginalized voice. As McPhail posits, the ultimate goal of Afrocentricity is not to say that Black is best. Rather it is a way of getting to a universal level of equity. The Afrocentric perspective centers Blackness because as the Combahee River Collective eloquently states, "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all systems of oppression."[49] In other words, African Americans have always been last to receive equality, so centering that perspective in the mission for equality is the only way forward. For true and lasting progress to occur, racial hierarchies must be displaced by a new social order that fosters racial harmony and equity.

Civic Fealty as Resistance in Earle J. Fisher's Invocation[50]

Rev. Dr. Earle J. Fisher's invocation is one of power and accusation. He reveals the truth of the social and economic inequities that exist in the region. He offers a prayer that lends pride and voice to the area's African American community. He does so through offering a prayer rooted in an Afrocentric foundation, given intelligibility through the religious discourse of prophetic Black liberation theology, in order to deliver a *parrhesiastic* message before the county's major power brokers. Fisher disrupts notions of social stratification and preaches that fealty to God demands action in the public square.

Fisher's rhetoric immediately situates him as a practitioner of prophetic Black liberation. He opens his prayer by drawing a distinction between two different conceptions of God:

> We invoke the presence of God in this place, but we do not call on the God of conformity or complacency. We do not petition the throne of a God of injustice and inequity. We do not summon a God who builds walls of terror and hate. We call on the one who is a bridge over troubled waters. We do not beckon for a deity that is divine in name only but powerless over the evils that befall us. So we call on the God of justice, the God of truth, the God of liberation, and the God of love. We call on the God that has sustained black life in this country for 400 years.

He crafts a dichotomous view of Christianity. He makes the audience choose between the God who Fisher casts in a positive light and the God who Fisher implies others have used to divide and demean the community. Fisher's rejection of "the God of conformity and complacency" is a direct challenge to the deity posited by pastors like Ivory Jackson. The message that these pastors preach is one of submission and patience. Fisher will not abide any such tolerance for passivity. He continues to distinguish between notions of God by calling attention to the problems plaguing the community.

His rhetorical choice to "not beckon for a deity that is divine in name only but powerless over the evils that befall us" directly castigates those that try to separate religious life from earthly reality. Fisher does not pray to "a God of injustice and inequity." Noting that such a God exists, however, Fisher acknowledges that there are systemic issues haunting his community. These obstacles are material and immediate. Fisher does not want to invite the presence of a God who wants him to ignore these obstructions, but, rather, he prays to one who will help conquer

them. Fisher's God is one who demands action and change in current moment. This characterization is of a God that is not separate from the oppressed but is actively walking among them.

Calling "on the God of justice, the God of truth, the God of liberation, and the God of love" situates religion as a site of *parrhesia*. Fisher wants to speak truth to power. He wants to liberate people from oppressive regimes of dominance. He wants to present a God that loves them for who they are. This perspective stands in contradiction to Jackson's embrace of respectability rhetoric. Where Jackson wanted a congregation whose individuality disappeared and melted into the mainstream, Fisher's constitutive rhetoric drafts a congregation that worships a God who loves and fights for justice in the face of power. He describes a God who promises equity and liberty and offers truth as a method for creating such a world.

Fisher's rhetoric does not mask historical or systemic flaws. While Ivory Jackson praises the "great history" of Memphis, Tennessee, Fisher calls upon "the God that has sustained black life in this country for 400 years." This line draws the audience immediately to the reality that the ancestors of the African Americans came to this country as enslaved people. Fisher does not try to run from the harsh truth facing Black people in Memphis and Shelby County today. He connects their problems to a legacy of oppression that dates back for centuries. Fisher posits a world where problems must be acknowledged and faced head on rather than hoped and prayed away. Such a world takes an Afrocentric approach to reality. He puts the lived experience of Black people center stage for his prayer. He refuses to adopt a White perspective for his invocation because he recognizes that such a perspective is where many of the issues plaguing his community find roots.

In the next section of the invocation, the pastor's *parrhesia* antagonizes those institutions that operate with a façade of righteousness but tacitly endorse a legacy of oppression. He pleads for action in the face of exploitation. Again, focusing on truth, the pastor prays "we ask You, O God, to make us honest about where we are and what we must do to get where you desire and have designed us to be." That he must implore God to compel honesty connotes a world that is imbued with dishonesty. Fisher acknowledges the deception that permeates the current political moment and demands a correction. He continues, "we rebuke our impulses for smoke and mirrors, political expediency, and other forms of exploitative advancement." Continuing his mission to describe the debilitating inauthenticity of the current moment, Fisher calls attention to corruption. He forces his audience to realize that the current system of government allows those in power to take advantage of those without. He describes a precarious world in which the most vulnerable are used to give more influence to those at the top. In describing this negative reality, Fisher notes a world that results from the promulgation of the particular kind of rhetoric of civic fealty given a stage in Ivory Jackson's invocation.

Fisher uses the vehicle of a beloved martyr to make his frank speech more palatable to his audience of powerful business leaders and government officials. Fisher closes this section with implicit references to Civil Rights icon Martin Luther King, Jr. Fisher exclaims, "We summon the spirit of courage and maladjustment as You send us further into this season of legitimate discontent." The idea of creative maladjustment is one that King has relied upon a number of times throughout his career and tacitly relates to a kind of *parrhesia*. For example, in a 1967 address to the American Psychological Association, King describes his idea of creative maladjustment as a way of standing up in the face of injustice. King explains that, for African Americans, "the worst aspect of their oppression was the their inability to question and defy the

fundamental precepts of the larger society. Negroes have been loath in the past to hurl any fundamental challenges because they were coerced and conditioned into thinking within that context of dominant White ideology."[51] Creative maladjustment stands as a method for the oppressed because "to lose illusions is to gain truth."[52] Fisher again associates with King through his reference to "legitimate discontent." This phrase is taken directly from the Civil Rights leader's 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech, in which King declares, "This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality…Those who hope that the Negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual."[53] Where Ivory Jackson relies on biblical allusions to lend an ethos to his invocation, Earle Fisher's prayer draws upon earthly leaders making the struggle that much more tangible to his audience.

The next section of the invocation, which happens to be the longest, incorporates all three of the rhetorical tools that guide the pastor's message. He continues his *parrhesiastic* condemnation of empty rhetoric by pleading, "May we use our time here today not to pander or pontificate with platitudes. Challenge us to commit to plans that bring about the structural and systemic change that causes Your will to be done on Earth as it is in Heaven." With that remark, Fisher decries that words are not enough. For meaningful progress to be achieved, true structural change must occur. This attitude directly correlates to James H. Cone's call for true faith to have a tangible impact on the world. Cone critiques the modern moment observing:

> The mistake of the modern church is to identify the work of God's Spirit in the believer either with private moments of ecstasy or with individual purification from sin…This is a hopelessly impoverished view. The working

> of God's Spirit in the life of the believer means an involvement in the world where men are suffering.[54]

This perspective facilitates Fisher's call to move beyond a religion—and a government—of the mind alone and towards institutions that take action to improve the conditions in this world. The pastor continues his critique of power by pleading for his audience to "denounce, decry, and condemn mediocrity." Fisher then dictates exactly what such progress would look like. Showing how civic fealty can also serve as resistance, Fisher reserves his fealty for ideas not idols.

Fisher's *parrhesia* does not only list problems, but also it offers solutions. The pastor calls for a "pledge to embrace the majestic and miraculous mission of fair and living wages, truly equitable contracting, reasonable access to healthcare, education that empowers and does not exploit." With this line, Fisher takes his ideas out of the theoretical and lists specific changes that need to be executed in order to create a more just and fair society. For Fisher, the success of a few at the expense of the many has led to a society that in turmoil. He demands that the situation be rectified. In this section, Fisher directly calls out some of the failures of the Strickland administration. Where Strickland celebrates an increase in women and minority owned business contracting with the city, Fisher's call for "truly equitable contracting" drawing the audience to recall that Strickland's numbers had to be retracted as there had actually been a decrease in such contracts. Fisher continues his tacit attacks on the Strickland administration by petitioning for government "to be much better than basic." This remark is a jab at Strickland's previous campaign motto of "Brilliant at the Basics."[55]

Fisher's commitment to Afrocentricity comes to light in this section as well. In addition to focusing on issues that impede African American progress in the city like poor access to medical providers and unjust wages, the pastor calls for a celebration of Blackness. He prays for

an espousal of "the full range of beauty that embraces Blackness and diversity as an asset not a liability." Where Ivory Jackson failed to include even a passing mention to Blackness or issues that the community faces, Fisher directly summons an endorsement of Black beauty and pride. By calling attention not only to the problems that obstruct Black progress, but also to the strengths that this community has within itself, Fisher's Afrocentric attitude shines a light on a facet of the region that is too often overlooked by those in power. Fisher closes this section of the invocation by calling for submission "to the sovereign God who demands that we love our neighbors in North Memphis, South Memphis, Millington, and Hickory Hill, like we love ourselves in HarborTown, Downtown, Germantown, and Collierville. May we not rest until we do this." The first four neighborhoods mentioned are predominantly African American neighborhoods. They are typically the last to receive incentivized funding and public development projects, while the final four neighborhoods are overwhelmingly White neighborhoods that receive the vast majority of public investment. Fisher's reminder that in God's eyes each of these neighborhoods is equal acts as a counter to Ivory Jackson's racial inferiority that submits that these Black neighborhoods are less worthy.

Fisher's final section concludes the invocation with a flurry of poetic imagery that serves two functions. It first enacts the Afrocentric Black excellence and beauty of which he speaks. Second, it continues the *parrhesiastic* examination of institutional flaws. Both of these functions are delivered through religious language meant to expand their intelligibility to an audience that might otherwise find such a disrupting message incommunicable. Fisher prays, "May the brooks of our bigotry and hatred dry up so that justice may roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream. Deliver us from our own dysfunction and deception and guide us into Your path eternal, God of our weary years, God of our silent tears." Fisher's rhetoric continues to focus on

discrimination with references to "bigotry and hatred." He pleads for salvation from man's persistent "dysfunction and deception." He admits that the efforts for equity have made him "weary" and brought "silent tears." Fisher does not deny that African Americans have faced a long and uphill road to get to their current position in society, but at the same time, he refuses to tolerate any moderation or acceptance of the status quo because there is still more to climb. Where Ivory Jackson hides these issues and calls for unity around a single leader, Fisher does not posit any messianic hero around which the community can rally. He understands that the issues are bigger than any one individual, so his rhetoric does not call for a savior. Where Jackson expends so much effort elevating Strickland, Fisher does not even make a single reference to Shelby County Mayor Lee Harris. Fisher's language does not concern itself with submission to any one individual. Instead, he calls for systemic and institutional change. He does not identify Harris as the sole person responsible for moving the community forward. Instead, Fisher continually calls on "we" and "us" to take action in both mind and body.

