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WORDS FROM ELSEWHERE:
THE RHETORIC OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN
PROPHETIC CALL NARRATIVES

BY THOMAS M. FUERST

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN
COMMUNICATION

THE UNIVERSITY OF MEMPHIS

APRIL 29, 2022

For Cassie:
I love you like dissertations love citations.

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A dissertation is a work of love and commitment not only on the part of the author but on the part of those who work with and love the author. This work is only possible because of the years of love and patience from my wife, Cassandra, who read numerous drafts and edited infinite comma mistakes. Andre Johnson's persevering belief in his students continued to inspire me as I labored to give birth to this text. I am also extremely grateful for the insightful comments and commitments of Christi Moss, Beverly Bond, and Gray Matthews. For years, my intellectual and personal life has flourished because of the creative pushback, affirmation, and friendship of JR Forasteros, Eric Crisp, Josh Dahm, Michael Fitzpatrick, Lucas Parris, Emily Rachiele, Paige Holden, Candy Passen, Brent Gann, and Dallas Pfeiffer. I am also grateful for the community of Bluff City Church for giving me the time and grace to work on my PhD while pastoring them. Finally, I want to acknowledge the two-decade-long commitment of Lonnie Nelson, who saw in a raw and unpolished college student the possibility of one day writing a dissertation.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the various rhetorical tactics of the African American Prophetic Tradition of the nineteenth century, specifically those utilized in the prophetic call narratives of Maria Stewart, Nat Turner, Julia Foote, and Richard Allen. These figures anchor their larger prophetic messages in the claim that God has *called* them to the prophetic task. This rhetoric of *calling* assumes that God still speaks, and that God's speaking matters to local communities under the thumb of racial and gendered oppression. Moreover, the rhetoric of calling assumes that God's speaking has material (not just spiritual) effect in the world, and that God has spoken through *them* to criticize systems of oppression and energize resistance. Through the prophetic call narratives of these four figures, communication scholars can glimpse the unique rhetorical contributions the African American Prophetic Tradition makes to American oratory, storytelling, ethics, and protest. These figures invite us to move beyond simplistic, folkish stereotypes of nineteenth-century Black preachers to see that they exercised sophisticated and thoughtful engagements with, indeed, *embodiments* of the biblical text and the "text" of the world around them.

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INTRODUCTION: WORDS ABOUT WORDS FROM ELSEWHERE

Thesis, Contemporary Relevance, and Methodology

The intent of this work lies in examining various rhetorical tactics of the African American Prophetic Tradition of the nineteenth century, specifically those utilized in the prophetic call narratives of Maria Stewart, Nat Turner, Julia Foote, and Richard Allen. These figures anchor their larger prophetic messages in the claim that God has *called* them to the prophetic task. This rhetoric of *calling* assumes that God still speaks, and that God's speaking matters to local communities under the thumb of racial and gendered oppression. Moreover, the rhetoric of calling assumes that God's speaking has material (not just spiritual) effect in the world, and that God has spoken through *them* to criticize systems of oppression and energize resistance.

Through the prophetic call narratives of these four figures, communication scholars can glimpse the unique rhetorical contributions the African American Prophetic Tradition makes to American oratory, storytelling, ethics, and protest. These figures invite us to move beyond simplistic, folkish stereotypes of nineteenth century Black preachers to see that they exercised sophisticated and thoughtful engagements with, indeed, *embodiments* of the biblical text and the "text" of the world around them.

In the call narratives of Maria Stewart and Julia Foote, we see the gendered elements that added a third layer to the Du Boisian "double-consciousness." Their stories allow us to see how they circumvented patriarchy and resisted patriarchal interpretations of the Bible through biblical, embodied, dramatic, visionary appeals that sidestepped persuasion and demanded either acceptance or rejection. In this, scholars have an opportunity to see, yet again, why we must depatriarchalize our notions of prophecy and

resistance rhetoric to “include the rhetorical activities of female prophets who exemplify the distinctive, substantive stylistic characteristics of the prophetic genre.”¹

Further, a rhetorical analysis of these four call narratives should generate interdisciplinary conversation amongst scholars from religious studies, theology, biblical studies, African American history, and rhetoric. Kristen Lynn Majocha rightly notes, “the literature on prophetic rhetoric overlaps genres, including religion, theology, communication studies, and religious communication studies, as well as other fields of academic inquiry,”² such as psychology, sociology, and political science.

Herein I attempt no new theory but rather apply known methodologies from rhetorical criticism to investigate texts communication scholars have insufficiently explored. Generally, I engage these texts with a close reading methodology, which focuses on the “purpose of the rhetor,” “intentional dynamics of a text,”³ and offers an analysis of the “historical and biographical circumstances”⁴ that result in form, style, composition, and the kinds of effect invited by the oration. However, recognizing the limitations of close reading hermeneutics, I also apply other critical lenses for each

¹ Kerith M. Woodyard, “Depatriarchalizing in Rhetorical Theory: Toward a Feminist Prophetic Tradition.” *Ohio Communication Journal*. Vol. 48 (October 2010), 30.

² Kirsten Lynn Majocha, “Prophetic Rhetoric: A Gap between the Field of Study and the Real World.” *Journal of Communication and Religion*. Vol. 39, No. 4. (Winter 2016), 6.

³ Michael Leff, “Things Made by Words: Reflections on Textual Criticism.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. Vol. 78 (1992), 223. Leff, in contrast to McGee’s fragmentation of texts, argues for a Ciceronian turn, which instills functionality of entire texts as the primary place of interpretive possibilities. In this, “we achieve something that might be called formal/functional criticism. This approach is committed to understanding discourses in their full complexity, comprehending them both as linguistic constructions and as efforts to exercise influence, and it operates through paradigm cases rather than abstract principles.” (228)

⁴ Kevin R. McClure, “Frederick Douglass’ Use of Comparison in His Fourth of July Oration: a Textual Criticism.” *Western Journal of Communication*. Vol. 64 (Fall 2000), 426.

narrative as the texts lead. Instead of using a method over a text and forcing it to work, I have attempted to let the text invite its own critical engagement. For example, with Maria Stewart and Richard Allen, I use close reading accented with structural analysis, intertextual observations, or cluster criticism. With Nat Turner, I engage questions of authorship and agency by applying close reading modified by the critical tool of conscious identification. With Julia Foote's call narrative, I utilize close reading supplemented with a womanist hermeneutical lens of redemptive self-love.

“WORDS FROM ELSEWHERE”: RHETORICAL CRITICISM, PROPHECY, AND CALL NARRATIVES

Through the remainder of this introduction, I discuss the ambiguities around defining of prophetic rhetoric. From there, I offer a survey of rhetoric scholarship wrestling with prophetic rhetoric. Then, I work toward a definition of prophetic rhetoric by investigating its impious piety, probing the nature of the genre, highlighting its heretical opposition to ideographs, and discussing its world-reimagining capabilities before offering a definition of prophecy and discussing the nature of prophetic personae. Finally, I define prophetic rhetoric.

Words About the “Words from Elsewhere”

The “words from elsewhere” discussed in this dissertation need some clarification. Because every study has its boundaries, and every scholar has limits to their knowledge, I only discuss prophetic rhetoric within the Jewish and Christian traditions, mainly as found in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. I make no claim on how other religious traditions define prophecy.

Still, even within the religious traditions associated with the Bible, ambiguity abounds. Kristen Lynn Majocha, covering a range of definitions in the field of rhetoric,

demonstrates that we have two primary problems when assessing the literature on the definition of prophetic rhetoric. First, an enormous rift exists between the way academics and non-academics approach the word family of *prophecy*. Second, we have the dilemma of the multi-disciplinary understanding needed to assess the genre adequately.

In the following, I survey prophetic rhetoric as studied in the field of rhetoric.

Prophetic Rhetoric

Kenneth Burke

While Kenneth Burke emphatically avoided metaphysical claims, he nonetheless mined Christian theology, which he saw as fundamentally rhetorical, for functional analogies to assist scholars in thinking about how rhetoric works. In *Permanence and Change*, he provides a paragraph where he discusses the *role* of the prophet. Drawing on Max Weber, who understood prophetic individuals as “a purely individual bearer of charisma, who by virtue of his mission proclaims a religious doctrine or divine commandment,”⁵ Burke ties communicative charisma to the revolutionary, subversive nature of prophetic rhetoric. He contrasts priests and prophets, not through in-depth Religious Studies analysis⁶ but simply as analogies.⁷ Mainly Burke concerns himself not with “words from elsewhere” but with *logology*, words about words. For him, prophetic proclamation provides creative possibilities for understanding *human* rhetoric that envisions new possibilities for old structures of thinking, speaking, organizing, and being.

⁵ Max Weber, “The Prophet,” in S. N. Eisenstadt, ed., *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building: Selected Papers*. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1968), 253.

⁶ The bifurcation of priest-prophet does not make sense within a religious studies context, given, especially, that biblical prophets like Isaiah worked in priestly roles.

⁷ Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, Ltd. 1984), 179.

James Darsey

James Darsey's *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America*

highlights our discipline's unease with prophetic rhetoric as a tradition rooted primarily in Jewish and Christian, rather than Greco-Roman, oratory. Darsey argues:

Though the study of the theory of rhetoric in the West has been largely restricted to the line of inheritance that runs from Plato and Aristotle through Cicero, Quintilian, Saint Augustine, into the Middle Ages, the neo-Classical rhetorics of the Renaissance, to the modern period, including George Campbell, Hugh Blair, and Richard Whately, to contemporary times and figures such as Kenneth Burke and Chaim Perelman, there is evidence of a body of rhetorical practice that has its roots in a very different tradition. Particularly in the United States, with its early self-conception as the New Israel, the 'shining city on the hill,' the rhetoric of the Christian Bible has had an enormous presence in our public discourse.⁸

Because prophetic rhetoric has a different origin, Darsey says scholars should evaluate it on its own terms and not only via a tradition foreign to its intentions and forms. For example, the prophetic figure contributes no inventional material to the artifact in the Jewish and Christian rhetorical traditions. Instead, echoing Claus Westermann, Darsey says, "prophetic speech is incomprehensible except as the speech of a divine messenger; the prophet, properly understood, speaks for another."⁹ Thus, in some sense, prophetic figures "read from a script" handed to them rather than invented by them. "Prophecy shatters the unity of rhetoric. *Inventio* and *action* are not products of the same agent."¹⁰

The script handed to the prophet is constitutive in that it calls for and creates a community of defiance against the dominant powers; while such resistance has its own

⁸ Darsey, 15-16.

⁹ Darsey, 16.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

reasons, it never becomes mere rationality. Because the powers are so evil, evil so oppressive, and oppression so absolute, prophets articulate their alternative vision in absolutist terms. “It makes no sense to talk of ‘practical wisdom,’ ‘sensitivity to the occasion,’ ‘opportunistic economizing,’ ‘the capacity to learn from experience,’ ‘flexibility and looseness of interest,’ or ‘bargaining.’”¹¹ Further, because the message arrives as “a word from elsewhere,” to change that message to appear more reasonable and palatable to the audience violates the very character of the message. The Greco-Roman Rhetorical tradition’s emphasis on pragmatic attentiveness to audience expectations for civil cohesion has no place in prophetic rhetoric’s decided rejection of pragmatism and its lack of interest in appealing to the distorted views of the audience and its *polis*.

Darsey also notes that the prophet’s rhetorical situation comprises times of crisis when the community loses its sense of the sacred under the threat of a hegemonic power. In this time of crisis, Darsey says, “the prophet is an accuser and judge; he (sic) is called into being when the law has been violated, a critical time. The prophet announces both the charges and the verdict of God or nature against the transgressor of the law.”¹²

Despite Darsey’s contributions, his desire to demonstrate prophetic rhetoric’s unique capacities and methodologies suffers from a significant racial blind spot seen most clearly when discussing the collapse of prophetic impulse in American politics.

What the contemporary right has in common with the prophetic tradition is the impulse to order...But there is a considerable difference between an order that derives from compassion, is optimistic, and provides direction for the future and one that derives from fear, is faithless, and retreats into

¹¹ Ibid., 21.

¹² Ibid., 24.

the mythical past...Modern movements of the left are no less spiritually impoverished than that of the right...[Leftist] visions failed to capture the imagination of most Americans not because of any inherent defect, but because radicalism is cultural and these ideals were not of our culture.¹³

Here, Darsey misses the existence of a radical, prophetic tradition that asserts the order of justice and appeals to traditions and myths rooted in the American experience. The Black church's African American Prophetic Tradition offers the possibility of a radical rhetoric transcending right/left dichotomies precisely by refusing to retreat into a mythical past.

Kerith Woodyard

Kerith Woodyard's "Depatriarchalizing in Rhetorical Theory: Toward a Feminist Prophetic Tradition" builds off James Darsey's definition of prophecy. Understanding that the tradition does not originate in the Greek tradition of rhetoric, she characterizes it by its refusal to adhere to audience expectations.¹⁴ The prophet upturns the audience's value system and, therefore, has no footing upon which to appeal to it.

Woodyard argues that scholars have overlooked female prophets in the Bible and subsequent history. Moreover, by doing so, scholars have neglected "some of the most radical voices in American public address, such as those belonging to female radicals and radicals of color."¹⁵ Through a feminist rhetorical lens, she seeks to depatriarchalize and *redeem* both the western rhetorical canon and the Bible. She demonstrates how the

¹³ Ibid., 206.

¹⁴ Kerith M. Woodyard, "If by Martyrdom I Can Advance My Race One Step, I am Ready for It': Prophetic *Ethos* and the Reception of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible*." *Journal of Communication and Religion*. Vol. 31 (November 2008), 276.

¹⁵ Kerith M. Woodyard, "Depatriarchalizing in Rhetorical Theory: Toward a Feminist Prophetic Tradition." *Ohio Communication Journal*. Vol. 48 (October 2010), 29.

feminist hermeneutic roots itself in the Bible's texts and themes, particularly those themes of the "prophetic liberating principle."¹⁶

Woodyard particularizes this emphasis in her essay on Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible* when she classifies it as an example of nineteenth-century prophetic rhetoric in the feminist vein. Drawing from Darsey, she shows how Stanton suffered rejection from both patriarchists and suffragists who deemed her prophetic posturing and unapologetic feminist interpretations of biblical texts too radical. She shows how neo-Aristotelian standards judge prophetic rhetoric as a rhetorical failure.¹⁷ However, because prophetic rhetoric operates with ancient Hebrew, prophetic *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*, it does precisely what Stanton intended: tells the truth about women's experience of injustice no matter the personal risk or possibility of persuasion. Stanton cannot appeal to an ideal in the audience's "reality structure" by identifying and persuading them. She "rather, calls for a fundamental *reordering* of the audience's value system as a means to alleviate social injustice and replicate the natural ordering of creation."¹⁸

Two aspects of Woodyard's work have relevance to this dissertation. First, her argument that prophecy moves rhetoricians beyond neo-Aristotelian and Greco-Roman traditions helps us understand the radical, rhetorical re-orientation we need for assessing prophecy. To use a Burkean phrase, studying prophetic rhetoric with Greco-Roman lenses reveals a "trained incapacity" on the part of scholars to adequately evaluate rhetoric and literature that does not see persuasion as a primary objective. Second,

¹⁶ Woodyard, "Depatriarchalizing in Rhetorical Theory." 32.

¹⁷ Woodyard, "If by Martyrdom I Can Advance My Race One Step, I am Ready for It." 275.

¹⁸ Woodyard, "If by Martyrdom I Can Advance My Race One Step, I am Ready for It." 280.

Woodyard highlights the value of recovering biblical, historical, and contemporary prophetic *female* voices, which I hope to build on by discussing Maria Stewart and Julia Foote.

Andre E. Johnson

Kristen Lynn Majocha provides one of the most thorough overviews of prophetic rhetoric in communication studies. She discusses essays that attribute prophetic rhetoric to American presidents and sees within prophetic rhetoric a secular-sacred dichotomy. Nevertheless, like Darsey before her, she almost exclusively evaluates *white*, dominantly protestant, *male* prophetic rhetoric. It is, nevertheless, easy to assume the secular-sacred dichotomy when your figures embody and reinforce that dichotomy.¹⁹ But what about when they do not?

Andre E. Johnson has highlighted this whitewashing of prophetic rhetoric and called rhetoric scholars to explore the African American Prophetic Tradition. Black prophecy does not always align with Anglo-American radical rhetoric (Darsey), nor does Womanist prophetic rhetoric generically coincide with male or feminist prophetic rhetoric (Kohrs Campbell). Johnson agrees with Darsey that the Hebrew origins of American prophecy requires that we “invoke another standard of judgment toward [the] rhetoric.”²⁰ Evaluating prophetic rhetoric with neo-Aristotelian standards forces the critic to render it a failure when it does not persuade. Yet prophetic rhetoric often fails to persuade its audience or adhere to minds because such objectives lie outside prophecy’s

¹⁹ Majocha, “Prophetic Rhetoric.” 11.

²⁰ Andre E. Johnson, *The Forgotten Prophet: Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and the African American Prophetic Tradition*. (Lenham: Lexington Book, 2012), 4.

telos or expectation. Prophetic figures rarely expect to persuade their audiences. Instead, their objective lies in *witnessing* or truth-telling about morally significant events.

Understanding the shift in emphasis away from *persuasion* to *witness* matters when rhetoric scholars attempt to analyze *types* of Black prophecy. For example, the two subsets of prophecy given most attention by Rhetoric scholars are apocalypse and jeremiad. In particular, the jeremiad relies on an agreed upon *covenant* between the prophet and the audience. The covenant forms a moral basis from which the prophet feels the audience has strayed and must return. Johnson rightly asks, however, “what if the covenant itself is the problem – can one still engage in prophetic discourse?”²¹ In the case of the African American Prophetic Tradition, Johnson considers the *Constitution of the United States* both the covenant and the problem. Thus, African American prophetic figures “had to develop other forms of prophetic discourse to appeal to and move their audiences.”²²

Whether these forms convey celebration, dispute, mission, or pessimism, Johnson defines prophetic rhetoric as “discourse grounded in the sacred 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.”²³ It may constitute, provide self-worth, inspire to action, or simply “speak out on behalf of others and chronicle their pain and suffering.”²⁴ Regardless, its agenda does not always assume a persuasive effect.

²¹ Ibid., 10.

²² Ibid., 10.

²³ Ibid., 7.

²⁴ Ibid., 14.

Christopher Hobson

Christopher Hobson looks explicitly at the African American Prophetic Tradition, drawing heavily on Gerhard von Rad's notion of "saving history," arguing that it resembles "African American ideas of God's action in history on behalf of the powerless."²⁵ Hobson's most poignant contribution to my discussion is his delineation of the biblical traditions of prophecy in the African American Prophetic Tradition.

He first notes the Exodus-Deuteronomy Tradition.²⁶ Herein, African Americans use figures related to the Exodus narrative to highlight God's work of liberation in American slavery and racism. The emphasis in this tradition lies in the eventual coming change in the African American experience. The covenantal ideas in the Exodus-Deuteronomy traditions in the Bible get translated in the African American Prophetic Tradition as a scathing indictment of America for breaking the sacred covenant by violating the civil rights of Black communities and individuals.

Hobson also notes an Isaiah-Ezekiel Tradition,²⁷ from which the African American Prophetic Tradition draws its emphasis on the communal hope for eventual restoration. This restoration comes about through the biblical idea of *turning* or *repentance*. As used in the African American Prophetic Tradition, white America has the

²⁵ Christopher Z. Hobson, *The Mount of Vision: African American Prophetic Tradition, 1800-1950*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), xiii.

²⁶ Hobson, 37-39.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

primary²⁸ burden of *turning*. Black America becomes its own means of redemption when speaking the *turning* truth to white America and working for its liberation.

Hobson also appeals to the Jeremian Tradition.²⁹ Drawing on Jeremiah's conception of a community so hardened by sin that it cannot turn, which the African American Prophetic Tradition applies to the United States, this tradition expresses hope for white America's *turning* but denies its likelihood. This denial looks a bit like Andre E. Johnson's notion of Prophetic Pessimism:

Many African-American prophets, therefore, finding the racism too entrenched and the American covenant ideals not realistic for Black Americans to ascertain, became wailing and moaning prophets within what I call the *lament tradition of prophecy*. In this tradition, the prophet's primary function is to speak out on the behalf of others and to chronicle their pain and suffering as well as their own.³⁰

Eventually, the hardness of white America's heart results in the nation's downfall. While in other strains of prophecy, the collapse occurs because of a broken covenant, the Jeremian tradition lacks covenantal reference. Instead, it tends toward apocalyptic thinking, connecting Jeremian prophecy with Black nationalism and its rhetoric of revolution.

Finally, Hobson details the Daniel-Revelation Tradition.³¹ This tradition uses apocalyptic rhetoric and emphasizes the approaching end of earthly kingdoms and the

²⁸ I say *primary* because the Black congregation may also need to do their own *turning*. However, Black *turning* is not only socially secondary but it is also ethically secondary. That is, the Black auditor needs to *turn* only insofar as they have assumed the superiority of whiteness or adopted, even if unwittingly, the assumptions of or behaviors that contribute to white supremacy.