The invocation closes with a reaffirmation of the centrality of Blackness in the church and in the community. The pastor concludes "In the name of all things holy and in the spirit of a loving and living Black messiah, Jesus the Christ, all of God's people say it together: Amen and Ashe." This move to identify the messiah as Black further grants agency to African Americans in the community. It is likely, also, a line that surprised much of the audience as the White community typically has very little interaction with progressive Black religion. Such a statement only more deeply emphasizes Fisher's insistence on the importance and relevance of Black life to the broader regional community. The final line, "say it together: Amen and Ashe" serves two purposes. First, the "say it together" is a performance of Black church culture's call-response tradition. Rhetoricians Jack L. Daniel and Geneva Smitherman assert, "More than an observed

ritual in Church services, call-response is an organizing principle of Black Cultural Reality which enables traditional Black folk to achieve the unified state of balance or harmony which is essential to the Traditional African World View."[56] Further the final word of "Ashe" has a similar effect. The word comes from the Yoruba tradition in West Africa. Scholar Will Coleman instructs, "'Ashe' is the power that animates all of creation…It is also a term comparable to 'Amen.' It could be translated as 'so be it.' But actually [because of its connection to an all-pervasive spiritual energy], the connotation is more imperative, in the sense of 'it definitely shall be so.'"[57] Fisher's final remarks are at once an act of *parrhesia* by calling out the hypocrisy and injustice that dominate the political system, an embrace of prophetic Black liberation by drawing attention to a Black messiah, and an act of Afrocentric celebration by performing a call-response with West African roots. His final word of "ashe" or "it definitely shall be so" is a rousing call to action for those with an ear toward progress.

The visual rhetoric of Fisher's prayer is also worth noting, particularly in contrast to Ivory Jackson. Where Jackson seemed to rely on divine inspiration with his prayer and appeared to put great effort into squeezing his eyes closed throughout, Fisher reads his prayer from a prepared transcript on his telephone. Equipped with a PhD in rhetoric, Fisher understands the power of speech and the opportunity that he has to amplify his message on such a stage. His delivery is gentle yet impassioned. As such, it creates a softer landing for his message particularly some of the sharper barbs that he places throughout the speech. Fisher needs his message to be communicable to an audience of downtown business executives that are not normally on his side. His calming, but deliberate, tone eases his audience into accepting his pleas.

Conclusion

Rev. Dr. Earle J. Fisher is a man on a mission. His invocation before Shelby County Mayor Lee Harris' State of the County address puts that mission on full display to an audience that may have been unfamiliar with the activist pastor's work prior to his approaching to the dais. Fisher delivers a prayer that preaches a message of *parrhesia* to the region's leaders. The medium that he uses to convey his Afrocentric message is prophetic Black liberation theology. His message calls the audience to act on behalf of social justice and to put an end to social stratification.

Fisher's frank speech is predicated on his position outside of the institution's normal realm. Rhetorician Hamilton Bean explains, "The use of *parrhesia* marks its speaker as an institutional outsider."[58] The pastor's ability to offer an uninitiated standpoint allows him to observe the failings of the system and its leaders. Fisher preaches that the structures of power have overlooked and exploited its underclass and Black citizens for too long. Fisher speaks truth to power at great personal risk. He had already been placed on the mayor's "City Hall Blacklist" and was also under illegal police surveillance on social media.[59] By challenging the status quo, Fisher put himself at greater danger for state intervention or silencing. However, by speaking up through religious language, Fisher created an opportunity for a rupture wide enough to make his Afrocentric call for racial equity communicable.

In order to make that message communicable, Fisher turned to the familiar language of religion shared by most his audience, yet he employed a particular style of religion that acknowledges structural deficiencies and affirms African American agency. Fisher's implementation of prophetic Black liberation theology allowed him to speak the language of the masses yet feature moments of Black power throughout the speech. His rhetoric provided flashes of Black resistance. He critiqued those flaws—both religious and governmental—that stifled

African American progress. He constituted an audience with empowered agency thorough his proclamation of a Black messiah. In doing so, he extended the possibility of representation for Black life to all sectors of existence. That same faith demands *parrhesia*. As James H. Cone writes, "Truth cannot be separated from the person's struggle and the hopes and dreams that arise from that struggle…There is no truth for and about black people that does not emerge out of the context of their experience."[60] Fisher's faith allowed him to make the earthly, material impediments to Black life an issue of religious concern as well. He was morally obligated to reveal the flaws of the system and to focus attention on the forgotten. Where Ivory Jackson's Pentecostal faith guides him to distance his thoughts from earthly matters, Fisher's prophetic Black liberation theology demands that everyday life be made to reflect the God's ideal vision. The only message of fealty in Fisher's rhetoric is to those grand ideas of equity and justice for which his God demands action.

The Afrocentric rhetoric that Fisher employs serves as the response to the call of Ivory Jackson's message. Fisher spoke three weeks after Jackson delivered his invocation. In Jackson's prayer, there was no mention of the plight of Black Memphians. Strickland only referenced African Americans once and that was to talk about the number of Black-owned businesses in the city. Fisher made a deliberate decision to celebrate Black life. He put the African American perspective at the center of his invocation. In doing so, he drew attention to the various ways this group has been marginalized by its leaders. Yet, the pastor also celebrates Black excellence and beauty. In his words, he views Black culture as "an asset, not a liability." Fisher's prominent placement of the Black perspective in his prayer gives validation to African American experience. Merging them together, Fisher presents a resistive rhetoric of civic fealty that prioritizes ideals over idols.

The link between *parrhesia*, prophetic Black liberation theology, and Afrocentricity is underexplored in rhetorical studies. The overlap among the three topics is great, but they are not the same. Rather, each depends upon the other in order to achieve its aim. Not only understanding, but also truly valuing the African American perspective is a necessary starting point for prophetic Black liberation. This attitude cannot be taken for granted or only offered token consideration. More studies that center the Black perspective are important to expanding the breadth and depth of rhetorical analysis. In order for prophetic Black liberation theology to have its desired impact of immediate, material change in the modern world, it must embrace a *parrhesiastic* approach. What that means is preachers must be willing to speak truth to power without regard to the risk. Only then will true and lasting progress prevail. The intertwining of these three approaches is what makes Earle Fisher's invocation a provocative rhetorical artifact that has the ability to make a true impact beyond casual lip service.

The first two chapters focused on the invocations delivered before mayoral addresses, but the final chapter considers those addresses and their preceding pageantry. The true intent of these mayors is revealed through a careful rhetorical analysis of these moments. That is to say, the third chapter seeks to determine if the competing rhetorics of civic fealty represented in these prayers are reflected by the mayors' policies and prose.

---

[1] Abyssinian Missionary Baptist Church, "If you're in need of prayer." Facebook.com, March 29, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/AbyssinianMissionaryBaptistChurch/.

[2] Abyssinian Missionary Baptist Church, "About," Facebook.com, November 7, 2007, https://www.facebook.com/pg/AbyssinianMissionaryBaptistChurch/about/?ref=page_internal.

[3] Antonio de Velasco, "'I'm a Southerner, Too': Confederate Monuments and Black Southern Counterpublics in Memphis, Tennessee," *Southern Communication Journal* 84, no. 4 (2019), 233-245.

[4] Phillip Jackson, "#UpTheVote901 Works To Increase Voter Turnout in Binghampton Neighborhood," *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), October 31, 2018, https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/news/2018/10/31/upthevote-901-voter-registration-binghampton-neighborhood-block-party/1838294002/.

[5] Earle J. Fisher, "Vote To Gain Political Power," *The Daily Memphian* (Memphis, TN), August 24. 2019, https://dailymemphian.com/article/7018/Vote-to-gain-political-power.

[6] Phillip Jackson, "Activists Say Memphis Police Were Too Aggressive Toward Protestors During Arrests," *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), September 21, 2018, https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/news/2018/09/21/activists-say-memphis-police-were-too-aggressive-towards-protesters/1382392002/.

[7] Ron Maxey, "Rally Leaders Say Memphis Mayor Jim Strickland Not Showing Clear Leadership," *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), August 20, 2017, https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/news/2017/08/20/rally-leaders-say-memphis-mayor-jim-strickland-not-showing-clear-leadership/584533001/.

[8] Rev. Dr. Earle Fisher, "Now Run Tell That: Memphis Needs Protection Not Occupation," *MLK50* (Memphis, TN), November 7, 2019, https://mlk50.com/now-run-tell-that-memphis-needs-protection-not-occupation-ceba4ab50f66.

[9] Ryan Poe, "Strickland to Critic: Leave 'Racial Politics' Out of Confederate Statues Debate," *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), August 21, 2017,

https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/news/government/city/2017/08/21/strickland-leave-racial-politics-out-confederate-statues-debate/586325001/.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2001).

[12] Ibid. 12-19.

[13] Hamilton Bean, "'A Complicated and Frustrating Dance': National Security Reform, the Limits of Parrhesia, and the Case of the 9/11 Families," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 12, no. 3 (2009) 434-435.

[14] Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 83.

[15] David R. Novak, "Engaging Parrhesia in a Democracy: Malcolm X as a Truth-Teller," *Southern Communication Journal*, 71, no. 1 (2006), 41.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Kelly E. Happe, "Parrhesia, Biopolitics, and Occupy," *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 48, no. 2 (2015), 216.

[18] Ibid. 217.

[19] Carlos Lévy, "From Politics to Philosophy and Theology: Some Remarks about Foucault's Interpretation of Parrêsia in Two Recently Published Seminars," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 42, no 4 (2009), 321.

[20] Jonathan P. Rossing, "Critical Race Humor in a Postracial Moment: Richard Pryor's Contemporary Parrhesia," *Howard Journal of Communications* 25, no 1 (2014) 16-33.

[21] See Cleage's *The Black Messiah* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1968) and *Black Christian Nationalism: New Directions for the Black Church* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1972).

[22] James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power: Fiftieth Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018).

[23] Andre E. Johnson, "The Prophetic Persona of James Cone and the Rhetorical Theology of Black Theology," *Black Theology* 8, no. 3 (2010), 266.

[24] Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999): 87.

[25] Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power,* xxv.

[26] Andre E. Johnson, *The Forgotten Prophet: Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and the African American Prophetic Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012): 7.

[27] Garth E. Pauley, "Rhetoric and Timeliness: An Analysis of Lyndon B. Johnson's Voting Rights Address," *Western Journal of Communication* 62, no.1 (1998),
28, 38, 49.

[28] Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 35.

[29] Ibid. 77.

[30] Ibid. 2.

[31] David A. Frank, "The Prophetic Voice and the Face of the Other in Barack Obama's 'A More Perfect Union' Address, March 18, 2008," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 12, no. 2, 2009, 170.

[32] James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation: Fortieth Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019): 126-27.

[33] Ibid. 67.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (Chicago: African American Images, 2003): 2.

[36] Karen Strother-Jordan, "On the Rhetoric of Afrocentricity," *Western Journal of Black Studies*, 26, no. 4 (2002), 197.

[37] Asante, *Afrocentricity,* 10.

[38] Ibid. 64.

[39] Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 21.

[40] Felicia R. Walker and Deric M. Greene, "Exploring Afrocentricity: An Analysis of the Discourse of Jesse Jackson," *Journal of African American Studies* 9, no. 4 (2006), 68.

[41] Cecil Blake, "Afrocentric Tokens: Afrocentric Methodology in Rhetorical Analysis," *Howard Journal of Communications* 8, no. 1 (1997), 13.

[42] Ibid. 67.

[43] Asante, *Afrocentricity*, 41.

[44] Ibid. 52-53.

[45] Celeste Michelle Condit and John Louis Lucaites, *Crafting Equality: America's Anglo-African Word* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993): 209.

[46] Ibid. 210.

[47] Mark L. McPhail, "From Complicity to Coherence: Rereading the Rhetoric of Afrocentricity," *Western Journal of Communication* 62, no. 2 (1998), 126.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995): 234.

[50] Earle J. Fisher, "Invocation," *YouTube.com*, Delivered February 15, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2uIrzdqlSL0&feature=player_embedded, unless otherwise noted, all remaining Fisher quotations are from this source.

[51] Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Role of the Behavioral Scientist in the Civil Rights Movement," American Psychological Association, Last Updated 2019, https://www.apa.org/monitor/features/king-challenge.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream," The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, Last Updated March 27, 2019, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/i-have-dream-address-delivered-march-washington-jobs-and-freedom.

[54] Cone. *Black Theology and Black Power,* 65.

[55] Bill Dries, "Strickland Surprised by Record Homicide Rate, Defends 'Brilliant at the Basics," *Daily News* (Memphis, TN), December 23, 2016, https://www.memphisdailynews.com/news/2016/dec/23/strickland-surprised-by-record-homicide-rate-defends-brilliant-at-the-basics/.

[56] Jack L. Daniel and Geneva Smitherman, "How I Got Over: Communication Dynamics in the Black Community," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 62, no 1 (1976), 27-28.

[57] Will Coleman, "'Amen' and 'Ashe': African Protestant Worship and Its West African Ancestor," *CrossCurrents* 52, no. 2 (2002), 159.

[58] Bean, 433.

[59] Antonio de Velasco, "Can Memphis' Mayor Honor MLK While Taking Stands MLK Would Have Opposed?," *MLK50* (Memphis, TN), February 23, 2018, https://mlk50.com/can-memphis-mayor-honor-mlk-while-taking-stands-mlk-would-have-opposed-62a389170787.

[60] James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997): 16.

CHAPTER 3

BUDGETS ARE MORAL DOCUMENTS:

CIVIC FEALTY AS RACIALIZED PRESENCE IN MAYORAL PAGEANTRY AND PROSE

There is an old adage that asserts, "Budgets are moral documents." The fiscal decisions that mayors prioritize signify those issues that are most important to their administrations. Sometimes, those choices lead to incentivizing business development, holding economic success in high regard. Other times, it means building a new school, prioritizing education above all else. Still other times, investing in more police officers and security equipment might suggest a passion for public safety. The way that mayors allocate their jurisdictions' money reveals more than just dollars and cents; it exposes ideological foundations. Deference to the ruling class or to the working class and economic expansion or economic equity are just two of many commitments that budgetary decisions belie. In each mayor's speech, certain accomplishments are praised, and others are promised. Even more are omitted entirely. The leader's rhetoric exposes what each mayor values.

This chapter highlights the rhetoric of civic fealty as a matter of racialized presence during the rest of the State of the City/County addresses. That fealty sometimes appears as complete submission to the mayor. Other times, it appears as fealty to any kind of economic progress whatsoever, regardless of the equity of such policies. Still other times, calls for fealty summon deference to issues greater than one individual. Fealty can be a sacrifice of personal pride in recognition of one's role in a larger system of injustice. In the mayoral addresses specifically, Mayor Strickland's event continued to put forth a postracial politics while Mayor

Harris' event focused on issues affecting the county's majority African American population. Both mayors delivered choreographed spectacles that reinforced their ideological positions. In their respective commitments to new funding initiatives, the mayors presented platforms that spoke to their visions of their constituency's identity.

This chapter analyzes two different aspects of each mayoral event. First, it presents a study of the pageantry surrounding the speeches. Both mayors feature introductory programs that divulge very specific rhetorical priorities. Secondly, it considers the actual mayoral speeches as artifacts and the way that each leader's rhetoric exposes disparate displays of value. Rhetorical presence is the theoretical lens that informs the analysis. Through these speeches, presence becomes nuanced through race. Theories of postracism and antiracism serve as a guide for understanding racialized presence by amplifying or deflecting from racial disparities. Before analyzing the addresses, a thorough understanding of these theories is useful.

Racialized Presence

The concept of presence refers to a speaker's ability to summon ideas that are disparate and distant from the audience and make them appear immediate and real. Rhetorician James Jasinki defines presence as "a discursive effect; through the effect of presence, some phenomenon, idea, concept, process, or person is made vivid, tangible, and/or proximate to an audience."[1] In *The New Rhetoric*, theorists Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca explain, "One of the preoccupations of a speaker is to make present, by verbal magic alone, what is actually absent but what he considers important to his argument."[2] For these authors, presence, "at first a psychological phenomenon, becomes an essential element in argumentation."[34] A nuance of presence comes not only through what is made present, but also what is left absent. In omitting certain ideas, speakers are able to frame their argument and lead

their audience to adopt a particular perspective. Essentially, presence becomes a function of rhetorical selection.

Intentional selection of what to make present and what to hide from the audience crafts a certain rhetorical worldview. As theorist Kenneth Burke explains, "Even if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function as a deflection of reality."[5] Burke asserts that language is incapable of fully expressing reality in its entirety. As such, any expression can only present a particularly constructed, selective perspective. That which is selected amplifies a certain viewpoint while that which is deflected attempts to remove another viewpoint from consideration. A speaker can only amplify one idea at a time, and each amplification has a corresponding opposite effect.

Another application of presence is through connecting disparate ideas through proximity or association. In this sense of the term, Burke's theory of perspective by incongruity appears relevant.[6] Perspective by incongruity is a way of aligning two opposing ideas in order to situate another. It is a rhetorical technique that uses analogy or metaphor to make sense through association. In practice, it might mean reducing nuanced arguments to a simple black or white binary. By making present these two polarized reductions, the speaker forces the audience to one camp or the other rather than examining the subtle nuances. Burke warns that audiences must be wary of such rhetorical moves because "the great danger of analogy is that a *similarity* is taken as evidence of an *identity*. Because two things are found to possess a certain trait in common which our point of view considers notable, we take the common notable trait to indicate identity of character" (emphasis from author).[7] This theory of argument by analogy has existed for centuries as an oratorical tool. Even outside of rhetoric, thinkers like Francis Bacon have posited presence as a method of making the unreal real for an audience. Bacon writes,

"Reason is commonly vanquished [in the present]; but after that force of eloquence and persuasion hath made things future and remote appear as present, then upon the revolt of the imagination reason prevaileth."[8] Presence is a technique by which orators can persuade audiences into assent simply through analogy and association. Presence can make dissent vanish through strategic application.

This constructed reality exposes not only the speaker's priorities, but also the way that the audience should understand the world. Rhetorician John Murphy describes the ideas given presence by an orator as "a framework through which the audience should view the world, judge arguments, and act upon those claims."[9] Audiences' alignment with that worldview becomes an epistemic practice. Theorist Louise Karon explains, "We come to know through our strength of adherence coupled with our awareness of the consensus of others."[10] In other words, a person's knowledge emerges from the degree to which they welcome the ideas made present to them by speakers and how they believe others are receiving those same ideas. Karon postulates that "all audiences function to affirm subjective certitude," and through rhetorical presence, that inner subjectivity is able to be transformed to "objective certitude. *We establish the real. The real* is as much a hypothetical construct as is the universal audience" (emphasis from author).[11] Knowledge and certainty are created through audience's embrace of what the speaker has made present. Karon quotes philosopher David Hume to explain that "a belief is *nothing but a strong and lively idea derived from a present impression related to it*." (emphasis in original).[12] Though theorized in 1976, Karon's idea is crucial to understanding the current political climate. People in power often surround themselves with those that sing their praises. For example, the Trump administration frequently parades cabinet members to congratulate or thank the President for some minor success. Applying this conception of presence reveals a

purpose beyond a simple ego boost. Rather, according to Karon's notion of presence, this demonstration of admirer after admirer is meant to stir a feeling in the audience that everyone is thinking that the President is remarkable, so disagreeing with that idea would call into question the dissenter's own ethos.

Presence and absence take on unique commitments in regard to race. Omitting issues of race employs a strategy of postracism that is rife with rhetorical and moral commitments. Postracism asserts that the culture has evolved beyond issues of race to operate in a color-blind world absent of discrimination. Rhetorician Kent Ono notes, "Postracism is the perfect elixir to help society forget about the icky historical abomination known as racism."[13] He argues that a premiere feature of postracial discourse is "to minimize the reality of racism…Denial is a transhistorical and psychological phenomenon, usually manifested in processes of sublimation, transference, or repression, and is therefore constitutive of oppression itself."[14] Postracism acts as a rhetorical praxis of control. By race making absent as a point of distinction, orators are able to control what conversation is intelligible. Critical race scholar David Theo Goldberg posits that a postracial standpoint shifts what is defined as racism: "Racism is reduced in its supposed singularity to *invoking* race, not to its debilitating structural effects or the legacy of its ongoing unfair practices."[15] When acknowledging race becomes itself the act of racism, systemic oppression is no longer institutionalized, but internalized, and blame is shifted to the individual rather than structures of dominance. Race theorists Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and David Dietrich write, "Whereas Jim Crow racism explained minorities' social standing as the outcome of their imputed biological and moral inferiority, color-blind racism…rationalizes the status of minorities as the product of market dynamics…and their alleged cultural deficiencies."[16] Rhetoricians Lisa Flores and Christy Dale-Sims describe this kind of postracial neoliberalism as

erasing "the social realities of race, including what Bonilla-Silva names 'racial structures' of privilege and superiority…The heart of racial neoliberalism (is) concealing and perpetuating systems of oppression upon which neoliberal success depends." [17] In other words, denying racial inequity allows the existing power structures to thrive by making racial problems individual failures to meet market demands rather than institutions' locking raced individuals out of access.