²⁹ Ibid., 40-41.

³⁰ Andre E. Johnson, "The Prophetic Persona of James Cone and the Rhetorical theology of Black Theology." *Black Theology: An International Journal*. Vol. 8, No. 3. (June 2010), 273.

³¹ Hobson, 41-42.

inauguration of a new kingdom of God's rule. Through the transition from the present age to the kingdom, this tradition challenges the community of God to endure and persevere. Hobson says, accordingly, that some tension may exist within the community regarding whether they can expect justice in this life or the next.

Given the contradictory nature of some of these prophetic traditions, Hobson concludes that the African American Prophetic Tradition's use of these strains embrace the tensions and use the version they found most helpful at a given moment. Whereas scholars may wish to create binaries and boundaries, prophetic speakers "were aware of all these traditions and did not necessarily observe boundaries between them."³²

THE CHALLENGE AND DEFINITION OF PROPHETIC RHETORIC

Most of the scholars mentioned above note that taking the Hebrew Bible origins of prophetic rhetoric seriously may challenge our existing theories and models of rhetoric. Darsey says this explicitly:

Unlike rhetoric operating within the constraints of neo-Aristotelianism, with its emphasis on adaptation of the message to the immediate audience, prophetic rhetoric – rooted in the books of the Hebrew Bible – is characterized by the rhetor's steadfast refusal to adjust the message to meet audience expectations.³³

Because persuasion does not provide the *telos* of prophetic rhetoric, an analysis of prophecy must criticize by modified standards or other standards than those typically used in our discipline. Indeed, it affects how we understand even the inventive intentions behind form and style, themes, and even the choice of genre.

³² Ibid., 42.

³³ Woodyard, "Depatriarchalizing in Rhetorical Theory." 28.

Impious Piety, Embodiment, and Enactment

Burke argued that rhetorical expectations regarding “what properly goes with what”³⁴ derive from a sense of *piety*. Piety compels the rhetor to choose what she deems the proper genre or form of discourse in a particular rhetorical situation. Piety orients us toward appropriateness and, thus, lends the rhetor the beginnings of identification.

However, the problem with prophetic rhetoric lies in its refusal to attend to the constraints of audience expectations, its disinterest in audience notions of fulfillment, and its rejection of rhetorical piety. It knowingly opts for an *impious* posture toward the audience, what the audience holds sacred, or even what may most effectively persuade.³⁵ If, in Burkean terms, form creates an appetite within the auditor that the rhetor then fulfills, then prophecy seems, in some sense, to leave the audience famished.

We see this impiety in the sundry speech forms prophets employ. These forms may not have distinct prophetic qualities.³⁶ Still, the diversity of forms displays the prophet’s inventive possibilities, allowing prophets to look outside even the piously pious forms of religion, into the so-called secular sphere, for forms that transcend the limitations of the sacred. The form the prophet chooses does not merely reveal a message. It responds to the “perceived situational demands”³⁷ by stuffing the impious message

³⁴ Burke, *Permanence and Change*. 74.

³⁵ Sometimes prophets do not even want to persuade, as in the case of the 8th century BCE prophet, Jonah, who expressed suicidal regret when his minimalist rhetoric did succeed. “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” Jonah 3:4 in *The New Revised Standard Version*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989).

³⁶ Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*. Trans: Hugh Clayton White. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 26.

³⁷ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, “Form and Genre in Rhetorical Criticism: An Introduction.” In *Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action*. Ed. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (Falls Church: Speech Communication Association (1976), 15.

with unexpected potentialities, alternative social possibilities, and limitations on the available social actions.³⁸

However, the prophet does not choose forms *foreign* to the audience. Rather, they choose unforeseen forms. They aim to shock, agitate, and throw off the audience's equilibrium by utilizing forms of lament when expected to rejoice, celebration when expected to mourn, delight when expected to despair, and anguish when expected to hope. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell highlights something similar when in her argument for a distinctive feminist genre, "Finally, women's liberation rhetoric is characterized by the use of confrontative, non-adjustive strategies designed to 'violate the reality structure'...violate the norms of decorum, morality, and 'femininity' of the women addressed.""³⁹

In short, prophetic figures use a variety of genres⁴⁰ to break conventional pieties and invoke "consciousness raising"⁴¹ in the oppressed. The prophetic rhetor chooses the unforeseen form to raise questions in a world of false answers, cast doubt on unwarranted certitude, or even provide a different *orientation* toward reality than that arranged by the hegemonic, imperial *disorientation* of the dominant consciousness's pieties.

³⁸ Hugh Dalziel Duncan in Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change*. xxv.

³⁹ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation: An Oxymoron." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. Vol. 59, No.1 (Feb. 1973), 81. Brueggemann also highlights this when discussing the prophets' choice of poetry: "Poetic imagination is the last way left in which to challenge and conflict the dominant reality. The dominant reality is necessarily in prose, but to create such poetry and lyrical thought requires more than skill in making rhymes. I am concerned not with the formal aspects of poetry but with the substantive issues of alternative prospects that the managed prose around us cannot invent and does not want to permit." Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*. 2nd Ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 40.

⁴⁰ Hobson, 11.

⁴¹ Kohrs Campbell, 78.

Because invention originates in the divine realm, the prophet may not even foresee the impiety:

Neither previous faith nor any other personal endowment had the slightest part to play in preparing a man who was called to stand before Yahweh for his vocation. He might by nature be a lover of peace, yet it might be laid upon him to threaten and reprove, even if, as with Jeremiah, it broke his heart to do so. Or, if nature made him prone to severity, he might be forced, like Ezekiel, to walk the way of comforting men and saving them.⁴²

Thus, whether poetry or prose, disputation or dialogue, the prophet's choice contradicts the expectation of form to set before the audience alternatives they had not already considered or they had insisted on *not* considering. Impiety is the instrument of prophetic invention; impiety is prophecy's piety; inappropriateness is the prophet's appropriateness.

The use of various forms assists in providing options for impiety. We see this in the way prophets combine form and content through embodiment or *enactment*. Enactment is a "recurrent rhetorical form, a reflexive form...in which the speaker incarnates the argument, *is* the proof of the truth of what is said."⁴³ For, as von Rad notes, "not only the prophet's lips but also his (sic) whole being were absorbed in the service of prophecy. Consequently, when the prophet's life entered the veil of deep suffering and abandonment by God, thus became a unique kind of witness-bearing."⁴⁴

Prophets employ visual rhetoric to bolster their enactment, to incarnate their message in both the biblical tradition⁴⁵ and the African American Prophetic Tradition.

⁴² Gerhard von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 37.

⁴³ Kohrs Campbell and Hall Jamieson, 5.

⁴⁴ von Rad, 18.

⁴⁵ "Ezekiel lies on his side in the dirt for 390 days, eats food cooked over dung, shaves his head, weighs and burns his hair, packs a bag and digs a hole through a wall, and does not mourn the death of his wife. In Jeremiah 13, the prophet places a worn loincloth in a rock and allows it to partially decay before using it as

Because “African Americans so strongly accepted the figural identification between themselves and a biblical Israel that most had no trouble feeling Christianity a religion that extended a special salvation promise to them together with a general one to all nations.”⁴⁶ We encounter identification and enactment in the sensual, visionary experience of Julia Foote as she washes Jesus’ feet, thus (re)enacting the scene in which Jesus teaches his own disciples what true power looks like. In her (re)enactment, however, she takes on the position of Jesus, thus, offering proof of her messiah-like status. So, too, with Nat Turner. Turner’s impending martyrdom combined with his childhood call and communal affirmation utilizes enactment to verify his prophetic, messianic status, morally and religiously validating his actions. Finally, as I demonstrate in chapter 1 the intertextual structuring of Maria Stewart’s call narrative enacts typical Hebrew prophetic call narrative structures. She positions herself rhetorically, spiritually, and physically in the prophetic traditions of Moses, Isaiah, and Paul. The structure of her narrative becomes the proof of her prophetic call. Jamie L. Carlacio argues that “in both a literal and figurative sense, Stewart *replaces* Paul, speaking ‘humbly’ for God and blending her voice with the most famous of Christian martyrs as she assumes her place at the textual pulpit.”⁴⁷

In both the biblical tradition and the African American Prophetic Tradition, the *bodily, visual* form of prophetic rhetoric consubstantially conjoins with the message

a sermonic object lesson.” Wilda C. Gafney, *Daughters of Miriam: Women Prophets in Ancient Israel*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 5.

⁴⁶ Hobson, 50.

⁴⁷ Jamie L. Carlacio, “Speaking with and To Me: Discursive Positioning and the Unstable Categories of Race, Class, and Gender. In *Calling Cards: Theory and Practice in the Study of Race, Gender, and Culture*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), kindle loc. 1631.

conveyed. Through enactment, prophets maintain cohesion between message and messenger, and between form and content because “form is never something external, concerned with literary style alone.”⁴⁸ Through enactment they bypass rational constraints⁴⁹ and become *proof* of the validity of their message. The frequency of the use of enactment, then, points to the need for analyzing the prophetic genre.

Genre and Time in Prophecy

Carolyn R. Miller’s 1984 article, “Genre as Social Action” argues “a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of a discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish.”⁵⁰ Miller’s pragmatic, action-centered approach to genre fuses modified versions of situation and motive (Burke), form and meaning (Campbell and Jamieson), and exigence (Bitzer). For Miller, genres do not exist in conceptual space awaiting employment in concrete situations. Rather rhetors create genre when they employ particular forms in *recurring* rhetorical situations. These forms, over time, become restraints upon rhetoricians, thereby reshaping content and forming genres considered “suitable” in certain circumstances. Genres do not merely exist on the page; their effects reverberate into real life and thus any evaluation of them must include a substantial appreciation for the social action they create.

Miller says, “what is particularly important about rhetorical situations for a theory of genres is that they recur”⁵¹ because recurrence offers us occasion for comparison.⁵²

⁴⁸ von Rad, 20.

⁴⁹ Kohrs Campbell and Hall Jamieson, 422.

⁵⁰ Carolyn R. Miller, “Genre as Social Action.” *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, No. 70 (1984), 151.

⁵¹ Miller, 156.

⁵² See also: Campbell and Jamieson, 430

Previous situations give us “types” of knowledge and meanings to apply to an analogous contemporary situation.⁵³ The analogous type, combined with audience expectations, create a series of constraints upon the rhetor. If the rhetor wants to establish identification and effect, they must take these constraints and expectations seriously. However, gifted members of the discourse community may employ creative means to subvert the audience’s expectations and the genre’s constraints.

The recurrence of types, the subversion of a discourse community’s expectations, and a genre’s constraints bring us to the first difficulty prophecy poses for generic criticism. Despite postmodernity’s complication of our notions of time, we still operate with a linear view. However, as von Rad notes, ancient “Israel’s perception of time was taken from a different angle from ours...Hebrew completely lacks a word for our modern concept of time.”⁵⁴ Israel’s conception of time revolved around their festal seasons, which gave rhythm to ancient life, and “the festivals, not time, were the absolute data, and were data whose holiness was absolute.”⁵⁵ While not sharing a cyclical view of time with their ancient Near Eastern neighbors, Israel’s festal-centric conceptions of chronology bound Israel to *historical events* not mythical ones. As von Rad notes, “When Israel ate the Passover, clad as for a journey, staff in hand, sandals on her feet, and in the haste of departure, she was manifestly doing more than merely remembering the Exodus: she was entering into the saving event of the Exodus itself and participating in it in a quite ‘actual’ way.”⁵⁶ Miller’s conception of genre assumes a linear notion of time where events in the

⁵³ For Miller, the situations never objectively, historically repeat. They only repeat by analogy.

⁵⁴ von Rad, 78.

⁵⁵ Von Rad, 80.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 81-82.

past are only folded over into the present via analogy, but Israel's notion of time allows for present persons to participate in historical events.

The more considerable difficulty prophetic rhetoric creates for Miller's understanding of genre and time, however, is that prophets intentionally break rhetorical pieties. Even if understood analogically, Israel's chronology still revolves primarily around its festivals commemorating historical saving events. The ritual and liturgies accompanying these festivals created audience expectations and, thus, rhetorical pieties connecting the moments through time. Given the prophetic penchant for impiety-as-piety, we expect and, indeed, see prophets criticizing Israel's festivals.⁵⁷ Given that Israel's festivals re-incarnated the original saving event, and given that time folded over on itself so that worshipers *participated* in the event they ritually re-enacted, prophet criticism disrupts Israel's notions of time by their impious criticisms.

That said, when prophets impiously criticized Israel's festivals, they did not see themselves as falling outside the saving history these festivals represented. Instead, they saw the message as bringing new meaning to old categories. Speaking within specific historical circumstances (*kairos*), prophetic rhetoric reinterpreted the historical, saving events with a new possibility that transcended and superseded ancient meanings. Herein lies the value of Miller's emphasis on analogous types:

The prophetic message differs from all previous Israelite theology, which was based on the past saving history, in that the prophets looked for the

⁵⁷ "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices," says the Lord; "I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood." Isaiah 1:12-15 (NRSV).

decisive factor in Israel's whole existence – her life and her death – in some future event. Even so, the specific form of the new thing which they herald is not chosen at random; the new is to be effective in a way which is more or less analogous to God's former saving work.⁵⁸

The former festival and ritual becomes analogous to a new era created via divine speech, much like divine speech creates a world previously marked by chaos in Genesis 1.

Miller says that the recurring rhetorical situations generate an exigence which she brands “a social motive.”⁵⁹ The exigence provides the rhetor with rhetorical purpose, a recognizable way of making their intentions known to the audience. Thus, evaluating the situations in which prophetic rhetoric arises has value. Keeping in mind that prophetic form and meaning, from the prophet's perspective, originate in “a divine understanding of human situations,”⁶⁰ interpreters assess four situations in which prophetic rhetoric appears in the Hebrew Bible: 1) the degeneracy of Yahwism because of syncretism (especially on the part of the priestly caste), 2) the rise of the monarchy and state-power in Israel through the sidelining of theocracy, 3) economic and social oppression within Israel, 4) the rise of oppressive imperial powers outside of Israel.⁶¹ In the African American Prophetic Tradition, we add two related elements: 1) The justice of God in history, and 2) God's identification with the oppressed against the oppressor.⁶²

These situations have in common a hierarchical abuse of power. Thus, as a genre, prophetic rhetoric appears as a response to the *recurrence* of hegemonic hierarchical

⁵⁸ Von Rad, 93.

⁵⁹ Though, she admits, the motive may be unknown. Miller, 158.

⁶⁰ Heschel, *The Prophets*. xxvii.

⁶¹ von Rad, 10-11.

⁶² Hobson, 90.

discourse and deed, characterized by “control over the rhetorical territory through definition, establishment of a self-perpetuating initiation or *rite de passage*, and the stifling of opposing discourse.”⁶³ At every level, prophetic rhetoric threatens these discursive characteristics. It questions or rejects given definitions, offers its own rites of passage, and positions itself as a divine, knowing, opposing discourse. For this reason, prophets often find themselves exiled from their own communities.⁶⁴

Rejection from a given community due to prophetic impieties raises the question of how prophets establish belonging to a specific discourse community to begin with. Genres operate on the level of community *building* and *belonging*. A given genre, with its conventions and constraints, not only makes “communicative events more efficient but also [demonstrates] the person who produced the text knows ‘how we do things.’”⁶⁵ Thus, if the prophets so frequently *break* generic protocol, mismatch “what goes with what,” and purposely choose impiety-as-piety, how does the audience or the critic evaluate their place in a discourse community?

First, prophets communicate knowledge of “how we do things” and their own belonging by employing mimetic imitation of previous prophetic figures. Earlier violations of piety from prophets become prime inventive opportunities for later prophetic figures. While complete overlap does not occur, because genres form and reform over time, the earlier paradigms establish the constellation of constraints upon

⁶³ Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 34.

⁶⁴ John the Baptist, for example, preached his rite of passage, baptism for repentance, in the desert in order to criticize the religio-political system in Jerusalem.

⁶⁵ Rodney H. Jones, *Discourse Analysis: A Resource Book for Students*. 2nd Ed. (New York: Routledge, 2019),

which later prophetic rhetoric draws. Earlier violations of piety from prophets become prime inventive opportunities for later prophetic figures.

Second, while using familiar forms, prophetic rhetoric is characterized by a choice of form, style, and genres the audience does not expect. They live within the constraints and conventions of the community's rhetoric but playfully imagine how they can subvert and challenge the "'built-in' constraints."⁶⁶ Prophetic rhetoric recognizes its generic constraints but seeks to exploit those constraints to communicate the message. We see such creative subversion in chapter 1 in Maria Stewart's application of Hebrew prophetic call narrative structures to her narrative.

Finally, prophetic figures communicate their knowledge of "how we do things" by appealing to *ideals* the community holds sacred. Prophets appear when sacred ideals seem threatened or compromised. Thus, in their impiety they challenge the existing pieties by appealing to the commonly held beliefs or visions. Together, these two elements mean that prophets not only demonstrate a knowledge of "how we do things" but they intentionally break the rules to show that "how we do things" does not align with divine intentions, creation's moral order, or covenantal agreements.

In their use of intertextuality, employment of unforeseen yet not foreign forms, and ideals the community holds sacred, prophetic rhetoric confronts the community's sacred language by drawing them back to a past meaning or re-arranging the meaning altogether. Either way, through their impiety prophets become heretical agents to those caught within the dominant narrative. They achieve this heretical status by attacking the ideographs validating the hegemonic regime.

⁶⁶ Jones, *Discourse Analysis*. 9.

Ideographs and The Heresy of Prophecy

Their sensitivity to and subversion of the ruling power's rhetorical power requires an impious rhetorical posture on the prophet's part. Thus, engaging a community's ideographs becomes a primary focus of prophetic rhetoric.

Michael Calvin McGee says ideographs operate as the building blocks on which ideologies are created. Ideology "is a political language composed of slogan-like terms signifying collective commitment."⁶⁷ Ideographs use (1) ordinary terms found in political discourse while also (2) using high-order abstractions that create space for illusion and misdirection. They, thus, (3) represent a collective commitment normative goal, (4) a warranted use of power, (5) and an excusing behavior that would otherwise be deemed socially or morally suspect. Still, they (6) guide or constrain behavior and belief within communal expectations, (7) are used to socialize the community toward certain political and moral ends. Further, (8) when used inappropriately become the basis for communal conviction and exile,⁶⁸ and, therefore, (9) "have the capacity to control 'power' and to influence (if not determine) the shape and texture of each individual's 'reality.'"⁶⁹

These slogan-like terms and their characteristics have relevance to prophetic rhetoric because prophetic rhetoric concerns itself with the misuse of political, social, and economic power. Indeed, because inappropriate use of an ideograph can have negative consequences for the rhetor and the prophet intentionally employs impieties to convey

⁶⁷ Michael Calvin McGee, "The 'Ideograph': A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology." in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism, 5th ed.* Editors: Carl R. Burghardt and Hillary A. Jones. (State College: Strata Publishing, Inc. 2017), 476.

⁶⁸ McGee, 476.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 468.

their message, the ideograph becomes a prime opportunity to question, deconstruct, or denounce the ideology within the ideograph.

In other words, the prophet commits the rhetorical heresy of impiety *visa vie* the ideographs, sacred words employed by the dominant consciousness. Heschel, though not discussing ideographs, illustrates this point well:

What they attacked was, I repeat, supremely venerable: a sphere unmistakably holy; a spirituality that had both form and substance, that was concrete and inspiring, an atmosphere overwhelming the believer – pageantry, scenery, mystery, spectacle, fragrance, song, and exaltation. In the experience of such captivating sanctity, who could question the presence of God in the shape of a temple?⁷⁰

Prophetic rhetoric intentionally challenges the ideographs of a given mythological community to dismantle, demystify, and reimagine material, political, economic, and sometimes even religious reality.⁷¹

We see the heresy of ideographic impiety within the African American Prophetic Tradition. Therein, prophetic figures must criticize and energize against not only everyday racism but how white supremacy has been instilled within rhetorical shells and ideological slogans. Richard T. Hughes names the mythologies undergirding American culture, and though he does not discuss ideographs as such, he does highlight how various words have functioned in American nationalist discourse. One example should

⁷⁰ Heschel, *The Prophets*. 252.

⁷¹ The seventh century BCE prophet, Jeremiah, does this when he cites the ideograph, “Peace! Peace!” Walter Brueggemann says the dominant religious regime’s use of peace “includes recitation of the royal-temple ideology which covers over the real issues and engages in massive denial and propaganda...the official claims are plain lies, because social reality does not correspond to its ideology.” Jeremiah chooses this ideograph and counters “but there is no peace.” He understands the ideographic use of peace “intends to keep critical questions muted, so that establishment policy may advance unchecked.”

suffice. Hughes discusses the myth of a “chosen nation”⁷² wherein notions of chosenness or election function ideographically to justify American imperialism and land-grabs.