On the other hand, when race is centered and made a point of contention, antiracism emerges. Antiracism involves an active effort to acknowledge and combat the systemic racism that people implicitly or purposively condone. Rhetorician Carrie Crenshaw describes antiracism as "a political commitment to racial justice [that] does not naively claim to be completely free of racism because racism is so systemic and White privilege is so difficult to escape."[18] She explains that antiracist rhetors act by locating "interactions that implicate unspoken issues of race, discursive spaces where the power of Whiteness is invoked but its explicit terminology is not, and investigat[ing] how these racialized constructions intersect with gender and class."[19]Antiracist rhetoric is an intentional move to make present ideas of race and discrimination before an audience. The race scholar Goldberg asserts, "Antiracism concerns facing down those repressive and constraining conditions conceived, mobilized, and effected in the name of and through racial conception."[20] Antiracism is a particularly racialized facet of presence theory that aims to draw attention to racial inequity despite the prevalence of postracial ideologies. In naming race as an issue, antiracist rhetors can locate a problem that is otherwise incommunicable in a postracial world.

Both Mayor Strickland and Mayor Harris use presence to make their visions of the community alluring to audience members. Strickland's postracial Memphis amplifies unity and

elevates Strickland's strength and power in the city. Rhetorician Abraham Khan notes this the kind of postracial "colorblindness obscures race's material effects in criminal justice, education, employment, housing, etc."[21] By never recognizing those inequities, Strickland is able to avoid taking responsibility for solving them and, instead, places that onus on the individual. The successes that he chooses to highlight make present a specific perspective that places priority on certain neighborhoods and devalues others. Strickland not only makes Blackness disappear, but his rhetoric also fails to distinguish Whiteness and therefore masks the expanding economic disparity in the community. The neighborhoods that he highlights are implicitly White, just not named as such directly. Postracism thrives because while race clearly still exists, it moves racial difference to an unconscious and inferential level, making the issue appear an individual shortcoming rather than systemic discrimination. On the other hand, Harris' amplification of the African American community highlights his commitment to antiracist rhetoric by putting his Black constituency first. In elevating those with the least, Harris' words shift the rhetorical situation away from Strickland's oppressive postracism and toward the empowering antiracism at the heart of the county mayor's message. The two men's words make self-worth, civic responsibility, and racial identity contentious topics. However, before the mayors speak, they each choreograph an event that is equally exposing particularly in regards to notions of civic fealty. This pageantry both amplifies the racial hierarchies constituted in the invocations and in the mayoral speeches and deflects certain individual's standing in the community. The rhetoric on display in the preamble to the Strickland speech situates the audience as subservient to the mayor, while the preamble to the Harris speech situates the individual as subservient to a greater cause that no one person can solve alone.

Racialized Presence in Strickland's Pre-Speech Pageantry

A lavishing of praise that amplifies his greatness and deflects any material problems Memphians face during his tenure precedes Mayor Strickland's speech. The first speaker to address the crowd after Ivory Jackson's invocation is City Councilwoman Patrice Robinson, an avid Strickland supporter. Her opening lines accentuate the feeling of gratitude and adulation directed towards the mayor. She exclaims:

> Because the mayor took the time to visit us in Whitehaven—he decided, I didn't help him make that decision, he decided that he wanted to come and do the State of the City address here, I said 'I better write something down'…usually I just do it off the top of my head, but I wanted to make sure that this is a special day for you, Mayor Strickland.[22]

Robinson's depiction of the audience as being so fortunate that Strickland "took the time to visit" amplifies the trope of Strickland as a member of a higher order than the citizenry. Rather than frame the speech as an annual obligation in which the city's elected representative updates the constituency on the operations of local government, Robinson presents the event as a celebration of the man. Her declamation that she "wanted to make sure that this is a special day for you, Mayor Strickland" is a rhetorical declaration that the people she represents should honor the mayor for simply doing his job. She then proceeds to highlight a number of public investments in her community: a rehabilitation of a public park, the construction of a splash pad at a community center, and a new fire station. These basic expenditures serve a necessary function in the community. By amplifying their presence in the audience's mind, Robinson's rhetoric paints a government that is active and working for the community.

However, Robinson makes absent certain disheartening facts about the neighborhood and government's failure. One local news source claims that one particular ward within

Robinson's district "boasts the highest crime numbers in the city."[23] Her praise of small investments in parks ignores gaping inequality in business incentives. For example, similar investments were made in the majority White South Bluffs neighborhood of Downtown Memphis, yet in addition to those necessary investments, corporate headquarters were given tax incentives to expand their footprint in the already booming district.[24] Robinson's tribute to the investment in Whitehaven echoes her earlier fealty to the mayor. Her rhetoric suggests that citizens should be grateful that their government simply acknowledges them enough to provide them with basic services. She deflects issues of income inequality, police brutality, and educational inferiority. She amplifies the government's commitment to the most minimal infrastructure concerns.

Next at the dais is Whitehaven High School principal, Dr. Vincent Hunter, whose rhetoric aligns civic fealty with spiritual salvation. Like Ivory Jackson, Hunter immediately turns to religion as a justification for submission to the mayor rather than protesting or scrutinizing policies. Hunter reads from Hebrews Chapter 13: "obey them that have rule over you and submit yourselves: for they watch your soul as they must have to give an account, that they may do it with joy and not with grief, for that is unprofitable for you."[25] Hunter's rhetoric aligns deference with spiritual salvation, yet the verse also brings in an economic connection as well. The inclusion of that final line, "for that is unprofitable for you," makes present for the audience an implicit threat. Hunter's language implies that there will be economic consequences for those that rise up against the mayor. He reminds the audience that even those few investments that the city is making in Whitehaven can be cut at the mayor's discretion. Hunter continues his introduction by turning to the mayor's biography.

The principal makes an aside prior to reading the biography that rhetorically reveals his true position on fealty and civic withdrawal. Before reading the mayor's story, Hunter insists "I have a great gift that I want to share with you, and that's the biography of our great mayor. I didn't know he was so special until I had a chance to read it. And he is special."[26] The language again supports this argument by association that the mayor's appearance in Whitehaven is a favor being granted to its citizens. It continues to amplify the mayor's elevation above the average citizen. Hunter continues, "A lot of times we don't take time—especially in education, we're so engulfed in the things that we do with our children—we don't look at what happens all across our city, and I want to share this great biography." Hunter's rhetoric embodies Karon's explanation of presence as a constructed reality built upon the way that listeners embrace and believe that others embrace concepts. Hunter's language supports Ivory Jackson's belief that people should be distant from government, and his application of presence constitutes an audience that supports this stance. His words excuse a lack of activism or concern with local politics. He posits a society that is comfortable with being "so engulfed in the things that we do" that is cannot be bothered with taking a stand on political issue—even one that might directly impact those things, like education funding.

In Strickland's pre-speech pageantry, ideas of civic submission and mayoral heroism are amplified. Any notion of resistance or scrutiny is deflected. Notably absent from the rhetoric of both Patrice Robinson and Vincent Hunter is any mention of race. Despite massive income and incarceration disparity, these two leaders fail to acknowledge any such problem and continue to preach fealty to leadership. There is no celebration of Black excellence or pride either. The speakers' postracial rhetoric makes absent such ideas and amplifies Strickland's vision. A very different vision is on display in the festivities that introduce Mayor Harris' speech.

Racialized Presence in Harris' Pre-Speech Pageantry

The pre-speech pageantry before Harris' State of the County is a strong and visible embrace of Blackness through a number of rhetorical moves. The choreography of the event makes race a central and apparent issue. After Earle Fisher's racially charged invocation, the crowd recites the Pledge of Allegiance which is, then, followed by an all-Black a capella group of high school students singing "The Negro National Anthem" and "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody." The juxtaposition of "The Negro National Anthem" and the Pledge of Allegiance creates an argument by analogy that these things go together. The presence of the two side-by-side makes the audience appreciate Black history in the same way that it honors the Pledge. Amplifying the message of acknowledging struggles in the past and fighting for a better future, the group sings in "The Negro National Anthem," "Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us/sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us/facing the rising sun of our new day begun/let us march on 'til victory is won."[27] Similarly, situating "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody," an old spiritual that became an anthem of the Civil Rights movement next to these iconic symbols of pride affirms the value and worth of Black life in the American story. The rhetorical move offers a powerful moment of immediate and visible impact on the audience as the mostly White crowd, which sat down following the Pledge, awkwardly staggers back to its feet as the group begins to sing "The Negro National Anthem" before sitting again for the spiritual. In "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody," the group sings, "Ain't got let nobody, turn me 'round/I'm gonna keep on a walkin,' keep on a talkin'/walkin' into freedom land…Martin Luther, he didn't turn/Rosa Parks, she didn't turn/Jesus Christ, she didn't turn."[28] The group directly makes present an argument by association with protest, Jesus Christ, and Civil Rights. The strident refusal to be turned back from protest amplifies the message that resistance is a key

component of a functional democracy and religious practice. This musical interlude makes race and the history of racial injustice present in the mind of the audience. It makes the distant past alive and primes the audience for its relationship to the current moment detailed in Harris' speech.

There is an error in the program following the songs, but this error has interesting rhetorical implications. An offstage voice, which has been introducing the various speakers, welcomes the first and only White speaker to the stage only to immediately interrupt her after she starts speaking to say, "I'm sorry, there was a change of plans. Dr. Dorsey, if you would just take your seat, we are actually gonna play a short video right now. We're gonna get to you." This error, while seemingly accidental, creates an powerful rhetorical moment. The language of this invisible emcee is essentially telling the White woman to "wait her turn; we'll get to you when we're ready." Juxtaposing this interaction with the just finished Civil Rights anthem seems an inverted echo of what many African American activists were told in that era in response to their demands for freedom now. It serves as an argument by analogy that, in the Harris administration, African Americans are done waiting. After her departure from the stage, a video plays that constructs a selective reality showcasing Black excellence and the work that government does to support that cause.

The video features a number of different moments that amplify certain realities and minimize others. It opens with an African American couple living in the majority-White suburbs talking about how great of a place the county is to raise a family and operate a business. It cuts to a Black real estate investor who is shown in one of the most underprivileged neighborhoods in Memphis. He asserts, "We are building a new renaissance of this neighborhood, economically and socially, that will be equitable for everybody."[29] Disrupting a

common trope of African American "welfare queens" absorbing an abundant amount of government resources, the first White woman in the video talks about her own experience relying on government benefits to stabilize her life before she found a career. Situating these two speakers back-to-back makes present the idea that even in the poorest neighborhoods of Memphis, Black entrepreneurs are working to create a better community. It amplifies a notion of White poverty and deflects Black dependency. The video strikes down societally imagined racial roles. Another speaker in the video mentions her excitement "about the diversity that I see everyday in leadership in our community. There are lots of people whose voices are being heard and who are being given an opportunity to contribute." Another speaker asserts:

> This is the first time in the history of the county that we've had young, African American women at the helm of leadership…It's going to be a great relationship between the executive branch of government and legislative branch of government, and we, at the County Commission, look forward to making sure that we collaboratively work together to push Shelby County forward.

These two statements present a variety of deliberate rhetorical decisions. First, they clearly amplify the message of proclaiming Blackness as an asset. They celebrate diversity and inclusion. Second, they deflect power and superiority away from the mayor. Rather than presenting a messianic vision of Harris, these speakers value societal collaboration and the intentional representation of underserved voices. They do not submit to one man; they work together through civic action to establish a better world.

Following the video, Dr. Amy Dorsey, the White woman dismissed from the stage earlier, approaches the dais, not to introduce the mayor, but to celebrate a young Black woman

who will introduce the mayor. Again, the visual dynamics are inverting much of the visuals that the Strickland pageantry presented. At Strickland's event, the audience witnesses Black speaker after Black speaker stand to laud the White mayor and elevate him above the community. At the Harris' event, the only White speaker on stage comes to elevate, not the mayor, but an ordinary Black citizen who has done extraordinary things for her community. Jerri Biddle's introduction of the Harris certainly praises the mayor, but it also is filled with moments of jest that would not have been feasible in the very detached, ultra-respectful introduction of Strickland. Biddle jokes about Harris' attendance of a rival high school to hers. After commending the mayor on his attendance of Morehouse and Yale, she joking remarks, "Hmmm…not bad Mr. Mayor."[30] These moments of simple levity foster a relationship that invites civic critique and participation in government. Even her praises of Harris center his African American roots. She notes that Harris "went on to become the first African American tenured professor of law in the school's history." Her description of Harris' service on the City Council celebrates his "fighting for citywide non-discrimination, the preservation and redevelopment of city museums in historic neighborhoods, and more opportunities for residents to share their opinions before a development project occurs in their neighborhood." She also reminds listeners that Harris was "the first African American to hold" the title of Tennessee Senate Minority Leader. Biddle's praise of Harris is less for the man as an individual, and more in regards to the road that Harris paved for future Black leaders. Her rhetoric does not present Harris as an idol; rather he is shown to be an advocate and an ally.

The pre-speech pageantry that precedes Harris' State of the County address does significant rhetorical work. It amplifies a selective constructed reality. That reality makes present the importance of Black life in the county, and it celebrates Black excellence. This

antiracist rhetoric makes Blackness visible and material, not only as a cog for economic progress for White-owned businesses, but also as an asset worth celebrating for its own merit. It deflects idolatry and pushes forward ideas of collaboration and inclusion. The fealty on display here is to the legacy of civic action that drives social progress. Strickland and Harris each choreographed programs that reflect their vision of the region. Those visions are on full display when the two men rise to speak.

Racialized Presence in Strickland's State of City Address[31]

Memphis Mayor Jim Strickland's State of the City address makes present notions of an idyllic land ripe for development for his audience. His rhetoric constructs a postracial reality. It lauds the momentum that his administration created over its three years in office and deflects major problems as either not worth mentioning or already solved. In ignoring racial discrimination and inequity, Strickland posits a selectively chosen postracial vision that does not represent the true picture for the 65% of his constituency that is African American. The investments that Strickland highlights and summons to the front of his audience's mind are a clear starting place for analysis.

The topic of the speech that gets more time than any other subject is one particular investment his administration is making, and that investment serves as an apt rhetorical metaphor for his entire agenda. Strickland spends almost 10% of his entire speech talking about the city's investment to fix potholes. Strickland decries, "Now, we all hate potholes. You do, and I do. But instead of ignoring them, we're tackling them."[32] Not four months prior to this speech, the FBI listed Memphis as "3rd most violent big city in the US," [33] yet the issue this mayor refuses to ignore is potholes. In amplifying the problems with potholes and his brilliantly basic strategy of filling them, Strickland averts the audience's attention away from the problem

of crime. Potholes are a racially neutral issue that can be immediately solved with a quick patching. Memphians can literally see government at work in their community. The problem is that potholes are really bandages for more serious underlying problems like the need to fully repave roads. The bandage might treat the symptom, but it does nothing to solve the deeper issue. The argument by analogy Strickland makes is that government is out there working for you in the streets everyday, but what he deflects is that such a remedy is more therapeutic than curative.

The only time that race comes up in Strickland's speech is related to economic progress. He talks about the *Black Enterprise* magazine naming Memphis as "the No. 1 city for Black-owned businesses."[34] He mentions the city's increase in spending in minority and women-owned businesses as well. At no other point in the speech does Strickland touch on the subject of race. He amplifies the issue when he can construct a selective reality that favors him, yet he deflects the entirety of other issues troubling the community by composing a postracial vision. However, even that amplification of Black business is revealing. Strickland boasts that the city now allocates 24% of its contracting dollars to these businesses; however, he does not go into detail to address how much of that is spent with Black-owned business versus White-woman owned business. Further, for a city with an overwhelming majority of its citizens classifying as African American, 24% does not connote a bustling Black economy. Phrasing the issue as he does, Strickland solicits praise for the progress that he seems to have made.

Economic investment disparities reveal a rhetorical rejection of racial discrimination. Strickland flaunts publically incentivized private development in the city. When talking about the affluent and predominantly White Downtown Memphis neighborhood, Strickland mentions major corporate headquarters relocations and high-income office jobs, yet when talking about

the predominantly Black South Memphis neighborhood, he speaks of a different kind of progress. He proclaims, "We're also making inroads in communities that haven't seen as much development recently. An example is when the grocery store closed on South Third. We went to work alongside so many great community partners…and a new grocery store opened last year." While these multiple downtown jobs offer salaries, paid-time off, and other career perks, the work that Strickland wants to make present for this audience in South Memphis are the low-wage, part-time jobs at a grocery chain. Strickland's rhetoric constructs a reality of equal care and commitment from government, but what he makes absent is the great disparity in quality of job. His continued recitation of his accomplishments situates Strickland in the White Savior position despite how immaterial these accomplishments are to the perpetual struggle of Black Memphians to escape poverty.

Strickland also revels in the city's work with affordable housing, but in doing so, he makes rhetorical commitments that devalue such work. Memphis is a city in which the per capita income of its Black residents averages $30,000, while its White residents average $60,000 in per capita income; this fact means that the people that need affordable housing are the African American residents. Affordable housing does not even get 2% of the attention in the mayor's speech, yet it is an issue that the majority of the city's population is confronting on the first of every month. The mayor ties increases in affordable housing development to growth of the city as a whole when he says, "As our city grows, this will continue to be more and more important." The argument by analogy that Strickland makes here is that until the economy improves for the wealthier citizens, those that are in need of affordable housing will be less important. In other words, the poorer (read Blacker) citizens need to wait their turn until the wealthier (read Whiter) citizens see their own pockets lined first.

Language that amplifies the need to lock up violent criminals and increase the police force deflects from the issue of criminal justice reform and discrimination that haunts the city. Strickland exclaims, "People who commit violent acts need to go to prison, and they need to stay there for a long time. Period." The mayor's speech comes just over a month after the release of a federal Department of Justice review of the area's criminal justice system described "a culture of intimidation that undermines due process" and a vastly disproportionate system of transferring Black minors' cases to adult criminal court that created "a toxic combination for African American youth" that is "blatantly unfair."[35] Strickland's call for stricter mandatory minimum sentences deflects from the fact that the area's district attorney has been rated "the most corrupt DA in the state, according to the Fair Punishment Project at Harvard University."[36] The mayor's selective postracial construction masks a system that has institutional bias against the majority of his constituency. He repeatedly ignores the deeper problems that plague the community.

The most damning effect of Strickland's racialized presence may be in the reporting that followed up on some of his claims. The *Memphis Business Journal* reports that despite Strickland's claim that minority and women owned business spending had increased to 24% of contracts, "it was actually 18 percent last year, down from 21 percent in fiscal year 2017."[37] Similarly, his claim that "poverty is down…(and) will continue to fall" only speaks to a fraction of the community. Dr. Elena Delavega's annual Poverty Fact Sheet reveals that in fiscal year 2018, the "non-Hispanic Black" poverty rate in Memphis actually increased from 28.9% to 33.8%, while the "non-Hispanic White" poverty rate decreased by from 12.3% to 11.8%, and "Hispanic" poverty rate decreased from 33.3% to 28.8%.[38] Strickland's postracial rhetoric allows him to continue deflecting statistics detrimental to the Black community in Memphis.

The data clearly shows that for the overwhelming majority of the city's population, poverty is, in fact, increasing.

Strickland's use of presence lauds his administration's work for minor victories like filling potholes and increasing adoption rates at the local animal shelter. It solicits adoration for basic work. But in constructing the selective reality of an active mayor working to help people in their daily lives, he also creates absence that forecloses another reality to his audience. The projects and spending proposals that Strickland advocates in his speech construct a moral argument that decenters African Americans and marks White progress as the standard by which he will judge success. Strickland's process of selection and deflection gives him the appearance of tackling issues on behalf of his constituency, but it ignores the deeper systemic issues that are predictors of his audience's fate. His refusal to acknowledge any racial discrimination or injustice reduces the validity of such claims that his audience might make. While the Memphis mayor hides this reality from his audience, the Shelby County mayor brings such dilemmas to center stage. The civic fealty of Strickland's rhetoric calls for deference to a system that has consistently turned a blind eye to issues plaguing the Black community in Memphis.