Frederick Douglass challenges this ideograph in his “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” He compares white Americans’ notion of chosenness⁷³ with ancient Israel’s election by Yahweh and rescue from Egypt:

This, for the purpose of this celebration, is the 4th of July. It is the birthday of your National Independence, and of your political freedom. This, to you, is what the Passover was to the emancipated people of God. It carries your minds back to the day, and to the act of your great deliverance; and to the signs, and to the wonders, associated with that act, and that day.⁷⁴

Douglas taps into his audience’s deepest held beliefs about national origins, moral virtue, and divine favor by citing white Americans’ ideographic notion of chosenness or divine election. This early, subtle reference to the myth builds the audience’s confidence only for Douglas to *impiously* violate the generic constraints⁷⁵ and contradict the ideographic myth. Because the Bible’s notion that

⁷² Hughes notes four other myths, each full of their own ideographic substance and ripe for prophetic criticism: The myth of Nature’s Nation – the conviction that American ideals and institutions are rooted in the natural order, that is, in God’s own intentions first revealed at the dawn of creation. The Myth of a Millennial Nation – the notion that the United States, building on that natural order, will usher in a final golden age for all humankind. The Myth of the Christian Nation – the claim that America is a Christian nation, consistently guided by Christian values. The Myth of the Innocent Nation – the conviction that, while other nations may have blood on their hands, the nobility of the American cause always redeems the nation and renders it innocent. Richard T. Hughes, *Myths America Lives By: White Supremacy and the Stories that Give Us Meaning*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018).

⁷³ Alan DeSantis says affirming the community’s notion of chosenness is the first of five elements of Amostic prophecy utilized by Douglass. The five elements are, 1) Affirmation of chosenness, 2) condemnation of the community for violating divine covenant, 3) narration of wrongs committed, and 4) admonishment, warning, and promise of future punishment, and 5) inspirational rhetoric that leaves the community with hope for a different outcome. Alan D. DeSantis, “An Amostic Prophecy: Frederick Douglass’ *The Meaning of the Fourth of July for the Negro*.” *Journal of Communication and Religion*. Vol. 22 (1999), 76.

⁷⁴ Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/what-to-the-slave-is-the-fourth-of-july/>, paragraph 4.

⁷⁵ DeSantis, “An Amostic Prophecy.” 66.

elect status entails an ethical obligation, Douglass scours white America with Amostic denouncement⁷⁶ and countering America's notion of divine election by positing God's choice of Africa, "Africa must rise and put on her yet unwoven garment. Ethiopia shall stretch out her hand unto God."⁷⁷

Prophetic figures like Douglass understand the necessity of logical arrangement, but they also know logic alone cannot challenge ideographs because ideographs do not rely on logic. They rely on their high-order abstractions and reinforcement of communal pieties in their shaping and texturing of reality. The prophet's job lies in the *heretical* act of criticizing what lies beyond criticism.

World Re-Imagining Rhetoric

Because prophetic rhetoric directly challenges the ideographs of a dominant community, it, therefore, must offer a re-framing or re-imagining of reality. Prophetic rhetoric functions as an imaginative discourse whereby the *could be* can be an *is*.

In this, again, prophetic rhetoric shares interests with rhetorical criticism. Kenneth Burke underlined the use of imagination in rhetorical analysis when he said, "Imagination can be thought of as reordering the objects of sense, or taking them apart and imagining them in a new combination (such as centaurs) that do not themselves derive from sensory

⁷⁶ You profess to believe "that, of one blood, God made all nations of men to dwell on the face of all the earth," and hath commanded all men, everywhere to love one another; yet you notoriously hate, (and glory in your hatred), all men whose skins are not colored like your own. You declare, before the world, and are understood by the world to declare, that you "hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal; and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; and that, among these are, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness;" and yet, you hold securely, in a bondage which, according to your own Thomas Jefferson, "is worse than ages of that which your fathers rose in rebellion to oppose," a seventh part of the inhabitants of your country." Frederick Douglas, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/what-to-the-slave-is-the-fourth-of-july/>, paragraph 64.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, paragraph 67.

experience. It can thus become ‘creative’ and even visionary of things forever closed to sense.”⁷⁸ Prophetic rhetoric employs imaginative rearrangement and redefinition in order to prompt thought and bring about a more just society.

Feminist rhetorical criticism, likewise, has taken imagination seriously. Jones Royster and Kirsch say imagination entails a “commitment to making connections and seeing possibility.”⁷⁹ For them, “critical imagination” functions as a primary methodological focus wherein the scholar meditates on the rhetorical artifact before them long enough to notice the unnoticed, rethink conventional wisdom, and re-imagine what “could be there instead.”⁸⁰ They suggest entering into imaginary, or imagination-driven, dialogue with the subjects of study to understand their words, visions, priorities, particularly when they differ from our own. They also see this dialectical tension between what *is* and what *could be* in African American women’s rhetoric:

While African American women’s rhetorics persistently evidence their activism and advocacy of various interests, they just as persistently evidence views of hope and caring in their being, not just warriors for justice and equality but also champions of peace and prosperity as well. The discussion of either view of their performances does not negate the other. Far from it. The existence of both views (and more) suggests instead that one view or dimension of their practices neither defines nor contains the full potential of their ways with words – any more than other examples of rhetors...would suggest the limits of potential for those rhetors.⁸¹

Trauma inhibits a community’s ability to express and imagine a world outside the oppressor’s grip. When articulated from within the traumatized community, imagination,

⁷⁸ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 79.

⁷⁹ Jones Royster and Kirsch, kindle loc. 316.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, kindle loc. 321.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, kindle loc. 997.

becomes a powerful energizing force. Therefore, such world re-imagining rhetoric and rhetorical criticism matter particularly for communities, like the Black church, who have experienced generational trauma under the dominant regime.

Prophetic imagination, then, requires the enactment of the two-fold task of the prophet: criticizing what *is* and energizing the believing community to what *could be*. Walter Brueggemann says the notion of prophetic criticism involves engaging in a “rejection and delegitimization of the present ordering of things.”⁸²

The rhetoric involved in such delegitimization aligns with Andre Johnson’s notions of disputation prophecy, pessimistic prophecy, and the second and third of his four-part rhetorical structure of prophecy: consciousness raising and the charge, challenge, critique, judgment, or warning of the audience(s).⁸³ Robert Alter expands on this when he argues that prophets assume the role of the conscience of the people, using moral castigation and scathing critique that “oscillates between outrage against the perversion of justice, the exploitation of the poor and helpless, debauchery, and misrule, on the one hand, and cultic betrayal, the worship of pagan deities, on the other.”⁸⁴

The energizing aspect of prophetic rhetoric entails the use of nurturing rhetorical forms that help the alternative community imagine a time and situation, incongruous with the present, toward which the community can actively move.⁸⁵ It constitutes the audience

⁸² Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*. 3.

⁸³ Andre E. Johnson, “‘To Make the World So Damn Uncomfortable’: W.E.B. Du Bois and the African American Prophetic Tradition.” *Carolinas Communication Annual*. XXXII (2016),” 19.

⁸⁴ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary. Vol. 2: Prophets*. (New York: WW. Norton & Co., 2019), xlvii-xlviii.

⁸⁵ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*. 4.

as a community of doxology free from the numbing, oppressive rhetoric of the dominant consciousness. It evokes a new language and the “legitimization of a new rhetoric.”⁸⁶ Because the prophet has already criticized the dominant discourse and its ideographs, they help to imagine and hope for concrete, this-worldly alternatives. As James Cone has said, “Because trouble does not have the last word, we can fight *now* in order to realize in our present what we know to be coming in God’s future.”⁸⁷

Indeed, if any piety exists in prophetic rhetoric, it exists in the fact that prophecy rarely ends in simple pessimism or escapism. Instead, it leads to hope. Even when “the prophets proclaimed Yahweh’s sentence of death on Israel” they also “made known the beginnings of a new movement toward salvation.”⁸⁸ Still, calling this *piety* is difficult because the hope was uttered in an *unexpected* moment. As von Rad has noted:

When the kingdom of Judah, too, had been destroyed and every political prop completely smashed, Deutero-Isaiah then delivered his message of comfort amongst those in exile, and, faced with the new situation, which he regarded as already very close at hand, broke out into jubilation which was strangely out of keeping with the dreary realities both before and after the Return.⁸⁹

In a world of despair, this hopeful imagery rarely appeals to the immediate community of prophecy, but often transcends that audience to become an intertextual paradigm for later communities. The piety of the prophecy may not seem evident to the original hearers, but

⁸⁶ Ibid., 18.

⁸⁷ James Cone, *Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation, and Black Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 16.

⁸⁸ von Rad, 12.

⁸⁹ von Rad, 11-13.

later communities, energized by the prophetic hope, validate the prophetic rhetoric. Thus prophets often look toward the *lasting* nature of their prophecy to determine *effect*.

Definition: Personae and Prophecy

Wilda Gafney has admitted, “There is no universally accepted meaning for the constructed category of *prophet*.”⁹⁰ However, building off Edwin Black’s notion of persona,⁹¹ Andre E. Johnson has provided us with the language of *prophetic persona*:

Writers and speakers may use a persona as a rhetorical strategy because when one uses a strategy of persona, he or she assumes a character in order to "build authority" as well as "invoke cultural traditions of their audiences". One persona that is available for rhetors is that of a prophet. When a rhetor adopts a prophetic persona, he or she may attempt to do several things at once, but the primary reason is to dictate the rhetorical situation.⁹²

Christopher Hobson calls this a “prophetic voice,”⁹³ a knowingly used rhetorical style and enactment the audience recognizes as prophetic. Insofar as the prophet has agency, they utilized an unexpected but *known* persona to assist in acquiring authority and indexing their role in the community.⁹⁴

Thus, building from the work of Johnson, I define prophetic rhetoric as a message divinely dictated, unforeseen, multi-formal, intertextual, counter-imperial, bottom-up,

⁹⁰ Gafney, *Daughters of Miriam*. 23.

⁹¹ “The author implied by the discourse is an artificial creation: a persona, but not necessarily a person.” Edwin Black, “The Second Persona.” *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: a Reader*. 2nd Ed. Ed. Mark J. Porrovecchio and Celeste Michelle Condit. (New York: The Guilford Press, 2016), 296.

⁹² Johnson, Andre E. “The Prophetic Persona of James Cone and the Rhetorical theology of Black Theology.” 268.

⁹³ Hobson, 155.

⁹⁴ Johnson, “The Prophetic Persona of James Cone and the Rhetorical theology of Black Theology.” 268

experience-driven, ideograph-subverting challenge to a dominant regime to apply itself to the moral precepts of what the community espouses as sacred. It criticizes the dominant regime insofar as it refuses to apply itself to these standards, and it energizes the community of the oppressed to imagine and world toward what *could be*. It functions as constitutive rhetoric, particularly, for the oppressed community longing for hope and, possibly, revolution. It likely does not find a hearing in its original audience, as it does not organize itself always for their persuasion. Still, it often finds affirmation later as the community sees the prophet's message ring true in their historical experience.⁹⁵

Looking Ahead

The following four chapters explore the prophetic call narratives of Maria Stewart, Nat Turner, Julia Foote, and Richard Allen. Each figure has a unique call narrative, nevertheless through critical tools and attentiveness to their prophetic interests, we can see ways their prophetic rhetoric challenges not only reorients the people of their day but may even reorient our discipline. We begin with Maria Stewart's paradigmatic call.

⁹⁵ My definition here resembles that of Andre Johnson, who defines prophetic rhetoric as: "Discourse grounded in the sacred, rooted in a community experience that offers a critique of existing communities and traditions by challenging society to live up to the ideals they espoused while offering celebration, encouragement and hope for a brighter future. It is a rhetoric 'characterized by a steadfast refusal to adapt itself to the perspectives of its audience' and a rhetoric that dedicates itself to the rights of individuals. Located on the margins of society, it intends to lift the people to an ethical conception of whatever the people deem as sacred by adopting, at times, a controversial style of speaking" Johnson, "'To Make the World So Damn Uncomfortable.'" 18. I merely add to Johnson's definition the concepts of generically mutli-formal, ideograph-subverting, and later communal affirmation, none of which are foreign to his analysis.

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CHAPTER 1: THE PARADIGMATIC CALL NARRATIVE OF MARIA W. STEWART

Marilyn Richardson refers to Maria Stewart as “America’s first Black woman political writer.”¹ While true, Stewart also adopted a prophetic persona that transcended mere politics and subverted the Enlightenment binaries of her white, nineteenth-century contemporaries and their religious and political thought. As Valerie Cooper notes:

Although her work has been widely categorized as political speech, it also rings with evangelical religious fervor because it is liberally sprinkled with biblical references...Modern binaries of sacred versus secular (or even church versus state) are not relevant to Stewart, who acknowledges no such divisions in her writing.²

We cannot, then, separate Stewart’s prophetic persona, discussed throughout this chapter in relation to her call narrative, from her political philosophies, radical ideas, or gender egalitarianism.

In this chapter, I discuss Maria W. Stewart’s call narrative in her speech, *What if I am a Woman?*,³ as a paradigmatic nineteenth-century African American Prophetic Tradition call narrative. I begin by examining the moral implications of call *narratives*, then I set the historical context for Stewart’s prophetic rhetoric against the backdrop of the patriarchal Cult of True Womanhood. Next, I discuss the genre and structure of call narratives in both the Bible and the African American Prophetic Tradition. Afterward, I explore Maria W. Stewart’s subversive use of the Hebrew prophetic call narratives for

¹ Marilyn Richardson, *Maria Stewart: America’s First Black Political Writer*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 30.

² Valerie C. Cooper, *Word Like Fire: Maria Stewart, The Bible, and the Rights of African Americans*. (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 2011), 4.

³ Manuscript taken from Philip Foner, *Lift Every Voice: African American Oratory 1787-1900*. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press), 1998. Stewart wrote this speech as she intended to leave Boston for New York, possibly to pursue more involvement with the abolitionist movement.

her own liberative purposes. Finally, I consider a few implications from these observations. First, however, some background on Stewart and the scholarship of call narratives may help explain the need for this chapter.

Indentured to a white pastor during her youth in Hartford, Connecticut, Stewart learned the language of Christianity in childhood, allowing her to later challenge the theologies of oppression arising from white pulpits and pens. Growing up with insider social knowledge of white households and religion, she likely developed an awareness of white culture, biases, hypocrisies, and ignorance. She used such knowledge during her speaking career when she became one of the earliest Black women to speak before a promiscuous audience of racial and gender-mixed hearers, breaking down both the male-female and public-private dichotomies.⁴ For, indeed, “to search for women in public is to subvert a longstanding tenet of the modern Western gender system, the presumption that social space is divided between the public and the private and that men claim the former while women are confined to the latter.”⁵ Thus, the experience of being a Black woman around whiteness likely developed her thoughts on gender oppression and belief that Black women’s labor was designed to hinder their achievement of education and social power.⁶

⁴ Kristin Waters, *Maria W. Stewart and the Roots of Black Political Thought*. (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 2022), 227.

⁵ Mary P. Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banner and Ballots, 1825-1880*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 4.

⁶ “Institutionalized practices restricting access to resources are particularly effective in undercutting the growth and flourishing of young people, especially girls...Stewart’s keen awareness of the degree to which the twin-oppressors of excessive labor and thwarted education successfully enforce barriers to race, class, and gender excellence.” Waters, 228-229.

Stewart employed this knowledge and refused these binaries in her farewell address, *What if I am a Woman?* delivered in a schoolroom of the African Meeting House in Boston, MA in 1833. Linking “her philosophy of everyday righteousness and political struggle together with an apocalyptic justice,”⁷ Stewart’s speech counters the racists and sexist arguments for Black and female inferiority by highlighting the achievements of both the continent of Africa and female intellectuals. Still, the combination of such diverse yet intersected interests, particularly infused as they are with religion, serves as one marker of Stewart’s prophetic intentions as seen in her call narrative.

Until William H. Myers’s *God’s “Yes” Was Louder than My “No,”* no one had documented or studied African American call narratives.⁸ Indeed, Myers only examines twentieth-century call narratives. Thus, we have a scholastic blank-spot regarding the rhetoric of Black call narratives prior to the contemporary era. Such neglect of call narratives ultimately hurt figures like Stewart because her entire ministry and message flowed forth from her call narrative, which the Black audience often deemed more important than education, preparation, skill, or sometimes gender qualifications.

Narrative and Moral Participation

The first observation about prophetic call narratives is that they are *narratives*, “symbolic actions – words and/or deeds – that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them.”⁹ Call narratives, like narratives in general, challenge:

⁷ Waters, 241.

⁸ Andre E. Johnson, “Introduction.” *Listening: Journal of Communication, Ethics, Religion, and Culture*. Vol. 55, No. 3 (Fall 2020), 149.

⁹ Walter R. Fisher, “Narration as Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument.” In *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism, 5th Edition*. Ed. Carl R. Burgchardt and Hillary A. Jones. (State College: Strata Publishing, 2017), 263.

...the notions that human communication – if it is to be considered rhetorical - must be an argumentative form, that reason is to be attributed only to discourse marked by clearly identifiable modes of inference and/or implication, and that the norms for evaluation of rhetorical communication must be rational standards taken essentially from informed or formal logic.¹⁰

For Walter R. Fisher, one benefit of narrative lies in its ability to foster public, moral discourse without resorting to mere syllogisms. Narration, particularly as employed within the prophetic traditions, invites hearers into a moral universe unencumbered by the dualisms of modernity and helps probe “the contours and meaning of events, and instantiating identities and positions.”¹¹ Narrative is, thus, a meaning-making social action that gathers hearers into its logic and mythologies, thus providing an alternative means of political engagement and “resolving the problems of public moral argument.”¹²

Thomas Hoyt, Jr. says the Black rhetorical tradition has relied on narration for both its deconstructive and constructive values because, “by telling a story, one could create or destroy a world view.”¹³ Narrative invites the audience to participate in this creation or destruction. Whereas traditional Aristotelian reason renders the audience – as non-experts – irrational, narration renders the audience capable of moral judgments and, thus, moral participants and co-creators of the narrative and the new world it imagines. In prophetic narratives, the audience, thus, learns the morally loaded language and methods of resistance to an oppressive, dominant consciousness.

¹⁰ Fisher, “Narration as Human Communication Paradigm. 263.

¹¹ Teun A Van Dijk, *Discourse Studies*. (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 2011), 80.

¹² Fisher, 271.

¹³ Thomas Hoyt, Jr. “Interpreting Biblical Scholarship for the Black Church Tradition” in *The Stony Road We Trod*. Ed. Cain Hope Felder, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 25.

Call Narrative as Thesis

Prophetic call narratives operate as narrative theses, both justifying the prophet and embodying the details of their ministry of rhetoric. The objective of the narrative, therefore, lies specifically in inviting the hearer to participate in the moral, religious, and political implications of the story.¹⁴ Much, therefore, hangs on the audience's perception of the call narrative, particularly when they are skeptical.

Audience skepticism of call narration matters most of all to Black women, who had to justify their prophetic calling and assert their prophetic thesis in the face of patriarchal disbelief. We see this in the call narrative of Jarena Lee. In her autobiography, Lee describes the divine impulse to interrupt a struggling preacher and finish his sermon:

The text he took [was] in Jonah, 2d chap. 9th verse, - 'Salvation is of the Lord.' But as he proceeded to explain, he seemed to have lost the spirit; when in the same instant, I sprang, as by an altogether supernatural impulse, to my feet, when I was aided from above to give an exhortation on the very text which my brother Williams had taken.¹⁵

Kimberly P. Johnson says, "By speaking up, Lee crossed the divide between the private and public domains. She stepped out of her assigned private domain to take on the preaching role (reserved for men) in the public domain."¹⁶ Lee, thus, uses this story to *justify* her earlier-described call which Richard Allen had rejected:

I now sat down, scarcely knowing what I had done, being frightened. I imagined that for this indecorum, as I feared it might be called, I should be expelled from the church. But instead of this, the Bishop [Richard Allen]

¹⁴ Myers, 69.

¹⁵ Jarena Lee, "The Life and religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady: Giving Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel," in *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William L. Andrews (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

¹⁶ Kimberly P. Johnson, "'Must Thee Take the Man Exclusively?': Jarena Lee and Claiming the Right to Preach." *Listening: Journal of Communication Ethics, Religion, and Culture*. Vol. 55, No. 3 (Fall 2020), 184.

rose up in the assembly, and related that I had called upon him eight years before, asking to be permitted to preach, and that he had put me off; but that now as much believed that I was called to that work, as any of the preachers present.¹⁷

Jarena Lee's narrative both justifies her calling and "serves as a public indictment against the early African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church for marginalizing women by not allowing female ministers to serve in the denomination."¹⁸ This justificatory element demonstrates the thesis-like role the call narrative performs.

To say the call narrative in the African American Prophetic Tradition takes on a thesis-like role for the prophet does not merely explicate *that* the prophet is called to prophetic ministry, but *why* and to *what end*. It functions as a piece of the political and prophetic paradigm for ministry establishing the prophet's authority, challenging the oppressor's authority, and re-envisioning the world according to a different set of moral possibilities. Thus, the prophet's call, like the prophet's message, does not merely state the facts of *what is* but inspires hope by reimagining the world as it *could be*.