Racialized Presence in Harris' State of the County Address[39]

Mayor Lee Harris uses presence and absence to draw attention to the issues plaguing the community that he serves. In his speech, he employs antiracist rhetoric to center the African American experience and the systemic failures that exacerbate an already unfair starting place. The issues that he brings to his audience's minds are ones that acknowledge a mountain of work that needs to be accomplished. He sets forth plans that he believes will lead to a more just and equitable society for all residents of Shelby County. He does not seek fealty by celebrating his

own success; instead, he rallies his audience around common goals of justice and progress, not individual accomplishments.

While Strickland's rhetoric hides and misconstrues the reality of poverty, Harris makes it the first thing on his agenda after acknowledging and thanking the County Commissioners that work alongside his office. Harris decries, "We have real challenges. 950,000 people live in our great county, and at least 200,000 of those live in poverty." Rather than boasting big development projects in the county's business districts as a solution to this issue, Harris talks about raising county employees minimum pay to $15 per hour and providing "a living wage." Harris' rhetoric works from a bottom-up perspective rather than a top-down approach. He makes present the struggles of those on the lowest end of the spectrum rather than praising the successes of those at the apex.

When he does talk about business development his approach further distinguishes his policies from Strickland's agenda. So much of the economic progress Strickland celebrates relates to publically incentivized projects, but Harris rejects this strategy because "these programs frequently use the force of government to transfer public resources into private hands…Instead of tax breaks, when it comes to economic development, I believe the focus most of the time should be on investment in public assets and people." Harris goes on to talk about job training programs and the ability for those at the bottom to move up. Amplifying this strategy, Harris' rhetoric affirms agency throughout his community instead of giving priority to the elite.

Unlike Strickland, Harris' rhetoric regarding criminal justice makes present the harsh reality of those living within that system. The first of several instances where he mentions those in the system is a proposal to invest in the county's "Office of Re-entry. We want to be in a

position to start new programs to help these ex-offenders get the training they'll need to get a job or create a job in this new economy." Words like "create" do not foreclose any possibility for his audience. Harris envisions a polity that, with adequate support, is capable of anything. Where Strickland wants to increase mandatory minimum sentencing, Harris' rhetoric centers on reducing recidivism by putting rehabilitation and job training in the minds of his audience. Strickland makes present fear, demanding civic fealty to his plan to penalize, yet Harris marks present opportunity, requiring fealty to a system of progress. He refers to criminal justice reform as a "major focus" for his administration. He acknowledges the discriminatory nature of this system, exclaiming,

> If we continue on the trajectory we are currently on, we will likely see the same well-known inequality play out well into our future. We know that at least 80% of our county jail population has been African American, while about 54% of our county population is African American. Most of those detained or locked up in our local facilities have not been convicted of a crime. Many of them could go to their home to await their trial date, if they just had money for bail. Let me say it again. Many of the detainees have already been judged to be no risk to public safety. They stay in our jails because they don't have any money. This means that, in many ways, that we are punishing some detainees just for being poor.

Harris links criminal justice reform to the lived experience of African Americans in his region. His rhetoric constructs a selective and racialized reality in which people are not being jailed because of crimes, but they are imprisoned by a corrupt system that locks them up for their economic position. The mayor continues this theme by focusing on reinstating suspended

drivers licenses as "one of the most important areas for criminal justice reform." He claims, "There are thousands and thousands and thousands and thousands of individuals in our county have unnecessary run-ins with law enforcement because they are driving without a license…because they can't afford to pay some unrelated court cost or fee." Harris' prioritization of bail reform and license reinstatement is an attempt to make present the idea that poverty is being criminalized and creating impossible cycles that government can put stop. This message is particularly racialized in a community where poverty and Blackness are so often paired and where poverty and Whiteness rarely coexist. Amplifying the message of Earle Fisher's invocation, the mayor references the Matthew Chapter 25 quoting, "'For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink…I was in prison and you came to me.' 'I was in prison, and you came to me.' We should not forget about that last part." Harris links religious obligation to civic participation and the support of the least among his constituency with criminal justice reform.

Harris uses argument by analogy to link public transit to economic prosperity. He exclaims, "Although it's not a super-sexy topic, public transit is one of the most important assets we have. It's one of the best ways to spur economic development." He sutures these two ideas together by explaining that with better public transit "job-seekers should have a realistic chance of taking a bus and getting to work on time and getting back home to have dinner with their family." Harris' rhetoric deflects what might be a perceived stigma against bus riders and constructs a selective reality in which bus riders are contributing to the local economy and good family members. Harris continues the analogy by framing bus riding as a civic asset in the same vein as renowned landmarks like the Memphis Zoo, Graceland, and Beale Street. He argues that these famous sites of pride have received tens of millions of dollars in public investment and

combined draw some 8 million visitors annually, yet "none of those assets compare to MATA (Memphis Area Transit Authority), which has 7 million rides a year and demand for millions more. If we can increase revenue to public transit, we can change the lives of many, many families." Harris' language presents the public transit system as an asset that has more impact than the sites for which the city is best known. Linking this not "super-sexy topic" to economic development and tourist hotspots, Harris applies presence as argument by analogy to win assent from his audience and to elevate the least rather than to seek personal praise.

Speaking in the middle of February, Harris' uses that month's role as Black History month to make present a strong and proud history of Black progress. He proclaims "Black History Month reminds me that everybody, anybody can be an agent of change…and perhaps most sobering, Black History Month should remind us that transformative change is hard, slow-to-come, and when change comes, it likely comes at a very steep price." Harris uses the rhetorical situation of speaking in Memphis, Tennessee, the site of so many important moments in the Civil Rights movement, in the middle of Black History month to make an antiracist proclamation about Black agency. He empowers his county's African American community to take in pride in their legacy and to believe that they are capable and duty-bound to continue the struggle despite what obstacles may come in their way.

Mayor Lee Harris' State of the County Address employs an antiracist strategy of rhetorical presence that centers on the Black experience. He does so both through an rhetoric that acknowledges discrimination and inequity in the criminal justice system and empowers Black agency particularly in the context of Black History Month. He pleads for the audience to look at the world from the perspective of those with least. His rhetoric situates a bottom-up vision in his audience's mind. The inequity of income and access in Shelby County often means

that when words like poverty are used, they often act as a stand-in for Black. Harris' rhetoric celebrates those Black lives and works to make their experience present for his audience in Downtown Memphis' business district. His civic fealty envisions a host of citizens submitting to progressive ideas that lift everyone rather than a select few. He wants active civic engagement, not distance and blind trust.

Conclusion

Mayors Jim Strickland and Lee Harris serve an overlapping community, yet their approaches to communicating with that constituency could not be more different. Strickland's deflection of racial discrimination masks an underlying rupture in the community. He constructs a vision of the city that is making strides in economic development and has moved to a postracial realm where the inequities have simply vanished. He elevates his own accomplishments and ignores the possibility that some policies that he endorses may further divisions in the city. Strickland's rhetoric dismisses Black agency as a thing of the past. There is no more Black or White in Strickland's postracial world. His present is one of purported equality. However, such rhetoric contradicts the actual lived condition of his constituents. On the other hand, Harris' amplification of racial inequity highlights the potential the county has to make progress. He constructs a reality in which Black life and Black agency are celebrated, not forgotten. His antiracist rhetoric is an active effort to begin to tackle some of the structural problems stifling Black progress. Harris sees the world not through what rhetorician Eric King Watts calls the "philosophical 'error'…(and) terrifying absurdity" of postracism;"[40] rather, the mayor views the world as plagued with racial injustice that must be acknowledged in order to be overcome. What is absent in Strickland's address derives from his privilege as a White male,

but Harris' Blackness is on full display at all times. He uses his pageantry and his prose to make present and amplify the Black experience in Shelby County.

These two visions of the region were obvious before the leaders even began their speeches. The pageantry that preceded their talks made clear that each leader would be positing a wildly disparate vision from the other. Strickland's ceremony seemed tailored to "make sure that this is a special day" for the mayor. The introduction to the mayor reiterated Ivory Jackson's call for civic submission and obedience. Harris' pageantry centered and celebrated African Americans. His ceremony situated the advances of the Civil Rights movement alongside the current fight for a more equitable society. It acknowledged that there are a number of problems impeding Black progress. It summoned an active and engaged public that is guided by an open and collaborative effort between the mayor and his constituents.

The rhetoric of civic fealty that each mayor posits through their respective programs constitutes vastly different worldviews. Strickland's postracial vision puts his constituents literally out of sight and out of mind. He wants his audience to defer to his administration in all things and allow him to govern unimpeded by any resistant concerns. On the other, Harris posits two different kinds of civic fealty through his rhetoric. First, he wants his audience to acknowledge problems so that solutions can be developed. That is, Harris calls for fealty to the reality of the Black condition in Shelby County rather than turning a blind eye. Black citizens and poor citizens are not subservient to the whims of the wealthy White elite in Harris' antiracist rhetoric. He envisions a world where the priorities of the masses and of the least take precedent over the priorities of the powerful. Secondly, Harris calls for fealty to ideas and messaging rather than individuals. He is willing to take criticism, whether it is from a senior in high school making jokes about Harris' education or from a citizen on the street talking about

inequitable incentive funding from local government. Harris posits a world where people serve each other and ideas of progress, not a world where people serve their leaders.

The investment and policy proposals that each mayor makes present in his speech reveals moral priorities that can help rhetoricians better understand the way that presence works as a rhetorical strategy in local communities. Paying close attention to what a leader amplifies and deflects in budget proposals opens a window into their worldview. As rhetoricians, understanding concepts like presence can enlighten the way that leaders prioritize and devalue racial equity. Connecting and expanding these long-held theories to ideas like postracism and antiracism that have more traction currently creates a through line in the field's history. These issues demand more research. That research cannot be limited to the words of the leaders alone. As the analysis of the pageantry preceding the mayors' speeches showed, the rhetorical implications set the stage long before the mayors opened their mouths, and their speeches drove home those messages. Rhetoric has sought to move beyond a legacy of "great men speaking well." Studies that look beyond the individual leader advance those efforts.

---

[1] James Jasinski, "Presence," *Sourcebook on Rhetoric: Key Concepts in Contemporary Rhetorical Studies* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001): 456.

[2] Chaïm Perelman, Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, John Wilkinson, and Purcell Weaver, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969): 117.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Kenneth Burke, "Terministic Screens," *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966): 45.

[6] Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*, 3rd edition (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1954): 71-168.

[7] Ibid. 97.

[8] Francis Bacon, *Advancement of Learning* (Auckland, New Zealand: The Floating Press, 1975): 231.