THE CULT OF TRUE WOMANHOOD

The call narratives of women, specifically, supersede the gender qualifications because such narratives summon to full fruitfulness the mustard seed of egalitarianism within the Christian tradition.¹⁹ Maria Stewart's call narrative demonstrates her belief, with her prophetess counterparts throughout history, that the God self-disclosed to the world of men has also self-disclosed to women. Indeed, if all persons have succumbed to

¹⁷ Kimberly P. Johnson, "'Must Thee Take the Man Exclusively.'" 184.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 185.

¹⁹ Hobson, *The Mount of Vision*. 8.

Adam's sin, then the daughters of Eve ought not to be silenced more than any man. In this reasoning, the same arguments that worked for racial equality could also find employment within the fight for gender equality *because their rootedness in the biblical text and its logic*. Through an egalitarian biblical hermeneutic and by means of the authority bestowed in her call narrative, Stewart's prophetic thesis lays the axe of prophetic utterance to the roots of the trees of patriarchy and prejudice, making her "instrumental in shaping a tradition in which women authorize themselves as speaking subjects by adapting apocalyptic rhetoric of Protestant ministerial traditions and combining it with repeated calls for compassion and mercy."²⁰ Not everyone, however, saw prophecy against patriarchy and prejudice palatable.

To understand the gendered rhetorical situation of Maria Stewart and other nineteenth-century Black women, we must appreciate *The Cult of True Womanhood* or *The Cult of Domesticity*. Though a phrase coined by later historians, *The Cult of True Womanhood* arose from the intersection of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Christianity, patriarchal gender roles, racial prejudice, and sexual identity in middle-class Western Europe. Beth Allison Barr notes three cultural roots of the *Cult of True Womanhood*:

1. Biological Essentialism: The Enlightenment's notions of sex difference and its inherent bifurcation of public-private.
2. Early Modern Science argued that women were genetically weaker than men and biologically akin to children.
3. The Industrial Revolution separating the domestic space from the workspace and, with the Enlightenment binaries, divided public and private.²¹

²⁰ Kevin Pelletier, *Apocalyptic Sentimentalism*. (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2015), 65.

²¹ Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth*. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2021), 161-164.

True Womanhood functioned as a kind of socio-economic and religious means of constraining the ethics, particularly the sexual ethics, of white women and limiting their access to public, civic power. While the cult held so much social sway that, “it cut across class and national borders affecting peasant women and queens,”²² class privilege and racial hierarchy became its defining markers as peasant women and Black women had neither the means nor the opportunity to fulfill the requirements of True Womanhood. In other words, Black women were *de facto* not *women* and intersectional (i.e. non-binaries) oppressive forces ensured they stayed that way.

This omission of poor and Black women from the category of *women* did not occur by accident. Valerie Cooper argues, “Implicit in the Cult of True Womanhood was the supposition that white women were its fullest, highest expression.”²³ True Womanhood’s racism and classism allowed social elites to define their own piety, purity, domesticity, and, therefore, *womanhood* over against Black women and poor women (whether white or Black). Thus, it “demonized prostitutes, working girls, and dance halls, elevating the home as the safest place for respectable women.”²⁴

Even white privileged women experienced demonization when they ventured out of the private sphere and spoke in public about politics. Phyliss M. Japp highlights this in Angelina Grimke’s abolitionist speeches:

The problem scarcely seemed critical at first, when [Angelina Grimke’s] listeners consisted of women gathered in private parlors. The situation quickly changed, however, when men began attending the women’s gatherings and crowds grew too large for private homes. Angelina soon

²² Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*. 155-156.

²³ Cooper, *Word, Like Fire*. 116.

²⁴ Barr, 156.

found herself addressing mixed audiences in public lecture halls. In these situations, her gender was the decisive factor in audience response.²⁵

Going public in her speeches challenged male-female *and* public-private binaries constraining nineteenth-century women. Thus, Grimke adopted a prophetic persona, drawing off the Hebrew prophets “she assumed a forceful, dynamic, ‘male’ posture.”²⁶

Given that even white women speaking in public challenged Enlightenment, patriarchal binaries, Black women posed an even greater threat as they *a priori* challenged male-female, white-black, and wealthy-poor binaries and, thereby, “subverted these idealized race and gender roles...in their efforts to create and project alternative identities for themselves.”²⁷ Jamie L. Carlacio highlights the subversive nature of this saying, “Stewart exposed ‘true’ womanhood as a racist and classist metaphor designed to exclude all but middle-class white women”²⁸ by asserting her rights as a woman, a *public* intellectual, and a prophetic figure. Carlacio continues, in her “Address Delivered to the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of America” Stewart argues for her right, as a Black woman, to speak in public and elevate the status of Black women, by extending:

the meaning of ‘true’ womanhood to include...African American women. She has taken the terms of the dominant culture and metaphorically turned them into terms that describe all women, regardless of race or class. Stewart has thus ostensibly destabilized the category of ‘women’ so that any woman might conceivably hold power and influence not only within her family but also within her community.²⁹

²⁵ Phyllis M. Japp, “Esther or Isaiah?: The Abolitionist-Feminist Rhetoric of Angelina Grimke’.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. Vol. 71 (1985), 337.

²⁶ Japp, “Esther or Isaiah?” 342.

²⁷ Cooper, *Word, Like Fire*. 116.

²⁸ Jamie L. Carlacio, “Speaking with and To Me: Discursive Positioning and the Unstable Categories of Race, Class, and Gender. *In Calling Cards: Theory and Practice in the Study of Race, Gender, and Culture*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), kindle loc. 1603.

²⁹ Carlacio, “Speaking with and To Me.” kindle loc. 1610.

Thus, Black women speaking in public threatened all the binaries of the Enlightenment's gender essentialism. Below, I trace this in Maria Stewart's speech, *What if I am a Woman?* as she navigates her prophetic calling *visa vie* the gender constraints in the Cult of True Womanhood by intentional rhetorical impiety.

Men, Women, and the Public Character of Prophetic Calling

For the African American Prophetic Tradition, telling the call narrative serves as the prophet's way of legitimizing their ministry. Women telling their call story, however, also serves to publicly legitimize their ministry *as women*. Men already have access to the public sphere at the time of their calling. The calling may propel them further into the spotlight, but from the beginning their privilege provides access to resources and spaces traditionally denied to women. A woman telling her call narrative, then, legitimizes not only her ministry but the very fact of going *public*. Given that Black women's "public activities were circumscribed by the actions of black men...[with] black men somehow [having] to sanction women's efforts in order for their voices to have public meaning,"³⁰ the questions, concerns, and calling to go *public* remain uniquely female experiences.

Clearly, the prophet's call involves a public witness against injustice. But the *expectations* of what gets entailed in a public prophetic ministry find definition around patriarchy. This causes problems for female prophetic figures. Not only do they have to publicly prophesy against white racial patriarchy, but also against Black gendered patriarchy and the supposed *divine sanctioning* of both. Women like Maria Stewart find

³⁰ Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. *Exodus: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 121.

themselves both having to defend their call to public, prophetic utterance, and also defend themselves against accusations of attacking the divinely ordained ordering of creation.

Even if she can gain a hearing beyond these accusations, she then enters a rhetorical arena where masculine norms dictate her reception. James Darsey outlined three significant ways American radical rhetoric and Old Testament prophesy intersect, “Both have in common a sense of mission, a desire to bring the practice of people into accord with sacred principle, and an uncompromising, often excoriating stance toward a reluctant audience.”³¹ With each of these, we can see potential and real conflict female prophets may experience. First, while Black men and women may find a mutual mission in racial liberation, the female mission includes liberation from *gendered* patriarchy. Second, while Black men and women both share the desire to bring the practice of whites and Blacks into accord with sacred principles, they do not always agree on what that sacred principle *means*. For both, the theological principle of one God having created all the races serves as the umbrella under which whites and Blacks find liberation from injustice, but Black women, uniquely, have to justify *speaking that sacred principle in public*. Finally, whereas Black men have to have an uncompromising stance in relation to an audience that is reluctant regarding 1) their *logos*, and 2) their race, Black women have a third component added to this reluctance: their sex, which implicitly calls into question their logos, ethos, and pathos all at the same time. Thus, even the reluctance of the audience takes on unique features in relationship to female prophets.

One specific way the audience’s reluctance assumes male norms and is, therefore, suspicious of female prophets has to do with the patriarchal characteristics associated

³¹ Darsey, 16.

with prophetic figures, which involve “extraordinary (re)birth or conversion” narratives, which tend to involve “extraordinary vision, comparable to the visions of the Old Testament prophets.”³² Additionally, the receiver gets imbued with *charism* and *charisma* that the community must receive and recognize. However, what the community considers a pragmatically valuable *charism* and what suffices as a rhetorically effective *charisma* to gets largely defined by male expressions. The female prophet’s *charisms* and *charisma* undoubtedly look different, especially when any loss of emotional or physical control only furthers stereotypes, and therefore receive harsher judgment than their male counterparts within in the context of The Cult of True Womanhood.³³

Yet, aside from her disposition and rhetorical strategies, her use of the Bible resonated most effectively with her audience. Against contemporary progressive expectations, Stewart employed the Bible to subvert patriarchal norms and justify her *public*, prophetic calling. The rest of this chapter explores *how* her use of specific scriptures in her call narrative work together to subvert racial and gender patriarchies.

CALL NARRATIVES: GENRE, CHARACTER, AND STRUCTURE

African American prophetic call narratives like Maria Stewart’s intertextually re-narrates the calls narratives of the biblical prophets, specifically by mimicking the cadence, content, and structure of their biblical precursors. Their objective lies in providing a thesis statement for further prophetic utterance and, thus, a justification for

³² Darsey, 93.

³³ We get hints of Maria Stewart wrestling with these assumptions shared within her audiences, “I have thought thus publicly to express my sentiments before you. I hope my friends will not scrutinize these pages with too severe an eye, as I have not calculated to display either elegance or taste in their composition, but have merely written the meditations of my heart as far as my imagination led.” Maria Stewart, *Productions of Maria Stewart: Presented to the First African Baptist Church and Society of the City of Boston*. (Boston: Friends of Freedom and Virtue, 1835), 6.

all prophetic acts. “The call commissioned the prophet: the act of writing down an account of it was aimed at those sections of the public in whose eyes he had to justify himself.”³⁴ Consequently, prophetic call narratives, like the larger genre of prophetic rhetoric, functions as a rhetoric of intense moral conflict, especially when women receive the calling. It would be surprising indeed “if distinctive stylistic features did not appear as strategic adaptations to a difficult rhetorical situation.”³⁵ After all, prophetic call narrative, like all genres, exists in “dynamic responsiveness to situational demands.”³⁶ Call narratives imply God-given authority and verify the prophet’s merits to carry the mantle and communicate the message. The weight of such a task, it turns out, may explain why call narratives have such a consistent structure. Thus, to appreciate these Stewart’s narrative, we must understand the structures she employs.

Call Narrative Structure

The onus of affirming prophecy lies with the community receiving the message. They must assess the authenticity of the message and, therefore, evaluate the prophet lest they mishear the divine voice and create a world unintended by the divine. The prophetic call narrative provides a key paradigm by which the community can make its assessment, or the prophet can self-justify their ministry when facing rejection.

³⁴ Gerhard von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 34.

³⁵ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, “The Rhetoric of Women’s Liberation: An Oxymoron.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. Vol. 59, No.1 (Feb. 1973), 78.

³⁶ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, “Form and Genre in Rhetorical Criticism: An Introduction.” In *Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action*. Ed. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (Falls Church: Speech Communication Association (1976), 20.

While the biblical text has a diversity of prophetic call narratives, Norm Habel has accurately drawn out six structural elements that occur most frequently:³⁷

1. Divine confrontation
2. Introductory word
3. The commission
4. The objection
5. The reassurance
6. The sign³⁸

Utilizing familiar structural elements helps a prophet's credibility and assists them in acquiring authority.³⁹ Thus it should not surprise us to see that elements of the biblical call structure also appears in the African American Prophetic Tradition.

In the field of Communication, Nicole Danielle McDonald has highlighted other call narrative arrangements and categories when examining Julia Foote's call narrative.

While distinct from Myers's structural outline, the emphases remain quite similar:

1. Preparation: God-ordained opportunities to exercise the gifts of proclamation before receiving the divine commission. The purpose is to gain familiarity with the call.
2. Divine commission: the command from God for a specific work. Identifies one's function in ministry.
3. Resistance: the objection to God's call based on presumed insufficiency to fulfill the call.
4. Affirmation of the call: the God-given sign directed to the chosen individual that confirms the call.
5. Prayer: communication with God throughout the narrative.
6. Supportive sisterhood: communal affirmation.

³⁷ Norm Habel, "The Form and Significance of Call Narratives," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*. 77 (1965), 297-323.

³⁸ This structure finds affirmation in Daniel I Block's discussion of the Hebrew prophet's call narratives, which, he says, typically consist of (1) a confirmation with God and/or his (sic) messenger; (2) an introductory address of the person being called; (3) the divine commission; (4) the raising of objections by the person called; (5) divine words of reassurance; and (6) a sign authenticating the call experience." Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth: The New American Commentary*. Vol. 6 (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1999), 257.

³⁹ Andre E. Johnson, "The Prophetic Persona of James Cone and the Rhetorical Theology of Black Theology." *Black Theology: An International Journal*. Vol. 8, No. 3. (June 2010), 268.

7. Acceptance: when submission to the call occurs.⁴⁰

McDonald refers to this structure as a “call narrative hermeneutic” which overlaps with my categorization of the call narratives thesis-like. As McDonald says, “When examined in this frame, Foote’s call narrative not only shapes her understanding of scripture, it also gives readers an understanding of how, in this case, African Americans see and discern scripture for the emancipation and liberation of their own lives.”⁴¹

Because Stewart “contended that the Bible spoke to her and of her, and she employed a hermeneutic that privileged as its interpretive key her identity as an African American and as a woman”⁴² it is helpful to see her call narrative in light of the call narratives of the Hebrew prophets. Here I use Hava Shalom-Guy’s general structure of the Hebrew prophetic call narrative to demonstrate the extent of Stewart’s mimesis:

- I. YHWH confronts a man (sic)
- II. An introductory word is given
- III. God commissions the man
- IV. The man objects to the call
- V. Divine reassurance is given
- VI. A sign of divine presence and empowerment.⁴³

Like her male counterparts, Stewart readily appeals to the Hebrew prophets in her own story and attempts to align her story with theirs. The more closely she can bring her story into their framework, the more she forces her listeners to recognize her divine authority.

Yahweh Confronts the (Wo)man

⁴⁰ Nicole Danielle McDonald, “From Resistance to Receiving: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Call Narrative of Julia A.J. Foote.” *The Listening Journal*. Vol. 55, No. 3 (Fall2020), 223.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁴² Cooper, 18.

⁴³ Hava Shalom-Guy, “The Call Narratives of Gideon and Moses: Literary Convention or More?” *The Journal of the Hebrew Scriptures*. Vol. 11, No. 11 (2011), 3.

In contrast to a number of biblical accounts of divine calling, where God appears through a divine messenger (Judges 6:12) or a mediating object (Exodus 3), and in contrast to certain prophets who receive direct visions of God (Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1), God's confrontation with Maria Stewart occurs through divine utterance like that of Jeremiah (Jer. 1:5). God confronts here with a creative word that establishes new possibilities of liberation. This word, however, Stewart hears does not come in the form of bold declarations of prenatal choice, but comes in the form of a question, "Methinks I heard a spiritual interrogation – 'Who shall go forward, and take off the reproach that is cast upon the people of color? Shall it be a woman?'"⁴⁴ and "Me thought I heard a spiritual interrogation, are you able to drink of that cup that I have drank of?"⁴⁵

The Hebrew prophets received their divine callings at specific, intentional times (*kairos*) in the history of Israel. The precise moment when their voice – or God's voice through them – is needed most or is most disruptive to the dominant consciousness. This disruption occurs, in language provided by Narrative Criticism, as a disruption of the accepted-mode-of-being. This is why "call narratives do not reside exclusively within an ecclesial context. Folks are pushed, pulled, prodded, and picked at in many ways to do things that they did not think they would ever do or to serve in ways they could not previously imagine."⁴⁶ The reception of the "words from elsewhere" disrupts the everyday life via extraordinary, extrasensory visions, voices, and experiences.

⁴⁴ Foner, 127.

⁴⁵ Foner, 137.

⁴⁶ Johnson, "Introduction." 148.

The call disrupts both the prophet and the audience, as neither the biblical text nor Maria Stewart's narration conveys any preparation for God's spontaneous word. This spontaneous word *to a Black woman* suggests the word of God has arrived in a climactic moment through a seemingly anti-climactic person, a non-person whose voice now throws the social order into disarray. "In claiming that she was called by God, Stewart unsettles the patriarchal order by contending that God is imbuing a woman with the authority to act on his behalf. What was once the entitlement of men is now the privilege of a woman, and a black woman no less."⁴⁷ Prophetic call narratives democratize authority and power beyond the boundaries of gender.

Due to the Cult of True Womanhood's cultural power, any claim of calling by a woman could result in patriarchal reminders that women's nature remains unfit for such a task. Designed by God for the domestic sphere, a woman was thought to lack the intellectual ability or emotional stability to speak publicly. Thus, the community could receive Stewart's claims to speak for God as usurpation of authority and divinely ordained gender roles. However, the divine confrontation in the Hebrew call narratives reinforces the prophet's rationality. "The call marks the initial interruption of God in the life of the individual. Such a moment was related as a supernatural confrontation which could be comprehended with the senses and tested by rational dialogue."⁴⁸ Rational dialogue, contrasted with the stereotypes of a womanhood, drives Stewart's call story. Prior to the divine encounter, she felt *more* unstable, "For I had been like a ship tossed to

⁴⁷ Pelletier, 63.

⁴⁸ Habel, 297-323.

and fro,⁴⁹ in a storm at sea.”⁵⁰ The prophetic call, however, aligns her mind to reason and divinity, “After these convictions I found myself sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in my right mind⁵¹...Then was I glad when I realized the dangers I had escaped; and then I consecrated my soul and body, and *all the powers of my mind to his service*...”⁵²

The divine confrontation brings about the most reasonable circumstances whereby Stewart sees herself as a student at the feet of Jesus and a vessel for his words. In this narrative move, Stewart self-legitimizes her authority as a prophet:

Stewart’s credibility as a speaker is predicated not simply on the authority of her mind but on a divine power that animates her soul and bolsters the veracity of her words...If [the audience finds] Stewart’s critiques offensive and her style unladylike, then they place themselves in direct opposition to God’s will.⁵³

To deny her divine calling, one must demonstrate not only that she **is** unreasonable, but that she has not encountered God at all.

An Introductory Word is Given

The specifics of God’s message also matter to Stewart’s call narrative. She earlier described God’s introductory word as a “divine interrogation” whereby God asks both about her ability to drink the cup of suffering and her willingness to take the reproach off the divine community. In the Hebrew prophetic tradition, this call-through-interrogation

⁴⁹ Ephesians 4:14, wherein the Apostle Paul calls the Ephesian church out of child-like thinking to sound doctrine.

⁵⁰ Foner, 139.

⁵¹ Mark 5:15, wherein the Gadarene Demoniac, a *gentile and therefore outcast to the promises of Israel*, is exercised and moves from irrational, demonic behavior to lucid, disciple-like behavior. This narrative is in contrast, in Mark’s gospel, to the rejection of Israel as a whole (this gentile understands who Jesus is, while Israel misses it) and to the misunderstanding of Jesus’ very own disciples throughout the entire gospel.

⁵² Foner, 139, Emphasis mine.

⁵³ Pelletier, 64.

is best known in the prophet Isaiah call narrative in Isaiah 6, “Whom shall I send? And who shall go for us?” (Is. 6:8) The question comes on the heels of Isaiah’s Temple vision wherein he sees God “high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple.” (Is. 6:1) Further, Isaiah’s calling also happens in the *kairos* moment of King Uzziah’s death (6:1). When the earthly king dies, Isaiah sees the heavenly king enthroned. If Stewart relies on the Isaiah for her introductory interrogation, she likely aims to foreshadow divine judgment wherein earthly structures of power and security get revealed as limited and mortal in the presence of the speaking God who sits sovereignly on his throne. This introductory interrogation, then, functions as “an explanatory word and a preparatory word”⁵⁴ that serves as a thesis for her prophetic ministry.

We should note, however, that calling-via-divine-commandment does not feature prominently in African American prophetic call narratives, despite its frequency in biblical call narratives. Hobson suggests this may have to do with the generally accepted belief that “God’s direct authorization of prophecy had ceased after the canonical prophets.”⁵⁵ While Stewart may have also agreed with such a statement, she sees her “spiritual interrogation” as anything less than a command in the form of a question. Whereas humans may question her calling for racial, gendered, or theological reasons, God has already questioned her in a way that supersedes theirs, “Shall it be a woman?”