[9] John M. Murphy, "Presence, Analogy, and 'Earth in the balance' (book by US Vice Pres. Albert Gore Jr.)," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 31, no. 1 (1994), 4

[10] Ibid. 102.

[11] Ibid. 102-03.

[12] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Rpt. Everyman's Library, 1911): 107.

[13] Kent A. Ono, "Postracism: A Theory of the 'Post'—As Political Strategy," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 34, no. 3 (2010), 227.

[14] Ibid. 228.

[15] David Theo Goldberg, *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell Manifestos, 2009): 360.

[16] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and David Dietrich, "The Sweet Enchantment of Color-Blind Racism in Obamerica," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 634 (2011), 191.

[17] Lisa A. Flores and Christy-Dale L. Sims, "The Zero-Sum Game of Race and the Familiar Strangeness of President Obama," *Southern Communication Journal* 81, no. 4 (2016), 209, 210-213.

[18] Carrie Crenshaw, "Resisting Whiteness' Rhetorical Silence," *Western Journal of Communication* 61, no. 3 (1997), 276n2.

[19] Ibid. 254.

[20] Goldberg, 21.

[21] Abraham Iqbal Khan, "A Rant Good for Business: Communicative Capitalism and the Capture of Anti-Racist Resistance," *Popular Communication* 14, no. 1 (2016), 41.

[22] Patrice Robinson, "Welcome to Whitehaven" YouTube.com, January 28, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDmaB8FXIj8, unless otherwise noted, all remaining Robinson quotations are from this source.

[23] Bianca Phillips, "The Most Dangerous Neighborhood in Memphis?," *Memphis Flyer* (Memphis, TN), August 19. 2010, https://www.memphisflyer.com/memphis/the-most-dangerous-neighborhood-in-memphis/Content?oid=2249603.

[24] Madeline Faber, "ServiceMaster Tax Incentive Package Approved." *Daily News* (Memphis, TN), June 15, 2016, https://www.memphisdailynews.com/news/2016/jun/15/servicemaster-tax-incentive-package-approved/.

[25] Hebrews 13:17

[26] Vincent Hunter, "Introduction of Mayor Strickland," YouTube.com, January 28, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDmaB8FXIj8, unless otherwise noted, all remaining Hunter quotations are from this source.

[27] Southwind High School Choir, "The Negro National Anthem," YouTube.com February 15, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2uIrzdqlSL0&feature=player_embedded.

[28] Southwind High School Choir, "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody," YouTube.com, February 15, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2uIrzdqlSL0&feature=player_embedded

[29] Shelby County Video. "State of the County," YouTube.com, February 15, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2uIrzdqlSL0&feature=player_embedded, unless otherwise noted, all remaining Hunter quotations are from this source.

[30] Jerri Biddle. "Introduction to Mayor Harris." February 15, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2uIrzdqlSL0&feature=player_embedded, unless otherwise noted, all remaining Biddle quotations are from this source

[31] [31] Jim Strickland. "State of the City Address" January 28, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDmaB8FXIj8, unless otherwise noted, all remaining video quotations are from this source

[32] Jim Strickland. "State of the City Address" January 28, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDmaB8FXIj8, unless otherwise noted, all remaining video quotations are from this source

[33] Yolanda Jones, "FBI: Memphis Ranks as 3rd Most Violent Big City in US," *Daily Memphian* (Memphis, TN), October 8, 2018, https://dailymemphian.com/article/528/FBI-Memphis-ranks-as-3rd-most-violent-big-city-in-US.

[34] Jim Strickland, "State of the City Address" YouTube.com, January 28, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDmaB8FXIj8.

[35] Sarah Macaraeg, "Final DOJ Report: 'Blatantly Unfair' Practice in Shelby County Juvenile Court," *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), December 10, 2018, https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/news/2018/12/10/shelby-county-juvenile-court-federal-oversight-doj-report/2266028002/.

[36] Wendi C. Thomas, "Tennessee's Population Is 18 Percent Black. None of Its District Attorneys Are.," *MLK50* (Memphis, TN), January 15, 2019, https://mlk50.com/tennessees-population-is-18-percent-black-none-of-its-district-attorneys-are-5eaeac68266.

[37] Samuel Hardiman, "Gains in City's MWBE Spend Based on Incorrect Data," *Memphis Business Journal* (Memphis, TN), March 14, 2019, https://www.bizjournals.com/memphis/news/2019/03/14/gains-in-citys-mwbe-spend-based-on-incorrect-data.html.

[38] Elena Delavega, "2019 Poverty Fact Sheet," School of Social Work at the University of Memphis, https://www.memphis.edu/socialwork/research/2019povertyfactsheet.pdf.

[39] Lee Harris, "State of the County Address," YouTube.com, February 15, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2uIrzdqlSL0&feature=player_embedded, unless otherwise noted, all remaining Harris quotations are from this source.

[40] Eric King Watts, "The (Nearly) Apocalyptic Politics of 'Postracial' America: Or 'This Is Now the United States of Zombieland,'" *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 34, no. 3 (2010), 217.

CONCLUSION:

"…SOMETHING IS HAPPENING IN OUR WORLD" [1]

In her autobiography, Ida B. Wells writes, "the city of Memphis has demonstrated that neither character nor standing avails the Negro if he dares to protect himself against the White man or become his rival."[2] The rhetoric of civic fealty studied in these three chapters demonstrates some ways that language is being used to both oppress and lend agency to Black Memphians. America has always struggled with issues of racial equity. In the minds of many, the country is a postracial society that has federally guaranteed equality under the law. But in the everyday practices of local government, we can see that those promises have not yet come to fruition. Rhetoric is a force that shapes identities and crafts realities through language. The notion of civic fealty covered in this thesis certainly carried with it immense force.

The rhetoric of Ivory Jackson's invocation is deeply connected to his Pentecostal religious beliefs. Those beliefs demand that he and his congregation distance themselves from matters of earthly concern. Instead, they should focus on salvation in the afterlife. Mayor Jim Strickland capitalized on Jackson's beliefs when he selected him to deliver the invocation at the mayor's State of the City Address. Jackson's prayer was fueled by deference to the leader and steeped in respectability rhetoric that belied notions of Black inferiority.

On the other hand, the language of Earle Fisher's invocation celebrated Black pride. He delivered a prayer of *parrhesia* rendering an Afrocentric perspective made intelligible by the language of religion. Fisher's background in prophetic Black liberation theology mandates that

believers challenge earthly oppression and fight to make the local community as near as possible to God's heavenly vision. Mayor Lee Harris aligned his administration with Fisher's beliefs when he put the pastor on stage at the State of the County Address three weeks later. Fisher's history of animosity with the Strickland administration and his fervent demand for material progress led him to preach a message that recognized failings of the institutions meant to help people. His prayer acknowledged a history of oppression and feelings of inferiority in the Black community, yet he challenged those tendencies with an Afrocentric rhetoric of Black pride and Black excellence that put the mission before the man.

The pageantry that preceded the mayors' addresses reinforced these competing ideas. Prior to Strickland's address, numerous speakers praised and elevated the mayor to a position unattainable by ordinary citizens. In elevating the mayor, this rhetoric essentially pushed down others and made them inferior in comparison to the mayor. These speakers never mentioned issues plaguing the Black community in Memphis. Like Ivory Jackson and Mayor Strickland, the orators posited a postracial reality in which discrimination had simply vanished. The performers, video, and speaker that introduced Harris' address did the opposite. They celebrated Black life. They put Black history on equal footing with more general American history. Where the Strickland event was all about making the mayor feel special, the Harris event focused on collaboration and ideals and decentered the mayor's position as a savior.

The speeches that the mayors delivered used rhetorical presence to affirm their ideas. Strickland's postracial speech makes Black life absent. Rather than focus on issues plaguing Black Memphians, he spends a large portion of the speech focusing on how quickly his administration fills potholes. The budget promises that Strickland makes reflect his moral ambivalence toward the African American community. He needs the community to vote for him,

so he offers token projects like working to open a grocery store in a Black neighborhood. However, he devalues the community's ability, so he only incentivizes more career-oriented jobs in White neighborhoods. His rhetoric of civic fealty emphasizes apathy for the Black community. Even his efforts to be more inclusive are revealed to be fraudulent over time. Mayor Harris' speech employs an antiracist rhetoric that builds from the bottom up. He addresses issues that affect the masses. He dedicates most of his speech to issues like criminal justice reform and public transit that disproportionally haunt the Black community. Where Strickland tries to make economic accomplishments present in the mind of his audience, Harris presents arguments that center on equity and agency. His message is for the people of the county from all walks of life, not exclusively the business elite. His rhetoric makes present visions of African American access and success.

Memphis Mayor Jim Strickland used his State of the City Address to launch his re-election campaign. Every aspect of that event was choreographed to deliver a message of submission to an elevated leader. Strickland posited a postracial Memphis where citizens had only themselves to blame for any failings or inequities. Respectability rhetoric was a strong aspect of that event, and it was intertwined with messages from the pulpit preaching civic distance and deference. That message was internalized, and Strickland won his re-election bid with 62% of the vote. Even the headline that heralded his reelection reinforced his message: "Memphis Mayor Jim Strickland Wins Reelection with Message of Unity and Optimism."[3] The message of unity meant fealty for all of his constituents, but the message of optimism was reserved only for those White Memphians that saw their economic tides rise with Strickland in office. Black Memphians continued to see their value in Memphis society dwindle. Their agency is connected to the identities conveyed through the rhetoric of civic fealty in the mayoral events.

The rhetorical identities crafted by and through various religious leaders situate Black citizens at differing levels of agency and power. Scholar Michelle Alexander writes, "Far from being a place of comfort or refuge, churches can be a place where judgment, shame, and contempt are felt most acutely. Services in Black churches frequently contain a strong mixture of concern for the less fortunate and a call for personal responsibility."[4] This personal responsibility thrives in the postracial era. Because race has ceased to be relevant, structural racial discrimination also vanishes. Instead, fault is placed on the individual. While this ideology is evident in the Pentecostal faith practiced by Ivory Jackson, not all religious communities turn a blind eye to systemic inequities. The prophetic Black liberation theology on display in Earle Fisher's invocation recognizes that inequities are real and present in the current moment. It does not dismiss them as a relic of the past; rather it locates them in the everyday lived experience of Black Americans. This faith tradition calls for immediate action and involvement in the civic square. While the Pentecostals preach civic separation and fealty to leaders, these preachers demand civic immersion and deference to movements for equity.