YHWH Commissions the (Wo)man

Isaiah’s interrogative is not the only scripture she cites. God’s question of her willingness to “take off the reproach” of his people also communicates her commission,

⁵⁴ Habel, 297-323.

⁵⁵ Hobson, 155.

as it intertextually references Ezekiel 36:15: “Neither will I cause men to hear in thee the shame of the heathen any more, neither shalt thou bear the reproach of the people any more, neither shalt thou cause thy nations to fall any more, saith the Lord GOD.”

Ezekiel’s larger context presents a prophetic warning against Edom and other nations that have devoured and enslaved the people of Israel. The prophecy also, however, provides hope for Israel because they are told they will no longer bear the weight of shameful subordination to such nations. By employing the Ezekiel prophesy in her call narrative, Stewart recognizes the dangers of her call to speak against the oppressive nation but also conveys that her hearing of the “words from elsewhere” authorize her as a voice of liberation and hope for Black people – God’s chosen people. The two callings are intertwined and inseparable, reflective of the general structure of both the Hebrew prophetic tradition and the African American jeremiad.⁵⁶

Still, even here we must consider the gender issues. No one would have objected to a woman speaking a word of encouragement to an oppressed people. But a public word of indictment against an oppressive political entity like a nation was considered a distinctively male domain. Apocalyptic fervor and militancy may have been appropriate for David Walker but inappropriate for Maria Stewart. Nevertheless, as the thesis statement of a prophetic ministry that later employed violent and militant rhetoric in her condemnation of white power, Stewart’s call narrative relies heavily on this Ezekiel passage of warning to the nations and hope for Israel. In this, we see,

Stewart’s Christianity is far from the compassionate and domesticated religion modern readers often associated with the nineteenth-century woman’s sphere. Indeed, from the beginning of her public discourse, the

⁵⁶ Willie Harrel, Jr., *A Call to Political and Social Activism: The Jeremiadic Discourse of Maria Miller Stewart, 1831-18-33*. *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, Vol. 9, No 3. (May 2008) 300-319.

vengeance/love – male/female dichotomies were disrupted by Stewart. The ferocity and militarism in Stewart’s language refuse antebellum compulsory norms requiring female discourse to be properly ‘feminine’; that is, to avoid the kinds of topics and rhetorical modes that Stewart marshals in her lectures.⁵⁷

Again, Stewart’s refusal to succumb to the false binaries of white, patriarchal religion. We can add to the list, secular-sacred and public-private dichotomies.

The *Man* Objects...*Maria* Does Not:

The predictable objection of male Hebrew prophets, when called of God, provides us with our most significant opportunity to see Stewart’s break from patriarchal norms. William Myers rightly observes that “most, if not all Old Testament callees manifest some level of reluctance, confusion, doubt, and instability in understanding and/or accepting the call. Youth, poor speech, lack of family tradition, and the resistance of people to the message are but a few reasons given for the callees reluctance.”⁵⁸

Reticence has a specific function for Black women who *have* to show it in order to avoid appearing as if they intentionally chose a masculine role. Seeking *prophetic power* might lead to, as Raymie McKerrow noted, “the ultimate act of excommunicating those who fail to participate in or accede to the rituals”⁵⁹ of patriarchal power:

The social structures of discourse...begin with ‘*restrictions* on who may speak, how much may be said, what may be talked about, and on what occasion.’ These restrictions are more than socially derived regulators of discourse; they are institutionalized rules accepted and used by the dominant class to control the discursive actions of the dominated.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Pelletier, 66.

⁵⁸ Myers, 121.

⁵⁹ Raymie E. McKerrow, “Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis.” *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*. 5th Ed. Ed. Carl R. Burghardt and Hillary A. Jones. (State College: Strata Publishing, Inc. 2017), 83.

⁶⁰ McKerrow, “Critical Rhetoric.” 83.

Thus, reticence has pragmatic benefit to prophets generally, but specifically female prophets because they challenge the gendered “world of ‘taken-for-granted,’ discourse” which generally shields itself from question and criticism “by accepting only certain individuals as the authorities who can speak.”⁶¹

Yet, whereas the Hebrew prophets might say, “Ah! LORD God! Behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child” (Jer. 1:6) or, “Who am I?” to do such a task (Ex. 3:11), Mariah Stewart’s response to her spiritual interrogation, oddly, conveys no objection. Myers observes that women, even within denominations that have female preachers, still feel “great internal conflict because of their gender” such that they argue with God over their calling.⁶² Stewart’s lack of reticence and resistance also strikes us as odd not only because of the pragmatic rhetorical benefits of narrating reticence but also because Stewart in other places makes frequent use of reticence and hesitancy. Shirley Wilson Logan observes that when Maria Stewart refers to her inadequacy in other places, outside her call narrative, she employs a rhetorical *insinuation*:

a rhetorical move wherein the speaker claims her inadequacy or lack of qualifications for the task and asks the audience’s indulgence. A way of ingratiating oneself with the audience, *insinuation* allows the speaker to acquire the auditors’ initial goodwill and support. It was clearly an essential move for a black woman speaking publicly in 1832.⁶³

Here, however, in her call narrative in *What if I am a Woman?*, she goes out of her way to indicate her willingness to accept the mantle of the prophet. Why?

⁶¹ McKerrow, 84.

⁶² Myers, 38.

⁶³ Shirley Wilson Logan, *“We Are Coming”*: *The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Black Women*. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press), 36.

Her lack of reticence, her overt willingness, comes out most clearly in *What if I am a Woman?* when she narrates God’s interrogation of her, “are you able to drink of that cup that I have drank of?” It is tempting to see this as a reference to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus prays and asks God to remove “this cup” of suffering (the cross) from him. But the reference to “the cup that I have drank” occurs in question form for a specific reason – it highlights a question Jesus asked James and John in Matthew 20:20-28 to emphasize their desire for power without suffering:

²⁰ Then came to him the mother of Zebedees children with her sons, worshipping him, and desiring a certain thing of him. ²¹ And he said unto her, What wilt thou? She saith unto him, Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on the left, in thy kingdom. ²² But Jesus answered and said, Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? They say unto him, We are able. ²³ And he saith unto them, Ye shall drink indeed of my cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with: but to sit on my right hand, and on my left, is not mine to give, but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared of my Father. ²⁴ And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation against the two brethren. ²⁵ But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. ²⁶ But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; ²⁷ And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: ²⁸ Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

Stewart’s call story cites this scripture for several subversive reasons. First, the text climaxes with an egalitarian leadership structure that reflects nothing else seen in the world (vs. 25-28). It imagines a kingdom so radically egalitarian that the greatest in the kingdom become the servants and the servants become the greatest. Stewart’s prophetic calling imagines and longs for such a world.

Second, in this text jealousy circulates among the disciples regarding the potential positioning of James and John (vs. 24). Jesus clarifies that he has no authority to grant the

position these two seek, thus the other disciples should not experience jealousy over it, especially because this call leads to suffering not glory. So, too, Maria Stewart wants to contend that her calling does not lead to glory but suffering. Her brothers in the faith have no reason to feel threatened by her call to prophetic suffering.

Third, and most importantly, Stewart cites this text because it shows the utter failure of the male disciples of Jesus to prepare for enduring such suffering. When Jesus asks James and John, “Can ye drink of the cup that I drink of” he implies a negative answer, “Ye know not what ye ask.” These two inner-circle disciples of Jesus seek the glory of Jesus’ kingdom but cannot endure its cup of suffering. *But not so Stewart.* God has no implied negative answer to the question. And she offers no objection or resistance to the calling, “Yeah, Lord, I am able.” Whereas Jesus indicts James and John (and by implication many male prophetic figures around Stewart) for their inability to endure suffering, Stewart aligns herself with Jesus in Gethsemane (now she shifts scenes to contrast herself with James and John more explicitly) when she says, “if it be thy will be it even so, Lord Jesus!” Just as Jesus in the Garden asked for a removal of the cup of suffering, yet ultimately also said, “not my will, but thine be done,” (Lu. 22:42) so, too, Stewart offers her will up to God. She seeks no personal glory. She knows this road ends in suffering. As a Black woman, she has experience enduring this road in a way that Black men only know the half and white women only know the other half of.

Stewart’s citation of Matthew 20 possibly contains the most subversive element of her prophetic call narrative. Within it, she shows the egalitarian leadership structure of the kingdom of God, chastises her male naysayers by calling out their jealousy, and aligns herself with Jesus in Gethsemane in contrast to her male counterparts who align

themselves with the power-hungry, bickering disciples who knew nothing of the true, selfless cost of their calling. She could not offer a more scathing indictment, for herein she “not only indicated her divine calling to act in public but also implicitly critiqued black men for their failure to act courageously on behalf of black people.”⁶⁴

Divine Reassurance is Given

Still, while Stewart says, “I am able” to endure the cup of suffering, she still needs reassurance. The Christian tradition reminds her of her finitude, “I found that sin still lurked within; it was hard for me to renounce all for Christ, when I saw my earthly prospects blasted.”⁶⁵ Despite her boldness, she struggled not with her ability to endure the suffering, but with the residue of sin, “It was hard for me to say, thy will be done.”

God sovereignly steps into anxiousness and “I was made to bend and kiss the rod.” “Kiss the rod” is Shakespeare not the Bible. Nevertheless, Stewart seems to be making a biblical reference with it as it parallels her statement, “I was at last willing to be anything or nothing, for my Redeemer’s sake.”⁶⁶ God had apparently taught her obedience and submission. God had prepared her to drink of the cup of suffering. In this, she moves from anxiety to assurance. She realized, unlike James and John, that she cannot serve two masters (Matthew 6:24) and her devotion now extends so far that she prepares to endure all the personal discipline required of a good disciple in the Sermon on the Mount,

⁶⁴ Glaude, Jr., *Exodus!* 122.

⁶⁵ Foner, 139.

⁶⁶ The rod she references could refer to the rod of the protective shepherd who causes the psalmist to lack nothing (Ps. 23:4). Or it the rod of discipline whereby a parent (in this case God) disciplines a child (Stewart) for the purposes of obedience (Prov. 13:24). Or, finally, it could reference Psalm 2, where both rods and kissing combine in a messianic litany that suggests the destruction of the messiah’s enemies, a prophetic warning to the kings of the nations, and a call for all nations to kiss God’s son/king, lest he be angry. Any of these may make sense in Stewart’s context.

including maiming her vision or severing appendages, if necessary. This single-mindedness becomes the causal factor in her reassurance, “Thus ended my many mighty conflicts.” She sits in biblical sabbath, enjoys a time of Jubilee, and inhabits in a period of peace of the sort depicted in Judges after a long struggle with disobedience.

We can appreciate the significance of divine affirmation for Stewart and other women only when seen in the larger context. One observation I make in chapter 2 when discussing Richard Allen’s call narrative, is that men’s experiences of prophetic calling tend to have less dramatic flair. The reason for this lies in the fact that their stories are more frequent and less scrutinized. As men, they do not have to endure the same level of skepticism as women. Thus, “divine validation is in some sense more important for women because they don’t receive the same quantity or quality of human validation as men do.”⁶⁷ A powerful moment of assurance from God goes a long way to easing Stewart’s anxiety, and more importantly for the narrative, assuring her skeptical hearers.

A Sign of Divine Presence and Empowerment

Whereas the Hebrew prophets often had powerful signs indicating the presence of the divine when sent out to prophesy, Stewart’s call narrative conveys a more subtle but no less potent sign of God’s presence. After asserting her wrestling, she finally states, “Thus ended my many conflicts, and I received this heart-cheering promise: That neither death, nor life, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, should be able to separate me from the love of Christ Jesus, our Lord [Romans

⁶⁷ Myers, 189.

8:38;29].”⁶⁸ Her citation of the apostle Paul, here, provides a unique insight into her hermeneutic and call narration, particularly because of Paul’s association with patriarchy.

Monika R. Alston-Miller problematizes the way scholars have understood Stewart’s self-identification. Rather than merely sweeping away Pauline imperatives, as many feminists have, Stewart adopts a liminal position, a “space between the boundaries of religious and civic discourse”⁶⁹ by fusing traditionally masculine voices (e.g. preachers) with traditionally feminine roles (e.g. spiritual mother and social reformer).

This breakdown or fusing of gender binaries, however, only scratches the surface of Stewart’s subtlety and subversion. In her engagement of Paul, she references his various texts and positions herself as an embodiment of Paul’s vision for pastoral, prophetic figures in the church. First, she further directly associates herself with him as the founder of Christianity when she says, “and truly, I can say with St. Paul...”⁷⁰ Second, she responds *in the same way the apostles did* to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.⁷¹ Thus she establishes that in what follows she has no intention of contradicting Paul. How, then, can she claim the role of overseer in the church and teacher of the Bible⁷² when Paul seems to have restricted those roles to men? Stewart answers that the Apostle Paul would change his mind about the public role of women if he had seen Black

⁶⁸ Foner, 137.

⁶⁹ Monika R. Alston-Miller, “The Influence of the Pauline Epistles on Maria W. Stewart’s Rhetoric, A Political Gospel.” *The Journal of Communication and Religion*. Vol. 38, No. 2 (Summer 2015), 100.

⁷⁰ Stewart, 137.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 137.

women's suffering.⁷³ She neither disagrees with Paul nor suggests her adversaries have misunderstood him. She says, rather, that his comments remain irrelevant because his writings did not address her *rhetorical situation*. Thus, she understands herself not only as a faithful exegete of what Paul *has said*, but also a faithful exegete of what Paul *would say* if he understood the contemporary context under which Black women suffer.

To understand the force of Stewart's citation of Paul's well-known text from Romans 8, we should notice Stewart's subtle pronoun shift. Paul does *not* say, "...should be able to separate *me* from the love of Christ Jesus," rather, Paul says, "should be able to separate *us* from the love of Christ Jesus." Stewart says this text served as a "heart-cheering promise" that she, specifically, received from God. For her, this text does not *merely* function as a general announcement to the church-as-whole regarding God's presence, but as a divine affirmation that no loss of life, property, spiritual force, or human criticism can stay God's divine, protective presence. The sign of God's abiding presence appears as nothing less than a *personalized* scripture God gives directly to Maria Stewart that provides a "sense of relief that the burden that came with the call experience and continued, even heightened, during the struggle is now lifted."⁷⁴

The citation of a Pauline text transitions Stewart to her final indicator of divine presence and legitimization of her prophetic call. Part of what Stewart needs to do to legitimize her ministry as a prophetic woman before the church necessitates navigating those problematic patriarchal texts from the Pauline corpus. As the writer of two-thirds of the New Testament, and a man who, himself, experienced a dramatic call from Christ,

⁷³ Ibid., 138.

⁷⁴ Myers, 62.

Stewart's ability to work with and reinterpret Paul proves a necessary piece of *going public* with her prophetic ministry and *demonstrating God's presence with her*.

Stewart traverses this Pauline topography not by tackling head-on or explaining away Pauline household codes but by *reimagining herself as the new Paul*. "And truly, I can say with St. Paul that at my conversion I came to the people in the fullness of the gospel of grace."⁷⁵ From here she mentions her stay in a certain unnamed city, the flourishing conditions of churches, the progress of schools, her visitation of Bible courses, and her hearing of a certain female leader of a Female Association. She also references a disinterested audience upon her arrival (aside from Mr. Garrison), who observed the power of her female influence, which sparked a holy zeal for her audience. Soon thereafter, the Spirit of God came upon her and she spoke before many people.⁷⁶

The key observation to make in this final section of her call narrative is her mimicking of Paul's narrative pacing. Just as Jesus re-enacted the story of Moses in Matthew 1-5, so Maria Stewart reenacts the travelling narrative and concerns of St. Paul. Her explicit citation of Romans 15:9 is followed by a rhythmic reciting of Paul's travels throughout the rest of Romans 15, only they are filled with *Maria's* travels and experiences. This means, just as with Paul, "for wise and holy purposes, best known to himself, [God] hath unloosed my tongue and put his word in my mouth."⁷⁷

Of course, in this section, Stewart makes use of a variety of biblical references⁷⁸ to explain the divine mystery of her call, but the section-as-whole is run-through with

⁷⁵ Foner, 137. Here she is citing Romans 15:29, a Pauline text.

⁷⁶ Foner, 137.

⁷⁷ Foner, 138. She cites here Luke 1:64, the praise of Zachariah at the birth of his son, John the Baptist.

⁷⁸ John 16:8, Deuteronomy 18:18, Isaiah 59:21, Jeremiah 1:9, 5:14, Psalm 35:4, Revelation 9:4.

Paul. While she makes explicit reference to Deborah, Esther, Mary Magdalene, and the woman of Samaria, but ultimately her rhetoric rethinks Paul and argues that he would, indeed, approve of her prophetic ministry:

St. Paul declared that it was shame for a woman to speak in public, yet our great High Priest and Advocate did not condemn the woman for a more notorious offense than this; neither will he condemn this worthless worm...Did St. Paul but know of our wrongs and deprivations, I presume he would make no objection to our pleading in public for our rights.⁷⁹

To stand against Maria Stewart at this point means to stand against Paul. It means to stand against the God who called her and called Paul. It means to stand against the God who dwelt *with her* just as God dwelt *with* Paul. With the weapon of God's presence, provided in the sign of a particular, personalized Pauline scripture, Maria Stewart "set the fiends of the earth and hell at defiance."⁸⁰ "Having cast this call as a holy mission from God and feeling thus equipped, Stewart sweeps away any qualms that her sex might disqualify her...She is, she suggests, a woman God has sent to do the job."⁸¹

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

We conclude now with a few implications we can draw from our analysis of Maria W. Stewart's call narrative and its structure. First, the "truth" presented in Stewart's call narrative does not function primarily as objective information passed from Stewart to the audience. Rather, the spiritual and moral dynamics of her narration come to the front of her intentions. Her voice, as the *narrator*, participates in the narrative. Thus, the story does not take on the disinterested, objective gaze of academic theology or

⁷⁹ Foner, 138.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁸¹ Cooper, 149.

the self-announced objectivity of the oppressor (male or white). Rather, as a character in the narrative, Stewart's prophetic task lies in embodying or incarnating the *pathos* of God to the people. Indeed, the narrative overflows with so much subjectivity and *pathos* that it becomes hard to argue *against* her claims because her "true nature" has become "synonymous with the divine message and one's *pathos* with the divine *pathos*."⁸²

Second, we can see a facet of this subjectivity in how *narrative-time* is emphasized over against literal, "real time."⁸³ *Narrative time* organizes itself around the themes and concerns of the Stewart's narration. Her objective does not lie in offering truths of cause and effect. Rather, she organizes her oration around well-known prophetic themes and relies on *their* order for her chronology.⁸⁴ Thus, we discern that the duration and details of the narrative get modified by how each narrator selects time's relevance to their theme, audience, and rhetorical situation. Historical time remains subjugated to story-time; historical happenings to narrative needs.

Next, the discipline of rhetorical criticism has not always been attentive to the racial or religious components involved in Black women's rhetoric. Future scholarship must take seriously the intersection of gender, race, and religion in Black women's pursuit of liberation, *while also* taking seriously the rhetorical situation in which Black women speak. Their intersectional experiences always remain relevant but sometimes

⁸² Darsey, 86.

⁸³ Myers, 115.

⁸⁴ I have pointed this out in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s prophetic call narrative with his reference to midnight, "Whereas in Stride Toward Freedom King merely mentions that the event took place "late, after a strenuous day," the sermon adds scriptural significance through a shift in description. By pinpointing the precise and portentous nature of the time (midnight) when "strange experiences" occur, King signals to his audience an Abraham-like experience of God." Thomas M. Fuerst, "A King's Place is in the Kitchen: The Rhetorical Trajectory of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Kitchen Table Experience." *The Listening Journal*. Vol. 55, No. 3 (Fall2020). 164.

Black women choose to directly attack the racial and gendered patriarchy in their contexts using tools like the Bible, which white Feminists sometimes find oppressive and regressive. However, Black women have found liberation in these texts precisely because they interpret, embody, and read them in liberatory ways which includes, as demonstrated with Stewart, a keen attentiveness not merely to individual texts but the *structures* of texts. Black women find these religious texts liberative precisely because of their complex, advanced, and decidedly liberationist hermeneutic.

Finally, these observations raise significant questions about the secular-sacred, public-private dichotomies we often assume in our discipline. Stewart narrates her story by mixing secular and sacred time, themes, and concerns. She does not divide political and religious commitments. She even challenges masculine-feminine binaries by adopting a prophetic persona generally adopted exclusively by men. Indeed, her speaking presence in public dismantles the public-private binary of the Cult of True Womanhood. Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch point our discipline's need to rethink our binaries when they argue, "in examining a woman's sermons/speeches, we push "beyond the public-private dichotomy and beyond just calling attention to social networks. Instead, we shift attention more dramatically toward circulations that may have escaped our attention, that we may not have valued."⁸⁵

Maria's Stewart fills her speeches with scripture references because she did not see herself trapped within a binary that reduced her to a political commentator, a Civil Rights activist, or a proto-Womanist thinker. Rather, she accepted the mantle of a Black,

⁸⁵ Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch, *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies*. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), kindle loc. 1370.