Although some find that such a platform is revolutionary or a rhetorical effort to encourage a Black supremacy movement, these critics miss the larger message. They read about Rev. Jeremiah Wright's comment "not God bless America, God damn America,"[5] and recoil in disgust. By only hearing those clips outside of their full context, critics miss the true call for pride in Black excellence and a national call to action for the creation of a more unified and equitable society. This *parrhesiastic* message should not be revolutionary. It should be the standard. In fact, it is a tone that, even early in his career, Martin Luther King, Jr. preached. In a 1959 conference for religious leaders, King decried, "Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic

conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them, is a spiritually moribund religion in need of new blood."[6] The point is that civic fealty does not have to be the norm or even accepted simply because hegemonic forces are trying to establish a postracial ideology that excuses a racialized social stratification. Civic fealty can also encourage resistance. There is evidence of resistance to these moves going back decades to leaders that are endeared by people of all races. Locating agency for the least and recognizing those structures that limit access are essential steps in the greater struggle for civil rights.

While this thesis specifically focused on Memphis and Shelby County, the conversations there reflect a broader national dialogue. Civic fealty is not unique to Memphis. In the midst of the national coronavirus pandemic, President Trump put the concept on center stage. In response to critiques from governors in Washington and Michigan, Trump lashed out saying, "All I want them to do, very simple, I want them to be appreciative. I don't want them to say things that aren't true. I want them to be appreciative. We've done a great job…If they don't treat you right, I don't call."[7] Trump's rhetoric demands governors fill a subservient position that elevates Trump's status. Trump's distance from responsibility for virus testing delays echoes Strickland's postracial message. Where Strickland's postracism situates racially inequity as a thing of the past and irrelevant to current conditions, Trump claims, "I don't take responsibility at all because we were given a set of circumstances, and were given rules, recommendations, and circumstances from a different time…And what we've done is redesigned it very quickly…And we're now in very, very strong shape."[8] Trump acts as if those problems and circumstances were not his fault. They were here before he got there. Now that he is in power, he has resolved those issues and those problems of the past are no longer worthy of discussion. This rhetoric also rings of Mitch McConnell's response to a question last summer regarding reparations payments to the

descendants of the enslaved. The Senate Majority Leader claimed, "I don't think reparations for something that happened 150 years ago for whom none of us currently living are responsible is a good idea."[9] The issue with this kind of racial distance rhetoric is that these problems still exist today. The evidence in Memphis makes clear that the wealth inequality and governmental disrespect that situates racial inequities are not only \ a thing of the past for which no one alive can be held responsible, but also something happening right now. This kind of rhetoric denies that these problems are real and present today. In the words of writer Ta-Nehesi Coates, "it was 150 years ago, and it was right now."[10] These problems have not gone away. They have simply been masked by calls for civic fealty and postracial denial.

The inequitable distribution of resources in Memphis erases Black significance and mirrors a similar erasure on a national level that has dire consequences. A recent NPR report showed that most of the coronavirus testing in Memphis "is happening in the predominantly White and well-off suburbs, not the majority Black, lower-income neighborhoods."[11] This report echoes national trends. In Chicago, African Americans comprise 29% of that city's population, yet 70% of the coronavirus deaths have been in the Black community.[12] An analysis uncovers similarly disproportional outcomes in Michigan, Wisconsin, and North Carolina among others.[13] Rhetoric that erases Black significance and budgets that promote inequitable investments in Black communities have a material consequence that in certain circumstances can lead to death. More scholarly attention must be paid to this reality.

With such seemingly insurmountable problems on the national radar, the local can sometimes be written off as insignificant, but this thesis argues that is a mistake. Rhetorician Karen Tracy aptly calls local government "democracy's litmus test."[14] In other words, local government is where citizens find out if democracy really works. Scholar Candice Rai notes,

"Democracy and the public work of rhetoric can only be captured by inhabiting particular places—where one might observe democracy's concrete uses, evocations, and practices…as it is practiced by ordinary citizens."[15] It is where policies have the most immediate and direct effect on their lives. Rhetorical scholar Robert Asen writes, "Revaluing local perspectives could help to contextualize policy developments proceeding concurrently and over time across districts within a region, state, or the United States."[16] Too often have pundits and political leaders written off the extremes of the Trump presidency as a fluke, or, in the words of Democratic presidential hopeful Joe Biden, "History will treat this administration's time as an aberration;"[17] however, looking at the trends that are proceeding concurrently in local communities across the nation contradict this claim. An analysis of the rhetoric of the local shows that Trump is not in fact an aberration, but, perhaps, he is the new normal. Race and religion scholar Eddie Glaude posits, "It's easy for us to place it all on Donald Trump's shoulders…but this is us. If we're going to get past this, we can't blame it on him. He's a manifestation of the ugliness that's in us...Either we're going to change, or we going to do this again and again."[18] Glaude's point is that for the country to progress, America cannot keep focusing only on messianic or devilish leaders as peculiar aberrations for the country's successes or failures. Citizens must recognize that the flaws and triumphs are happening all around them on a local level at their church, in the town square, at the grocery down the street, and at City Hall. What once was a spectacle has become the mundane. Continuing to focus exclusively on the national omits the truth of the lived local experience by creating a civic separation and a hierarchy. In fact, that assumed hierarchy may be inverted when it comes to resistance. Race scholar Ibram Kendi asserts,

> The most effective protests have been fiercely local, they are protests that have been started by antiracists focusing on their immediate surroundings:

> their blocks, neighborhoods, schools, colleges, jobs, and professions. These local protests have then become statewide protests, and statewide protests have then become national protests, and national protests have then become international protests. But it starts with one person, or two people, or tiny groups, in their small surroundings, engaging in energetic mobilization of antiracists into organizations.[19]

The bulk of social change starts at the local level through some resistance to fealty. Progress demands civic participation and action. It will not abide submission to oppression.

This thesis situates the rhetoric of civic fealty, not only as a means of control, but also as a means of resistance. By emphasizing the responsibility that citizens have to fight for justice, rhetors like Earle Fisher and Lee Harris extend agency to a broad swath of the population rendered futile by the words of Ivory Jackson and Jim Strickland. Both Fisher and Harris center the needs of those with the least. Their rhetoric is part of a national awakening that is resisting hegemonic demands for fealty to individual leaders. Instead, these citizens call for action in support of a greater good and a common cause rather the uplift of one individual. The rhetoric of civic fealty starts locally, but it exists in a national context that is making it more and more relevant to everyone's lived reality.

The introduction to this thesis took its title from lines in the last speech Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. ever delivered. But while that "Something is happening in Memphis" line may have been an apt start to an analysis of rhetoric in Memphis, the lines that surround that phrase situate this thesis in a larger context. King declares "I'm delighted to see each of you here tonight in spite of a storm warning. You reveal that you are determined to go on anyhow. Something is happening in Memphis, something is happening in our world." The Civil Rights icon finds value

in each and every person in the room. He recognizes their agency to continue to fight in the face of danger. He takes pride in their commitment. What King sees in the streets of Memphis reflects a growing movement happening in world. The question remains unanswered as to whether the movement that prevails be the one that demands civic separation and fealty to an idol or civic participation and fealty to an ideal.

---

[1] Martin Luther King, Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop," The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, Last Updated March 27, 2019, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/ive-been-mountaintop-address-delivered-bishop-charles-mason-temple.

[2] Ida B. Wells, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells,*" (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 52.

[3] Samuel Hardiman, "Memphis Mayor Jim Strickland Wins Reelection with Message of Unity and Optimism," *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), October 4, 2019, https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/news/2019/10/03/memphis-mayoral-election-results/2418558001/.

[4] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*: *Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2011), 166.

[5] Jeremiah Wright, "Confusing God and Government," ABCNews.com. Delivered September 16, 2001, Posted April 27, 2008, https://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/story?id=4719157&page=1.

[6] Martin Luther King Jr., "Address at the Religious Leaders Conference on 11 May 1959," *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. Volume V: Threshold of a New Decade, January 1959-December 1960*, eds. Clayborne Carson, Tenisha Armstrong, Susan Carson, and Kieran Taylor (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 200.

[7] Donald Trump, "President Trump with Coronavirus Task Force Briefing," C-SPAN.org, March 27, 2020, https://www.c-span.org/video/?470753-1/president-trump-coronavirus-task-force-briefing.

[8] Donald Trump, "President Trump with Coronavirus Task Force Briefing," C-SPAN.org, March 13, 2020, https://www.c-span.org/video/?470351-1/president-trump-declares-national-emergency-response-coronavirus.

[9] Ted Barrett, "McConnell Opposes Paying Reparations: 'None of Us Currently Living Are Responsible' for Slavery," CNN.com, June 19, 2019., https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/18/politics/mitch-mcconnell-opposes-reparations-slavery/index.html.

[10] Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Opening Statement," United States House of Representatives, C-SPAN.org, June 19, 2019, https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4803498/ta-nehisi-coates-house-hearing-reparations

[11] Blake Farmer, "The Coronavirus Doesn't Discriminate, But U.S. Health Care Showing Familiar Biases," NPR.org, April 2, 2020, https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/04/02/825730141/the-coronavirus-doesnt-discriminate-but-u-s-health-care-showing-familiar-biases.

[12] Maria Ines Zamudio and Elliott Ramos, "In Chicago, 70% of COVID-19 Deaths ARE Black," WBEZ.org, April 5, 2020, https://www.wbez.org/shows/wbez-news/in-chicago-70-of-covid19-deaths-are-black/dd3f295f-445e-4e38-b37f-a1503782b507.

[13] Ibram X. Kendi, "What the Racial Data Show," *The Atlantic*, April 6, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/04/coronavirus-exposing-our-racial-divides/609526/.

[14] Karen Tracy, *Challenges of Ordinary Democracy: A Case Study in Deliberation and Dissent* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 196.

[15] Candice Rai, *Democracy's Lot: Rhetoric, Publics, and the Places of Invention*. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2016), 2.

[16] Robert Asen, *Democracy, Deliberation, and Education*. (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), 186.

[17] Shane Goldmacher, "Biden Thinks Trump Is the Problem, Not All Republicans. Other Democrats Disagree," *New York Times*, May 4, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/04/us/politics/biden-trump-republicans-2020.html.

[18] Eddie Glaude, Jr., "Blaming Trump Is Too Easy: This Is Us," Deadline: White House, MSNBC.com, August 5, 2019, https://www.msnbc.com/deadline-white-house/watch/blaming-trump-is-too-easy-this-is-us-65354309615.

[19] Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York, NY: Bold Type Books, 2016), 510.