Christian prophet in all its rhetorical, non-binariied implications. To sanitize Stewart's voice by forcing her back into modernist binaries means to lose the connections between her speeches and her primary source of strength, political resistance, and worldview. In the use of these various biblical texts, Maria Stewart subverts the racial patriarchy of white America and the gendered patriarchy of Black males. Rather than denigrating her call, these texts align her with the motifs of the Hebrew prophetic call narratives of the Bible. Stewart's call narrative intertextually links hers with those of Jeremiah and Isaiah. The content of her message reflects that of Ezekiel's. Her *ethos* and orientation toward suffering surpasses that of James, John, and her male contemporaries. Further, in spite of the Pauline household codes that call for her submission to male authority, Maria Stewart narratively embodies Paul's apostolic, prophetic mission. The ultimate form of domestication would be to remove her from these radical claims wherein she imagines and reimagines an egalitarian, socio-politically liberated Black womanhood. In these ways, Stewart's call narrative stands as subversive and paradigmatic.

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CHAPTER 2: PROPHETIC PERSPECTIVE BY INCONGRUITY: THE SACRALIZED SECULAR IN THE CALL NARRATIVE AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF RICHARD ALLEN

From the beginning of Richard Allen's 1830 autobiography, the narrative reads less like a memoir and more like an *apologia*, an attempt to defend his prophetic life, activity, and the founding of Mother Bethel AME church. The narrative progresses with a series of sharp contrasts and unanswered questions that remain rather glaring if we take the work as a straight-forward autobiography. Richard S. Newman highlights these oddities by contrasting them with the literary milieu just after Allen's age:

Allen stated at the very outset of his narrative that "slavery is a bitter pill," a lesson he learned early (as a slave separated from his family) and often (Allen was mistakenly grabbed as a runaway slave in the early 1800s). But Allen stopped there, telling readers merely that he would eventually purchase his freedom. What happened to his mother? How did he react when informed that he would be separated from his parents? Did he ever attempt to reconnect lost family members? Allen's reticence on such matters is interesting when one considered that he died just prior to a literary revolution: the advent of the antebellum slave narratives. Befitting a romantic, confessional, highly emotional age, with a more literate reading republic than ever before, these new style autobiographies of the 1840s and 1850 revealed slaves' innermost thoughts to a largely white, Northern, middle-class audience hungry for tales of injustice in the South.¹

Still, as Newman continues, such emotional vulnerability and openness were foreign to Allen's time, style, and personality. More specifically, Allen may have thought "veiling one's deeper thoughts was critical to black survival."² Thus, his autobiography reads like an *apologia* if not an autobiographical homily answering critics.

¹ Richard S. Newman, *Freedom's Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers*. (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 12-13.

² Newman, *Freedom's Prophet*. 13.

The realities of his personality and cultural setting may also explain why, in contrast to Maria W. Stewart, Richard Allen's call narrative in *Gospel Labours* seems much more subtle and less overt. If Stewart's call narrative appeared paradigmatic and mimetic of biblical precedent, Allen's must be *found* within a document seeking primarily to argue for the necessity of a Black Methodist congregation and a movement that stands outside white, ecclesial hegemony. After all, the primary conflict in the narrative, as Joanna Brooks explains, "led [Absalom] Jones and Allen to establish two independent black churches in Philadelphia: Allen founded the Methodist-affiliated Bethel African Church on April 9, 1794, and Jones organized the Protestant Episcopal African Church of Philadelphia on August 12, 1794."³ Just as Allen avoids emotion or evades questions later biographers might have wished he had expounded upon, so too he does not provide direct insight into his call narrative. He justifies the divine calling upon Bethel Church but seems less interested in his own personal call narrative.

While the structure of Maria W. Stewart's call narrative more closely mimicked the prophets of the Bible, Allen's call narrative is no less shaped by them. Allen's apologetic narration combines deeply thoughtful Protestant exegesis with a liberation theology shaped by the experience of enslavement, the Book of Exodus, and the prophet Amos.⁴ Again, we see that narration provides an alternative mode of argument that anchors Allen's rhetorical power in the experience of Black people in the nineteenth-century. This does not mean Allen could not argue in syllogisms. Instead, it means that,

³ Joanna Brooks, "The Early American Public Sphere and the Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic." *William and Mary Quarterly*. 3rd series, Vol. LXII, No. I (January 2005), 81.

⁴ Newman, 116.

in prophetic form, he understands syllogisms and objectivity do not *persuade*, nor do they, more importantly for prophetic rhetoric, “preserve morally significant events” in the minds of his audience.⁵

The rhetorical situation of Allen’s narration also needs highlighting. Allen planted Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia when a burgeoning Black population triggered significant demographic transformations threatening white social status and economic stability. Predictably, white Philadelphians, sometimes themselves European immigrants, resorted to physical violence and psychological intimidation to maintain racial and economic hegemony. Allen’s autobiography and call narrative prophetically unveil that the city’s racial realities reflected the church’s. In unveiling white, Methodist racial animosity, Allen justifies his entrepreneurial work as a church planter and provides us the *motive* for embracing his call to prophetic ministry.

THESIS AND METHODOLOGY

When Richard Allen uses “gospel labours” in the title of his autobiography, he employs a *perspective by incongruity*, described by Kenneth Burke as “taking a word usually applied to one setting and transferring it to another setting. It is a ‘perspective by incongruity,’ since he established it by violating the ‘properties’ of the word in its previous linkages.”⁶ For Burke, these opposing categories get thrust together to provide new interpretive possibilities. Thus, in *Gospel Labours*, Allen elevates himself, a

⁵ Edwin Black, “Excerpts from *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method*.” in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*. 5th Ed. Ed. Carl R. Burghardt and Hillary A. Jones. (State College: Strata Publishing, Inc. 2017), 51.

⁶ Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, Ltd. 1984), 90.

formerly enslaved traveling preacher, to the level of the biblical prophets and contrasts his status with the white, Methodist churchmen of his day.

In this chapter, I use Kenneth Burke's Cluster Criticism, a mechanism for determining motive,⁷ to analyze Richard Allen's *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen*.⁸ I show that various word clusters demonstrate remarkably consistent uses of key terms that valorize Allen's sacralizing of the secular in his *Gospel Labours* while villainizing white Methodist churchmen who maintain a secular-sacred distinction that inhibits their desire to *work* to spread the gospel. This contrast rhetorically functions to justify Allen's calling to apostolic and prophetic ministry while also criticizing social and institutional hierarchies.

I begin my analysis by identifying the key terms based on their frequency or intensity. Next, I determine "what goes with what"⁹ in Allen's mind. This requires creating clusters from terms associated with key terms and commenting on *how* they relate. Finally, I inspect the explicit and implicit contrasts of those clusters to ascertain Allen's motives: (1) the justification of his prophetic, apostolic calling, (2) the devaluation of his opponent's credentials, and (3) his rejection of white secular-sacred dichotomies.

⁷ Sonja K. Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*. (Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, Inc. 1989), 367.

⁸ Richard Allen, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen*. (Philadelphia: Martin and Boden, 1833). Kindle Edition.

⁹ Sonja K. Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism*. 367.

Identification of Key Terms

The key terms in Allen's autobiography are *work*, *labour*, *serve*, and *preach*.

Allen's uses them repeatedly throughout his text, particularly in pivotal moments.¹⁰

These terms connect in clusters with terms, images, or metaphors that congregate around them. Sonja Foss details the process as follows:

This involves a close examination of the rhetoric to identify each place in which each key term appears. The terms that cluster around each key term in each context in which it appears are noted. Terms may cluster around the key terms in various ways. They simply may appear in close proximity to the term, or a conjunction such as *and* may connect the term to the key term. The rhetor may also suggest a cause-and-effect relationship between the key term and another term, suggesting that the one depends on the other or that one is the cause of the other.¹¹

¹⁰ Foss, 368.

¹¹ Foss, 369.

Table 1: Work

Term	Charting the Cluster	Deeper Cluster
Work	Religion	Not make worse servants (moral) good
		Made better slaves (honesty/industry)
	Freedom	From endless work
		Vs. the ease of his work on his master's plantation.
	Hard	Hard work led to pain and prayer.
		with manual labor
	Served my Lord	Head vs. heart
	My hands administered to my needs	Received nothing from the (Methodist) connection
		Stopped traveling and went to work
		So no one could say he was chargeable to the connection
		Industry
		Thank God
	(Building) the house of the Lord	The Lord was with us
		We believed (God's) will

How is work associated with its cluster?

Throughout Allen’s autobiography, he catalogues various places he found employment. *Work* occurs nine times,¹² seven of which refer to manual labor. The ninth reference, regarding the building of a church building according to the will of God,¹³ mixes manual labor and divine desire in a way that highlights several other uses of the term. While Allen exclusively uses *work* to refer to manual labor, he never distinguishes it from spiritual or religious matters. He works long hours, even skipping church services,

¹² The first being a self-reference to the autobiography, itself. This reference stands on its own and does not add any clarity to our understanding of the word usage elsewhere.

¹³ Allen, *Gospel Labours*. Kindle Loc. 126.

so his “unconverted” enslaver will not think religion made his slaves “worse servants.”¹⁴ He further laments his endless toil and the prospect of being sold should his enslaver die.¹⁵ This leads him to *work* to purchase his freedom.¹⁶ The economic details of this purchase also highlight not merely Allen’s work-ethic and his affiliation with Methodist virtues. “When Allen accumulated sufficient funds to pay Sturgis for his freedom, he also offered his debt-ridden owner “a gift of eighteen bushels of salt, worth a guinea per bushel at the time, in consideration of the uncommon Treatment of his Master during servitude.” Dickerson quotes historian Gary Nash saying, “such a gift representing at least a half a year’s wages for a common laborer, testified to Allen’s regard for his master and to his adoption of the Methodist disdain for all things that money could buy.” As demonstrated in the remainder of this chapter, such disdain for monetary means serves to contrast Allen, a “true Methodist,” with the white, Methodist preachers who demand pay, sometimes inordinate pay, for their services. In Allen’s labor, however, he never “forgot to serve my dear Lord,”¹⁷ and details his prayer life while at *work*. While his hands labored away, his heart remained devoted to his Redeemer.¹⁸

¹⁴ Allen, Kindle Loc. 28. Allen feels the need to prove this to his owner because slaveholders often emphasized biblical texts that justified master over slave hierarchies. Allen needed, therefore, to demonstrate the truthfulness of his commitment by submitting to his master, even though his owner, at the time, did not express Christian faith or morality.

¹⁵ Ibid.; Kindle Loc. 41. Sturgis was in constant debt and had already sold several of Allen’s family members. Dennis Dickerson, *African Methodism and its Wesleyan Heritage: Reflections on AME Church History*. (Nashville: AME Publishing House, 2009), 19.

¹⁶ Dickerson, *American Methodism and its Wesleyan Heritage*. 20.

¹⁷ Allen, Kindle Loc. 53.

¹⁸ Ibid.; Kindle Loc. 53.

He also uses *work* to highlight his *work ethic*. He repeatedly says he never used preaching as a means of making money. When he ran out of clothing, he ceased preaching and began *working*. In this way, “my hands administered to my necessities.”¹⁹

In these ways, Allen mimics the prophetic call narrative of the biblical prophet, Amos and the apostolic spirit of the Apostle Paul. Concerning Amos, the prophet tells us of his absorption in manual labor – shepherding and grooming trees – when God’s presence overtook him and called him to his prophetic task.²⁰ In narrating his story with Amostic parallels, Allen demonstrates the overlap between labor and prophecy. He labors to prophesy; prophesying is labor. He has a call to do both.

The emphasis on manual labor also parallels the Apostle Paul in the New Testament. Accused by some in the Corinthian church of making a living, like the Sophist, by using his proclamation of the gospel to become wealthy, Paul responds that he has continued to do manual labor precisely so no one can accuse him of selling his rhetorical talents. In this case, Allen’s autobiographical sketch emphasizing his own labor demonstrates that he has never taken advantage of his own rhetorical skill or prophetic giftings for self-benefit. Instead, even in the eventual splintering of his church, he has continued to rely on his own labor. No one can accuse Allen of prophesying to make money or achieve acclaim.

¹⁹ Ibid.; Kindle Loc. 114.

²⁰ Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1962), 34.

Table 2: Labour

TERM	CHARTING THE CLUSTER
	Gospel
	Preach(ed) 3x
	Glory
	Faith
	Blessed (3x)
	Served the Lord
Labour	The Lord was with... (3x)
	Souls (3x)
	Employed – Cutting wood
	Affliction of body (rheumatism, foot pain) (2x)
	Kindly received
	Added to the ministry
	Large field open for instructing African brethren

How is Labour associated with its cluster?

The second term, *labour*, occurs nine times. Four refer explicitly to religious labour. The other five initially appear ambiguous because they could reference manual or religious labor. However, of note, not least because *labour* occurs in autobiography’s title, eight of the nine uses of *labour* occur in the same paragraph.²¹

Four times Allen uses the term unambiguously to refer to *gospel* labour or the “awakening” of souls. However, two of the more ambiguous uses are connected to words that suggest, even if the work equates to manual labor, he sees God’s presence and favor in the work. The unambiguously religious uses of *labour* surround the ambiguous uses, communicating that Allen sees his primary *labour* in each place as preaching the gospel. Manual *labour* serves the religious end. To use Burke’s phrasing, Allen “converts”²² manual *labour* upward and makes “secular” labor sacred.

²¹ This is paragraph takes place on page 8-9 in the autobiography. But see the endnote table I have provided, cell (D).

²² Burke, 134. See also Joel Overall, “Piano and Pen: Music as Kenneth Burke’s Secular Conversion” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*. Vol. 41, No. 5 (2011).

Further, the ambiguous samples are not only surrounded by religious terminology and uses of *labour*, but they also contain intertextual biblical references. In one, Allen tells of a family who showed him the ancient Christian virtue of hospitality even though he was physically ill.²³ Such hospitality and caring for the traveling minister intertextually references Paul's experience with the Galatian church.²⁴ Like Allen's *Gospel Labours*, Galatians contains a lengthy discussion of Paul's travelogue as he preached throughout the Roman Empire.²⁵ Moreover, Galatians contains a personal narrative designed, at least in part, to defend Paul's apostolic, prophetic calling. Through this intertextual use of Pauline imagery, Allen identifies himself as an heir or embodiment of the Apostle Paul.

Further, Allen's sore feet intertextually reference Romans 10:15, where Paul blesses the feet of those who are sent to preach the gospel.²⁶ Again, if the exigence for which Allen writes his autobiography is a challenge to his apostolic or prophetic ministry, discussing his sore feet and those who blessed his feet with healing balms would resonate with biblically informed audiences who understand its referent to preachers and prophets of the gospel. Indeed, far more than a reference to Romans 10:15, the man and his wife washing Allen's feet remind readers of Jesus washing his disciple's feet.²⁷ Not only does

²³ Christin Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999).

²⁴ Galatians 4:13 (NRSV) "You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you; 14 though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me, but welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus."

²⁵ See Galatians 1:13-2:10.

²⁶ Romans 10:15 (NRSV) "And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

²⁷ Allen, Kindle Loc. 73.

the scene show Allen's affection for this couple (placing them in the position of Jesus), but it also verifies his claims to apostolic and prophetic authority, as one who has received foot-washing from Jesus. Allen identifies himself as the heir or embodiment of Paul and the twelve disciples.

In the end, Allen's use of *labour* clusters mostly in one religious-language saturated, intertextually rich paragraph. Allen intertwines the labours. To labour is to do the Lord's work, whether that work entails preaching or performing manual labour. When referenced at all, manual labor affords him the opportunity to preach.

Table 3: Serve

TERM	CHARTING THE CLUSTER	DEEPER	DEEPER STILL
Serve	My dear Lord	Hard work	Slavery
	Prayer	My redeemer	Make my living
	Preaching (7x)		Employed (brickyard, cutting wood, driving wagon)
	My dear Lord (was with me)		
	Blessed		
	Glory to God		
	Family	Trust	
	Labour		
	Loved the Lord (2x)		
	Happy		
	Pious woman	Children strangers to vital religion	Preached
	<i>Other ministers: Inadequate pay to serve church (2x)</i>		
	<i>Will pay preacher</i>		
	<i>No pastor allowed to serve us</i>	<i>Pastors expelled if they serve us</i>	
	<i>Left to ourselves</i>		
	<i>Could not preach</i>		

How is Serve associated with its cluster?

Allen uses forms of *serve* (serve, service, servant) ten times in *Gospel Labours*. Four times they form the phrase, “serve the lord.” Five refer to the vocational service of white preachers who sought inordinate pay. Of these, he never says their service was “for the lord” even though they were doing church work. None refer to manual labor.

We also discern a formal and informal use of the terms. The informal refers to acts of menial service directed toward or performed by fellow Christians. These include

acts of hospitality, healing, or piety. The formal uses refer to the vocation of pastoring a church. He uses the formal exclusively for the white preachers he criticizes.²⁸

Table 4: Preach

Term	Charting the Cluster	Deeper Cluster
	The Gospel	Lord, Savior Jesus (2x), saved
	Acts of piety/worship (6x)	
	Religion made better slaves	Honesty/industry
	Methodist (13x)	First to preach to Black people, skeptic/willing to preach at master's house, simple preaching, abandon discipline
	Master converted	Gave up slave owning
	Woke from sleep preaching/praying	
	Preached while traveling for work (9x)	Happy seasons, meditation, prayer
	Met acquaintances through (5x)	Hospitality, apostle, trustworthy family, souls added to the labour, blessed, great faith
	Lord with me/them (7x)	Blessed labours, glory to God (2x), souls for hire, laboured for lord (2x)
	Glorious meeting	
	Souls awakened	Cried to the Lord, seeking redemption, white and coloured
Preach, Preacher, Preaching, Preached	"must be a man of God"	
	English (Preachers)	Ministers/holy orders
	St. Georges Church	
	Large field opened to preach to Black people	
	Met opposition (4x)	For building church for coloured people (2x), 3 blotted opposition names, used insulting language
	White elder would not <i>preach</i> .	Persecuted us
	Tyrants	Especially to Black people, turned out of Methodist society.
	Divided money gained from preaching with white preachers	
	1793, appointed to preach in Philadelphia	Only Black preacher in Philadelphia, rejected appointment because Methodist.
	White preachers want higher pay than church can afford (13x)	Limited times they would preach because of this pay.
	White minister forcing way into the pulpit.	Packed around pulpit and kept him from getting in it.
	Similar acts by white preachers in Baltimore.	

²⁸ I have indicated the shift to formal usage with the dotted arrow and italics.

How is Preach associated with its cluster?

The terms preach, preachers, preached, and preaching comprise the single most prevalent word-family in Allen's autobiography with sixty uses, and, thus, likely comprise the "ultimate term" in the text. The uses are overwhelmingly positive but explicitly negative uses *exclusively* when referring to the white Methodist ministers in Philadelphia and Baltimore. In all, Allen sees *simple* Methodist "spiritual" or "extempore"²⁹ preaching as the source of Methodism's success among people of color. It also converts his enslaver early in the autobiography and persuades him to release enslaved Africans. Preaching "awakens" hundreds of souls throughout the narrative, and Allen hints at no resistance to his own preaching until he encounters white Methodist preachers.³⁰ He also associates preaching with acts of piety and worship at least six times and laments the loss of such disciplines among the Methodists of his day.

Seven times Allen uses the phrase, "the Lord was with me/them" in the context of preaching. The term has intertextual significance with the Bible. Prophetic figures in the Bible often struggled with God's presence when they faced opposition. Due to this, they needed constant reassurance of divine presence.³¹ At other times, the Bible says "the Lord was with" a prophetic figure, making their prophecies come true and giving them status among the faith community.³² Allen's seven-fold repetition of this phrase does not merely reflect a habit of the tongue; it identifies him with the biblical prophets.

²⁹ Allen, Kindle Loc. 196.

³⁰ One exception to this may be the resistance of some middle-class black church audiences.

³¹ Exodus 3:11-12, Jeremiah 1:8

³² I Samuel 3:19

The negative uses of the term universally refer to the white preachers who use the craft to make money. Allen remains uninterested in whether they can make a living preaching because he has detailed decades of *work* that afforded him the opportunity to preach. He exhibits no sympathy for white preachers who refuse to do manual labor so they can preach but only want to make their living by preaching.

Both by displaying his willingness to *work* to preach and by displaying the white preacher’s unwillingness to work, Allen, again, calls upon the Apostle Paul. Acts 18:3 describes Paul’s travels to Corinth, where he stayed for a season with a couple and did manual labor (tent-making) with them. Acts 18:4, then, connects Paul’s manual labor with the work of preaching the gospel, as he used his time working in Corinth to visit local synagogues and evangelize.³³ Allen’s subtle use of the Pauline tent-making theme further contrasts him and the white Methodists. Despite their denominational credentials, it justifies his apostolic, prophetic calling and calls theirs into question.

View of Key Terms Revealed in their Opposites

The next step in cluster criticism involves analyzing the implicit and explicit *contrasts* of Allen’s key terms. We begin by charting their *opposites*. From there, we offer thoughts on how the clusters work within Allen’s autobiography.

Table 5: Opposites

View of Work Revealed in Cluster Analysis	Opposite³⁴
Hard working (Christian) servants/slaves	A religion that creates lazy servants

³³ Acts 18:1-4 (NRSV): After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. 2 There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, 3 and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together—by trade they were tentmakers. 4 Every sabbath he would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks.

³⁴ I italicize the *implied* contrasts to differentiate them from the explicit rhetorical contrasts.

Honesty	<i>Falsity</i>
Industry	<i>Lack of work ethic</i>
Serve the Lord	<i>Unconverted/self-interested</i>
my hands were employed to earn my bread, my heart was devoted to my dear Redeemer	<i>Work without devotion to God</i>
Worked to meet needs	Burden on the connection
View of <i>Labour</i> Revealed in Cluster Analysis	Opposite
Blessing	<i>Non-blessed (he never says cursed)</i>
Preaching	Refusal to preach without inordinate pay
Faith	<i>Unfaithful</i>
Serve the Lord	<i>Unfaithfulness</i>
Awakened souls	<i>Cannot awaken souls</i>
Welcomed me	Opposed me
<i>Added to the ministry</i>	<i>fruitless</i>
I soon saw a large field open in seeking and instructing my African brethren, who had been a long forgotten	<i>No concern to evangelize</i>
View of <i>Serve</i> Revealed in Cluster Analysis	Opposite
Serve	“Serve” only when paid
Serve the Lord	<i>self-interested</i>
Prayer	<i>Prayerlessness</i>
The Lord was with me/us	Removed Black members from the congregation and Methodist society
Shared with white ministers	Require pay to preach
Laboured for the Lord	Do not want to preach at poor, black churches
View of <i>Preach</i> Word-Family Revealed in Cluster Analysis	Opposite
Preacher	Refusal to do manual labor
Souls awakened	<i>Will not see souls awakened</i>
Recognized as a “man of God”	<i>Will not be recognized as ‘a man of God’</i>
Piety and spiritual discipline	Disregards piety and discipline
The Lord was with me/them	<i>Those who do not experience the Lord’s presence</i>
Those who serve the church (informal)	Tyrants, refuse to work to preach, bullies

Through this analysis of opposites, we see the derisive critique of Allen’s opponents. When considering Allen’s emphasis on *gospel labours*, which throughout “converted” manual labor upward and made it sacred, we see how Allen rhetorically prepared his readers for moral judgment long before he introduced the opponents in the

climax of his text. In all four opposites sets, we see that the negative involves a lack of divine activity or presence. His opposites were implicit in the first three key terms, and he made them explicit with the white Methodist preachers. Allen laments their lack of attention to Methodist disciplines,³⁵ disinterest in piety, refusal to *serve* black churches,³⁶ and tyranny.³⁷ By contrasting their *service* with his *labour*, he suggests they do not experience the divine presence. Due to this lack, they had no passion for converting the “African brethren,” something for which Methodists had a reputation.³⁸ He attributes these failures to such Methodists “becoming somebody” instead of remaining on the margins, seeking status instead of associating with *nobodies*.³⁹ Dickerson coincides this lament with a shift in class demographics in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Methodists. “The Wesleyan movement that initially drew Allen’s loyalty became an increasingly unfamiliar religious body. The fervor with which the gospel was advanced, openness to the poor and to blacks, and staunch abolitionism all started to wane.”⁴⁰ Such preachers can never be recognized as “men of God”⁴¹ or embody the prophetic and scriptural narratives as Allen does. Despite their credentials, he rhetorically reduces them to tyrants and bullies, men who merely *preach* but are unwilling to *work* for it.

³⁵ Allen, Kindle Loc. 186.

³⁶ Ibid.; Kindle Loc. 227.

³⁷ Ibid.; Kindle Loc. 191.

³⁸ Ibid., Kindle Loc. 194.

³⁹ Ibid., Kindle Loc. 93.

⁴⁰ Dickerson, *African Methodism and its Wesleyan Heritage*. 21.

⁴¹ Allen, Kindle Loc. 80.

Concluding Thoughts on Motives

Sonja Foss says naming motives involves answering the question, “Given that these terms have special meanings for this rhetor, what was the motive for producing this particular rhetoric in this specific way likely to have been?”⁴² Burke argued for four fundamental motives in human communication: guilt, redemption, hierarchy, and victimage.⁴³ While Allen tells his story with antagonists, he does not frame the story in terms of victimage. He also expresses no guilt and, therefore, no need for redemption. His primary motive seems to be hierarchical. *Gospel Labours* elevates him spiritually, if not denominationally, above the white, Methodist preachers in Philadelphia. It also functions to “convert upward” notions of *labor*, *work*, and *service*, so that they are seen on the same sacred plane of *preaching*. We end by taking each of these in turn.

Apostle and Prophet: The Supremacy of Richard Allen’s Spiritual Status

Through his intertextual references wherein he explicitly identifies himself with the biblical prophets and the Apostle Paul, Richard Allen elevates his status beyond merely a formerly enslaved, traveling preacher, or church planter. He demonstrates through these clusters that from the beginning, his primary concern has been the promulgation of the gospel, no matter the cost. Whether his bruised feet became beautiful through his preaching travels, whether he had to tent-make like the Apostle Paul, even in his travelogue, Allen *identifies* with the biblical narrative in a way that both *incarnates* its narrative and also makes him *consubstantial* with biblically literate audiences. The

⁴² Foss, 369.

⁴³ Hugh Dalziel Duncan in Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, Ltd. 1984), xxxi.

motive we see here is a man who favorably contrasts himself with white Methodist preachers who refuse to work and, therefore, cannot embody the biblical narrative or prophetic discourses. As an ex-slave and traveling preacher, his prophetic and apostolic credentials outweigh his counterparts, thus placing him in a higher spiritual position. He has justified his call to apostolic and prophetic ministry and has delegitimized the *service* of those with all the institutional, formal credentials. The human hierarchy has it wrong, but then again, institutions have rarely appreciated the prophets in their midst.

The Prophets and Binaries

Kenneth Burke highlights the complexity of determining motive when he says that “it will naturally take its place within the framework of our *Weltanschauung* as a whole.”⁴⁴ Rooted in this, he continues, “We discern situational patterns by means of the particular vocabulary of the cultural group into which we are born. Our minds, as linguistic products, are composed of concepts which select certain relationships as meaningful...these relationships are not *realities*; they are *interpretations* of reality.”⁴⁵ Because of these interpretations of reality and motives, we must understand the dominance of our own (post)modern dichotomies which would not make sense to either the Hebrew prophets or nineteenth-century Black figures. Richard Allen cannot speak in terms of a secular-sacred dichotomy because it remains foreign to his experience as an enslaved person where *life* was work and God speaks in that *work*.

⁴⁴ Burke, 25.

⁴⁵ Burke, 35.

Within the discipline of Rhetoric and Communication, we can see how Allen fulfills Kenneth Burke's prophetic function whereas his Methodist interlocutors and opponents fulfilled Burke's priestly function. Burke describes it as follows:

The members of a group specifically charged with upholding a given orientation may be said to perform a *priesthood function*...The decay of a priesthood leads to a division between *priests* and *prophets*. The priests devote their efforts to maintaining the vestigial structure; the prophet seeks new perspectives whereby this vestigial structure may be criticized and a new one established in its place.⁴⁶

Indeed, while much value may come from reading Allen's rhetoric through this lens, realistically, Allen fulfills his prophetic role within the tradition of the Hebrew prophets who did not always differentiate between the prophetic and priestly roles. Indeed, such a stark binary would have seemed foreign to them and, maybe, Allen. For Allen, however, rejecting the prophetic-priestly binary would have seemed even less important than the rejection of other binaries.

Prophetic rejection of inconvenient or artificial binaries fill the Bible. Allen heavily relies upon the prophetic books of the Bible, especially the call narratives, for his implicit and explicit rejection of them. Isaiah's call narrative, for example brings together "Holy, Holy, Holy"⁴⁷ – signifying the transcendence and distance of Yahweh – with "the whole earth is full of his glory"⁴⁸ – indicating the immanence and presence of Yahweh. The whole earth (immanence) is full of God's glory (transcendence). With the collapse of the binaries, a whole host of collapses occur. As Abraham J. Heschel has pointed out:

⁴⁶ Ibid., 179.

⁴⁷ Isaiah 6:3

⁴⁸ Isaiah 6:3

God and the world are not opposite poles. There is darkness in the world, but there is also this call, 'Let there be light!' Nor are body and soul at loggerheads. We are not told to decide between 'Either-Or,' either God or the world, either this world or the world to come. We are told to accept Either and Or, God and the world. It is upon us to strive for a share in the world to come, as well as to let God have as share in this world.⁴⁹

There are no secular-sacred, no body-soul, no this-worldly-next-worldly binaries.

Such non-dualistic thinking reveals why, as Newman pointed out, "Allen was comfortable with secular and sacred texts." He read not only Josephus but also works by contemporary American statemen, including both Ben Franklin and George Washington."⁵⁰ God's presence permeated the secular and sacred histories, politics, and philosophies.

Enlightenment binaries riddled white theology and kept it shackled to its own oppressive categories, but Asante makes an important point that applies to Allen when he says, "No black man can truly identify with a God who speaks only the language of the white oppressor."⁵¹ The dualistic, binary-laden language of whiteness would have inhibited Allen's ability to critique his opponents. The rejection – or transcendence – of such language provided him prophetic insight that changed American history, even if some scholars still cannot see it. For a prophetic figure heralding the fulfillment of Methodist promises of equality, Allen's "best claims to equal founding status was his attempt to merge faith and racial politics in the young republic."⁵²

⁴⁹ Abraham J. Heschel, *What is Man?* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965), 93.

⁵⁰ Newman, 119.

⁵¹ Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 48.

⁵² "Overlooked by scholars who assume a secular-sacred dichotomy. "Allen's life exemplified one of the defining characteristics of black activism before the Civil War: the movement from integrationist to nationalist beliefs. Perhaps because most scholars have viewed Allen as primarily a religious figure, his radical side has not garnered much attention." Newman, 20.

Why a Non-Dramatic a Call Narrative?

Compared to Maria W. Stewart, Nat Turner, and Julia Foote, Richard Allen's call narrative appears, to use William H. Myers's terminology, *non-cataclysmic*.⁵³ In such narratives the prophet does not experience a complete reorientation during their calling. Instead, the calling occurs as a natural overflow at the intersection of their theology, politics, and life. Christopher Z. Hobson commented on a similar experience with other figures in the African American Prophetic Tradition:

Most of my subjects, do not claim to act by commandment. One reason may be that those with formal study in divinity generally accepted the tradition that God's direct authorization of prophecy had ceased after the canonical prophets. Additionally, Methodists and Baptists recognized speech inspired by the Holy Spirit – but not directly commanded by God – as more authoritative than ordinary pastoral speech.⁵⁴

Whether or not Allen views direct communication with God as having ceased remains irrelevant. Hobson's point lies in the fact that receiving a calling to prophecy need not require a cataclysmic, visionary event.

However, something beyond educational bias may lay behind Allen's non-cataclysmic calling. Specifically, he holds the most social privilege of our four figures. As a *free* man, he has more social privilege than Nat Turner. He has more social privilege than either Foote or Stewart as a man. Further, the fact that he has enough social clout amongst the Black community in Philadelphia to start a new church suggests that a

⁵³ William H. Myers, *God's Yes Was Louder than My No: Rethinking the African American Call to Ministry*. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1994), 73.

⁵⁴ Christopher Z. Hobson, *The Mount of Vision: African American Prophetic Tradition, 1800-1950*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 155.

dramatic, visionary tale was not needed to convince anyone of his *ethos*. This is, of course, speculation, but we cannot discount the possibility of privilege playing a role.

Perspective by Incongruity: The Sacralized Secular in Allen's Gospel Labours

When Richard Allen calls his autobiography *Gospel Labours*, he deliberately cultivates the use of contradictory concepts, particularly among Protestants who see the gospel as “grace not works.” Allen employs a rhetorical *perspective by incongruity* whereby spiritual pieties (the gospel) are conjoined to material pieties⁵⁵ (labour) in a way that provides a new orientation toward the task of preaching. Allen never separates the spiritual and material, but continually presses them together in A-B-A-B structure through his narrative. “Instead of looking for a Hegelian synthesis that would follow thesis and antithesis, he would have us realize that the real course of events is necessarily, at all times, unified.”⁵⁶ Allen's problem with the white Methodist preachers lies precisely in their desire to do the spiritual work of preaching without the material work of manual labor. Allen sees *Gospel Labours*, together, as the means by which his hands and his heart are conjoined. His rhetoric “converts upward” the Black, traveling, tent-making prophet and converts downward the white, Methodist preachers who separate secular and sacred. Instead of working within a secular-sacred dichotomy, Allen cannot separate secular and sacred. Instead, he finds the *gospel* solely in the context of *labours*, and understands *labour* as the only means for preaching the *gospel*.

⁵⁵ “Piety is a schema of orientation since it involves the putting together of experiences. The orientation may be right or wrong; it can guide or misguide.” Burke, 76.

⁵⁶ Burke, 94.

This conflation of secular and sacred in *Gospel Labours* forms a perspective by incongruity that aligns Allen with the larger Black church liberationist theology and African American Prophetic Tradition. Dianna Watkins Dickerson calls prophetic utterance “the moment in which the sacred and the secular, much like blues and gospel, converge upon one another.”⁵⁷ Molefi Kete Asante explains, “The Afrocentric writer knows that oppositional dichotomies do not exist...The interaction of my physical and metaphysical world leads to my behavior at the moment and this interaction cannot be reduced to separate units”⁵⁸ such as body-mind, material-spiritual, secular-sacred, or private-public. These categories have been *read onto* African American rhetoric.⁵⁹ Part of Allen’s motive in his autobiography lies precisely in demonstrating the superiority of the *preacher*, prophet, or apostle who leaves the elements in a holistic harmony rather than, as the white Methodist preachers do, assuming a secular-sacred divide that allows one merely *preach* without *working, serving, or doing gospel labor*.

⁵⁷ Dianna Watkins Dickerson, “‘You Are Somebody’: A Study of the Prophetic Rhetoric of Rev. Henry Logan Starks, DMin.” *The Journal of Communication and Religion*. Vol. 43, No. 4 (Winter 2020), 97.

⁵⁸ Asante, 17.

⁵⁹ “Often ignorant of African philosophy and culture, commentators have imposed Western constructs and values on material that grows out of coherent, albeit different, traditions.” Asante, 25.

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CHAPTER 3: FOOTE WASHING: THE RHETORIC OF SELF-LOVE AND SUBVERSIVE SANCTIFICATION IN JULIA FOOTE'S PROPHETIC CALL NARRATIVE

For most of her faith journey, Julia Foote forbade female preaching. Like many of her contemporaries, she assumed women should serve “the church in some type of domestic position as members of the congregation, benevolent aid organizers, or Sunday school teachers.”¹ She submitted to male spiritual and familial authority and “posed no real threat to the power structure maintained by preachers, deacons, and other male leaders.”²

By the end of her life, however, and after years of denominational infighting and even exile from her church, Foote had become the first woman in the A.M.E. Zion denomination to become a deaconess and a full elder. Further, she participated in revivals in Canada, across the North-Eastern United States and deep into the Mid-West, at one juncture even preaching to a crowd of several thousand hearers. Finally, her autobiography, *A Brand Plucked from the Fire*, was met with praise from both Black and white ecclesial communities. It applied the gospel and the Methodist doctrine of Entire Sanctification to racial and gendered discrimination and the structural, legal, and financial hinderances to Black flourishing in America.

The movement in her narrative from rejection to revivalist started when she began having visionary experiences wherein God called her to preach through an angelic intermediary. In a period of liminality, she wrestled with reticence and repeatedly

¹ Chanta M. Haywood, *Prophesying Daughters: Black Women Preachers and the Word, 1823-1913*. (Columbia: University of Missouri, 2003), 1.

² Haywood, *Prophesying Daughters*. 14.

responded to God, “No, Lord, not me.”³ In arguing with God, she appealed to her impotence and ignorance, wavering back and forth between knowing “all things are possible with God” and a “shrinking”⁴ feeling of dread. When taking these doubts and fears before God in prayer, she experienced successive “heavenly visitations,” which grew increasingly colorful and climaxed with an apocalyptic trip to heaven wherein the holy Trinity directly revealed divine will to her, connected her gospel preaching to the Hebrew prophet Joel,⁵ and compelled her to surrender to the call to preach. Foote’s surrender, however, proved the easiest part of her prophetic journey because outside her heavenly visions, indeed, in the church, patriarchy and white supremacy persisted.

In this chapter, I examine Julia Foote’s call narrative from her autobiography, *A Brand Plucked from the Fire*, through a womanist lens. An interesting amalgamation of slave-autobiography and spiritual-autobiography, I ask how Foote’s narrative employs a proto-womanist hermeneutic of redemptive self-love as a means of authenticating her prophetic and apostolic calling. I demonstrate throughout that Foote’s call narrative elucidates a rhetorical theology of redemptive self-love that refutes the reticence of “professors and non-professors,”⁶ her spouse,⁷ her mother,⁸ her pastor,⁹ white people in

³ Julia Foote, *A Brand Plucked from the Fire: An Autobiographical Sketch*, (Cleveland: W.F. Schneider, 1879), 65.

⁴ Foote, *A Brand...*, 65.

⁵ Foote, 78.

⁶ Foote, 67.

⁷ George Foote told her he would consider admitting her to an insane asylum if she began preaching. Foote, 67.

⁸ Her mother told her she would rather her daughter die than take up a preaching ministry. Foote, 84.

⁹ Her pastor and church threatened her with excommunication and church discipline. Foote, 102.

general, her audience, and most importantly herself. I begin with discussing womanism and redemptive self-love as a theoretical framework for reading Foote's rhetoric. From there I discuss redemptive self-love within the context of Foote's *conscious* choice of genre and the conscious choices involved in crafting a call narrative that counters the hegemonies of whiteness and patriarchy. Finally, I discuss facets of her call narrative which orient the reader around the notions of redemptive self-love, including her emphasis on Entire Sanctification, her application of apocalyptic imagery, her employment of Edenic and Eve imagery, and finally, her intimate cleansing from Christ.

In Foote's description of her call narrative, we get a unique insight into prophecy's emphasis on *pathos*. Abraham Heschel highlights *pathos* as the prime rhetorical tool of the prophet, particularly as *pathos* reflects the passions of God:

an analysis of prophetic utterances shows us that the fundamental experience of the prophet is a fellowship with the feelings of God, *a sympathy with divine pathos*, a communion with the divine consciousness which comes about through the prophet's reflection of, or participation in, the divine pathos. The typical prophetic state of mind is one of being taken up into the heart of the divine pathos... The emotional experience of the prophet becomes the focal point for the prophet's understanding of God. He lives not only his personal life, but also the life of God.¹⁰

Thus, in the *pathos*-filled narrativization of her prophetic call, Julia Foote, like many other female prophets before and after her, *embodies* the prophetic prediction of Joel 3:1-2, which promises the Holy Spirit's empowerment of *all* flesh, including women's, to prophecy with the *pathos* of God. Women like Foote

¹⁰ Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1962), 31.

have found their voice authorized by Joel's words expanded such that "all people, without regard to gender, age, or social standing, will function as prophets."¹¹

WOMANISM AS THE BEST FOOTE FORWARD

Until recently, few scholars in communication and, specifically, rhetoric have paid attention to womanism or its ancestry. Womanism's practitioners have concentrated on activism rather than academics, survival rather than systemization. Kimberly P. Johnson rightly observes, "more people have employed womanism than have described it."¹² However, this inattention has shifted with more womanists writing scholastically and more scholars reading womanist works. This amalgamation has inaugurated a fresh academic arena ablaze with opportunities to reassess familiar voices, excavate forgotten ones, and distinguish Black women's experiences from Black men and white women. For example, whereas "feminist scholars have reasoned that women's language, acts, and deeds of liberation tended to express themselves quite differently than those of men,"¹³ womanists have added that Black women's language, acts, and deeds of liberation tend to express themselves quite differently than those of white women. Womanism allows us to reengage Black women's voices and ask how their rhetoric, agenda, activism, and assumptions all differ from those of the white feminists.

¹¹ Wilda C. Gafney, *Daughters of Miriam: Women Prophets in Ancient Israel*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 111.

¹² Kimberly P. Johnson, *The Womanist Preacher: Proclaiming Womanist Rhetoric from the Pulpit*. (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), xviii.

¹³ Sallie M. Cuffe, "Reconstructing Subversive Moral Discourses in the Spiritual Autobiographies of Nineteenth-Century African American Preaching Women." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*. Vo. 32, No. 2 (Fall 2016), pg. 54.

Through this reengagement, we realize one remarkable difference between feminism and womanism lies in the degree of openness to Christianity. Feminism has, with warrant, largely left the church and considered the Bible as an apparatus of androcentric autocracy. Womanists, however, while still acknowledging the patriarchal presumptions in the Black church and white interpretations of the Bible, read themselves into the biblical narrative, see themselves as actors who embody the ongoing, open-ended narrative, and employ their incarnation of the biblical narrative to subvert patriarchy and white supremacy. Kimberly Johnson asks with feminists and womanists alike:

What can be said when the churches where we worship are intoxicated with patriarchal religious traditions and rhetoric? How can we turn to the church for affirmation, guidance, and strength if the messages that we hear from the pulpit only seem to liberate and affirm the humanity of our male counterparts? Where do we go to get the information on what strategies to use?¹⁴

Whereas feminists may reply to Johnson's queries by dismissing the church as a pillar of patriarchy, Johnson answers with an appeal to the experiences of Black, female preachers of the gospel who intentionally interpret the Bible considering the experiences of Black women's liberation. Instead of merely having the Bible laid over them and theology taught to them, womanist rhetoric centralizes Black women's subjectivity in producing discourses of knowledge and power.

Contemporary womanists did not, however, invent a biblical hermeneutic of liberation or emancipatory methods of knowledge production. They inherited these from proto-womanists like Julia Foote:

[The] biblical hermeneutic applied by early black women's autobiographers to their social situation is not unlike the womanist hermeneutic valorized by latter twentieth-century and twenty-first-century

¹⁴ Johnson, *The Womanist Preacher*. xxi.

womanist biblical scholars such as Renita Weems, who contends that ‘womanist biblical hermeneutical reflections do not begin with the Bible’ but with ‘African American women’s will to survive and thrive as human beings.’¹⁵

To survive and thrive as human beings, Black women historically had to learn to love themselves as *Black* and as *women*. Womanist academics adopted the language of “redemptive self-love” to articulate of their effort to love themselves in opposition to the antagonisms of androcentrism and whiteness. Indeed, more than themselves, in a rejection of white individualism (another contrast with white feminism), womanist activists and rhetoricians have focused on “principles of justice for the entire community.”¹⁶ In the classic words of Alice Walker, a womanist commits to the “survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female... Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.”¹⁷ Thus, redemptive self-love not only applies to Black women but typifies their prophetic proclamation to all people, whether white or Black, male or female.

Womanism’s openness to religious experience gets anticipated in the traditions of nineteenth-century Black women’s Spiritual Autobiographers. Julia Foote’s *A Brand Plucked from the Fire* is not unique in the employment of religious experience as a means of empowering women to “appropriate their own moral agency to move, to challenge, and to reinterpret reality differently than the prevailing social norms and power structures dictated.”¹⁸ In womanist terms, religious experiences helped women like Foote love

¹⁵ Cuffe, “Reconstructing Subversive Moral Discourses in the Spiritual Autobiographies of Nineteenth-Century African American Preaching Women.” 59.

¹⁶ Melbourne S. Cummings, Judi Moore Latta, “When They Honor The Voice: Centering African American Women’s Call Stories” in *The Journal of Black Studies*. Vol. 40, No. 4 (March 2010), 671.

¹⁷ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), xi-xii.

¹⁸ Cuffe, 56.

themselves and find their voices in a “white man’s” world. As with nineteenth-century proto-womanist preaching, so with contemporary womanist preaching, redemptive self-love expanding outward to the entire community drives the womanist’s rhetorical theology. What Johnson says about contemporary womanist homiletics equally applies to the rhetoric of nineteenth-century Black women’s spiritual autobiographies:

Redemptive self-love sermons seek to redeem a woman by removing the socially perceived shame of a woman away from her actions. The preacher must offer a perspectival collective that re-images the woman from being a villain to being a heroine by identifying the integrity and morals by which the woman lives to lift the shame, dishonor, disgrace, and condemnation that society has placed upon the woman. These sermons also require the preacher to encourage women (both in the text and in the audience) to match their human agency and moral agency with a rhetorical agency. Redemptive self-love reflects the ability to unashamedly love self and stand up for self regardless of what anyone else thinks.¹⁹

This womanist value and voyage toward redemptive self-love drives even the rhetorical choices of proto-womanists like Julia Foote. She asserted her *humanity* by employing first-person narration and a creative interpretation of biblical texts.

Feminist theologian Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza highlighted five aspects of feminist biblical criticism and theological method:

1. Hermeneutic of Suspicion
2. Hermeneutic of Remembrance
3. Hermeneutic of Imagination
4. Hermeneutic of Evaluation and Proclamation
5. Hermeneutic of Resistance²⁰

¹⁹ Johnson, 59.

²⁰ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 62.

Womanism adds to Fiorenza's list 6) Radical Subjectivity, 7) Traditional Communalism, 8) Redemptive Self-Love, and 9) Critical Engagement.²¹ By placing themselves as subjects *within* the biblical narrative, they ground their interpretive authority within the communal assessment of other Black women who mutually attempt to build what Martin Luther King, Jr. called "The Beloved Community."²² The Beloved Community serves as a *realized* (i.e. present) eschatological community wherein an egalitarian, just society's prophetic vision comes to fruition. It is a communal reality that refuses this-worldly and next-worldly binaries. As Madlock explains, the Beloved Community is:

an inclusive space where all people share in the wealth of the earth, and where poverty, hunger, homelessness, and other forms of social injustice are not tolerated. Peaceful conflict resolution prevails where love and trust triumph over fear and hatred, and all God's children rejoice in peace and justice...A womanist ethos, logos, and pathos rejects oppression and is committed to social justice and inclusivity for all of humanity; this is the set of values that goes beyond theology.²³

The prophetic nature of this community gets highlighted further by Katie Geneva Canon. She writes that the womanist community, "Black women serve as contemporary prophets, calling other women forth so that they can break away from the oppressive ideologies and belief systems that presume to define their reality."²⁴

²¹ Kimberly P. Johnson, "'Must Thee Take the Man Exclusively?': Jarena Lee and Claiming the Right to Preach." *The Listening Journal*. Vol. 55, No. 3 (Fall 2020), 186.

²² Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope*. (Atlanta: Academy Series Scholars Press, 1993), 188.

²³ Annette D. Madlock, "A Womanist Rhetorical Vision for Building the Beloved Community: Introduction to the Special Issue." *Journal of Communication and Religion*. Vol. 43, No. 3 (Autumn 2020), 6.

²⁴ Katie Geneva Cannon, *Katie's Canon: womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*. (New York: Continuum, 1995), 56.

Thus, womanist theology and rhetoric situate Black women's subjectivity at the center of the biblical narrative and its intersection with contemporary life in the *biblical* fight against oppression and empire. Centering Black women's experiences required a critique of white feminism and Black (including the Black church's) patriarchy.²⁵ It required a dismantling of the binaries of patriarchy in all its forms that keep Black women from attaining their full personhood through intersectional sites of oppression.²⁶

Rhetorical critics have largely overlooked the contribution of womanists and proto-womanists,²⁷ which seems particularly problematic given the possibilities they offer for further dismantling the hold patriarchy still has in our discipline. In this chapter I offer a glimpse into the beauty of womanist rhetorical, theological, and ideological contributions by demonstrating that Julia Foote, a proto-womanist, "engaged in the process of knowledge production that [was] most necessary for [her] own flourishing rather than being exploited for the enlightenment and entertainment of white psyches and male egos."²⁸

REDEMPTIVE SELF-LOVE AND RHETORICAL CHOICES

Genre

Discourse analysts define *genre* as, "a recognizable communicative event characterized by a set of communicative purposes identified and mutually understood by

²⁵ Elain Flake, *God in Her Midst: Preaching Healing to Wounded Women*. (Valley Forge: Judgson Press, 2007), xiii.

²⁶ Cummings and Latta, "When They Honor The Voice." 671.

²⁷ Johnson, *The Womanist Preacher*. Kindle loc. 254.

²⁸ Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, "Writing for Our Lives: Womanism as an Epistemological Revolution," in *Deeper Shades of Purple*, ed. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 2.

members of the community in which it occurs.”²⁹ Because a genre has a recognized structure, includes discursive intentions, *is* a social action, and happens within a community that understands those intentions, the rhetor never passively chooses a genre. Further, through genre, rhetors gather the discourse community into a common set of goals, self-articulations, ambitions, and actions. By mastering genre, rhetors reinforce belonging and assert their rightful place in the discourse community. “We produce and use genres not just in order to get things done but also to show ourselves to be members of particular groups and to demonstrate that we are qualified to participate in particular activities.”³⁰

So, when Julia Foote selects spiritual-autobiography as the genre to tell her story, she asserts her membership in a community historically off-limits to her. She and her audience both knew spiritual autobiography “is more representative of the ‘straight white Christian man of property’ and privilege who has been valorized as the unmarked ‘universal’ subject.”³¹ By choosing a genre associated with the “universal” white, male subject, Julia Foote establishes herself, a Black woman, as a member and actor³² within the universal human community, as a prophet to the universal human community to whom God has called her. Through this *choice* of genre, she places herself, her calling, her actions, and her religious experience on equal footing with white, male Christian

²⁹ V.K. Bhatia, *Analyzing Genre: Language Use in Professional Settings*. (London: Longman, 1993), 13.

³⁰ Rodney H. Jones, *Discourse Analysis: A Resources Book for Students*. 2nd. Ed. (New York: Routledge, 2019), 10.

³¹ Cuffe, 47.

³² Rodney Jones continues, “Genres do not only link people together; they also link people with certain activities, identities, roles and responsibilities.” Jones, *Discourse Analysis*. 11.

preachers of privilege. She takes a genre that valorizes white men and applies it to a Black woman. She accomplishes the genre's goals, not through glamourizing the usual subjects but by sanctifying the unexpected subjects. Before her audience reads a word, they know her genre-choice carries socially subversive significance: Black women, no less than white men, can love themselves enough to tell their own stories. No less than white men, Black women have claims to human agency and subjectivity.

William L. Andrews cites two other relevancies of autobiography to Black women's self-narration: 1) a demonstration of the author's humanity, and 2) the establishment of the narrator as truth-teller.³³ Katie Cannon combines these when she says, "The Black women's literary tradition delineates the many ways that ordinary Black women have fashioned value patterns and ethical procedures in their own terms, as well as mastering, transcending, radicalizing and sometimes destroying pervasive, negative orientations imposed by the mores of larger society."³⁴ However, this re-writing of pervasive negative orientations involved a communal process, not merely individual resistance. Collectively, Black women created a "Black counter-public" in which they found mutual support and affirmation.³⁵ Part of this counter-public entailed the production of literary materials that centers Black women's subjectivity, humanity, and truth over against the objectivity, dehumanization, and lies of white, male supremacy:

Counterpublics foster political and cultural activities that allow working-class and other disfranchised persons to reclaim a measure of subjectivity despite being positioned as the instruments, objects, or properties of the

³³ William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 1-2.

³⁴ Katie Geneva Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 76.

³⁵ Stephen Kantrowitz, *More than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829-1889*. (New York: The Penguin Press, 2012), 5.

middle class. The counterpublic...stages a social and discursive challenge to the power of the white male property owners who make up civil society.³⁶

The distinctiveness of a Black woman's self-narration is coupled with the complexity of the historical record and personal recollection, which change with time and telling. This rings true especially in Black autobiographies because, as Jon Ernest argues, certain literary structures become standardized in the attempts to assert Black humanity and truth-telling. Thus, "the vision of history that black autobiography could offer was, accordingly, predetermined."³⁷ Thus, Foote's "autobiographical sketch of her call fits squarely in the long history of the African American call narrative tradition, which dates back to the period of African enslavement in America."³⁸

Narrative Shape

Scholars have long noted the centrality of religious storytelling and its function as self-affirmation in the African American rhetorical tradition. However, as noted throughout this dissertation, minimal academic attention has accented African American call narratives and the rhetorical devices employed therein.³⁹ Despite this inattention, these narratives matter, not only for their vivid imagery and insight into nineteenth-century Black religion, but also because we gain insight into how figures like Julia Foote saw *themselves* through their rhetorical theology.

³⁶ Joanna Brooks, "The Early American Public Sphere and the Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic." *William and Mary Quarterly*. 3rd series, Vol. LXII, No. I (January 2005), 70.

³⁷ John Ernest, *Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794-1861*. (Chapel Hill: The North Carolina University Press, 2004), 186.

³⁸ Nicole Danielle McDonald, "From Resistance to Receiving: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Call Narrative of Julia A.J. Foote." *The Listening Journal*. Vol. 55, No. 3 (Fall 2020), 220.

³⁹ Cummings and Latta, 667.

To critically examine the first-person narratives of some African American women as they relate the stories surrounding their calls to ministry, privileging the centrality of the women's language, is to know how these women see the world and to use a womanist consciousness to interrogate voice, community, and identity.⁴⁰

Words create worlds, and the worlds created in these call narratives depict a dynamic deity *still* narrating redemption beyond the biblical canon. Despite the near-deism of white Christianity, whose doctrines declared that God had spoken a final word in the Bible and did not directly communicate in the present, Julia Foote held that God currently calls and declares definitive words directly to individuals: "When called of God, on a particular occasion, to a definite work."⁴¹ "Called" requires a response. "Particular occasion" places Foote's calling within a specific earthly timeframe not a general spiritual feeling or a mystical other-worldly experience. "To a definitive work" stipulates the specifics of the labor she should undertake. Nothing about this experience conveys subjective abstractions, merely mysticism, or even emotivism. Foote's rhetorical theology asserts that God still acts definitively and speaks specifics to the world through the unexpected, unwanted perspective of a reticent Black woman. Thomas Hoyt provocatively says, "by telling a story, one could create or destroy a world view,"⁴² and Julia Foote articulates her story in a way that destroys the world view of Christianized Deism, ecclesial androcentrism, and cultural white supremacy.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 671.

⁴¹ Foote, 65.

⁴² Thomas Hoyt, Jr. "Interpreting Biblical Scholarship for the Black Church Tradition" in *The Stony Road We Trod*. Ed. Cain Hope Felder, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 25.

Embodiment of Narrative Performance

For centuries Black women laid the foundation for their shared political solidarity and subversion. Embodied in their lives and re-narrations, we have seen that women like Maria W. Stewart refused the crumbs from the prejudiced table of patriarchy and patterned their narratives after the Hebrew prophets and New Testament figures like Mary, the mother of Jesus. The latter announce through their narrative embodiment Jesus' solidarity with the dispossessed. In life, as with the prophetic forebearers, prophets defeat oppression not through tolerance, niceties, and respectability, but through re-imagining the world in a way that topples oppressors and exalts victims.

Such re-imagining in the Bible often takes on a scandalous tone, one that subverts gender roles and class expectations. For example, Beth Allen Barr notes, "by allowing a woman to anoint him with oil, Jesus overturns male headship – allowing a woman to do what only men had been able to do until that moment: anoint the king."⁴³ The woman in this anointing narrative remains *nameless* not because of patriarchal presumptions within the text but because by remaining nameless the individual woman serves as an invitation to *all* women. This allows for what Patterson calls the "typological" re-narration seen in Womanist biblical interpretation, a re-narration that invites Black women to identify with the various biblical characters:

By typologically identifying with female biblical figures that include Mary (the mother of Jesus), Jochebed (Moses's mother), Hagar (Ishmael's mother), and Queen Esther (King Ahasuerus's wife), black women 'wrote defiantly or pleadingly, prayerfully or confidently, testifying to their lives and testing the ability of language and their readers to convey and to

⁴³ Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth*. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2021), 45.

understand the truths that – from the depths of their experiences – they knew.”⁴⁴

It remains possible that Patterson’s use of “typological” may miss the fulness of what Womanist hermeneutics does. Black women do not merely see themselves as *types*. They see themselves as *incarnations, embodiments, or heirs* of these prophetic traditions. Regardless, in their hermeneutical identification and embodiment, Black women “self-consciously invoked biblical narratives in which (Black) women rebelled against oppressive institutions, led communities, and triumphed in the face of adversity, in order to destabilize biblical authority as the chief arbiter of their civil disenfranchisement.”⁴⁵ Additionally, they claimed divine authority, claimed vivification of the prophetic spirit. They did not merely establish their moral claims on the Bible, but, like the Hebrew prophets, established their claims on their experience of the Holy Spirit who spoke to the prophets *in the Bible*.

REDEMPTIVE SELF-LOVE

James Cone argues that theology as a discipline fails to appreciate the liberative angles introduced by Black theology, and implicitly by womanist theology, because theology still works with white, Western notions of soteriology.⁴⁶ Therefore, he says, we never ask the simple question, “What are the theological implications of God’s love for the black person in America?”⁴⁷ White theology and rhetoric loses the ability to articulate

⁴⁴ Robert J. Patterson, “A Triple-Twined Re-Appropriation: Womanist Theology and Gendered-Racial Protest in the Writings of Jarena Lee, Frances E.W. Harper, and Harriet Jacobs.” *Religion and Literature*. Vol. 45, No. 2 (Summer 2013), 57.

⁴⁵ Patterson, “A Triple-Twined Re-Appropriation.” 58.

⁴⁶ Soteriology refers to the doctrine of *salvation*. It seeks to explain how God brings about salvation and restoration to both individuals, communities, and all creation.

⁴⁷ James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 49.

Black *humanity* without an adequate awareness of God's redemptive love for Black people. In this section, we examine the various ways Julia Foote discursively demonstrates her acceptance and assertion of God's redemptive love and, therefore, the place of Black women within the human community. We begin by discussing self-love and the subversive elements of Foote's doctrine of Entire Sanctification. Then we address Foote's use of apocalyptic imagery as an affirmation of self-love. From there we discuss Foote's re-interpretation of the Eve narrative from Genesis 3 as an expression of self-love that liberates all women. Finally, we discuss the movement from victim to victor in Foote's cleansing encounter with Christ.

Self-Love and Subversive Sanctification

Strains of nineteenth-century white theology questioned whether Black people had souls. Certain ecclesial authorities argued that if they did not have souls, chattel slavery carried no ethical consequences. However, even if they did have souls, to these theologians, those souls had earned enslavement, "Traditionally, the Negro had been considered a kind of 'Canaanite, a man devoid of Logos,' whose low social status was 'a punishment resulting from sin or from a natural defect of the soul.'"⁴⁸ Even the Methodist Episcopal church had treated Foote's parents not "as Christian believers, but as poor lepers" whose spiritual status sat below anyone with white skin.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ William L. Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 1.

⁴⁹ Foote, 11.

The Wesleyan doctrine of Entire Sanctification supplied a subversive strand of spirituality that not only countered the claim that Black people lacked souls but went so far as to proclaim that those souls stood worthy of love from God, neighbor, and self:

Wesleyan Methodism constructed a more benevolent God and a more democratic means of redemption than Puritanism did, positing that salvation was achieved through Grace alone. The Methodist conversion relation, then, detailed how the Christian transformed her life from one of sin to one of sanctification. Methodist theology, then, was one of personal transformation. To be sure, black Christians were drawn to the requirement that the conversion narrator, creed notwithstanding, should testify to God's intervention in the sinner's life, for they perceived it as a worthy rejoinder to the white's theory that the Christian God did not esteem Africans as full – as opposed to 'three-fifths' – human beings.⁵⁰

In other words, Wesleyan theology, with its stress on sanctification as an essential aspect of the *ordo salutis*,⁵¹ offered an opportunity for Julia Foote and her contemporaries to grow in redemptive self-love. This combination of redemptive self-love and Entire Sanctification matters to our discussion of Foote's call narrative because through her acceptance of and emphasis on Entire Sanctification (which she sometimes calls *holiness* or *perfection*), Foote receives her call to preach. The former necessarily precedes the latter.

Entire Sanctification in the Wesleyan tradition has as much to do with redemptive love for God, neighbor, and self as it does abstaining from specific actions (alcohol, gambling, sex, etc.). While holiness has a widespread association with abstaining, in Wesleyan theology, abstaining provides only one half of the equation; the other half of holiness has to do with progress in the virtues of holy love. As John Wesley explained:

⁵⁰ Jocelyn Moody, *Sentimental Confession*. (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2001), 22.

⁵¹ "Order of salvation" refers to how salvation works in Christian theology.

It is that habitual disposition of soul which, in the sacred writings, is termed holiness; and which directly implies, the being cleansed from sin, “from all filthiness both of flesh and spirit;” *and, by consequence*, the being endued with those virtues which were also in Christ Jesus; the being so “renewed in the spirit of our mind,” as to be “perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect.”⁵²

Those who receive Entire Sanctification did not simply cease to sin, they received *freedom* to pursue virtue and live lives of holy love. In both abstaining and receiving freedom, “sanctification was thought of as a state of complete spiritual purification and perfection”⁵³ with profound implications for women like Julia Foote:

Belief in the Wesleyan version of sanctification freed them to trust the prompting of their innermost selves because of their conviction that what came from within was of the Holy Spirit, not the corrupt ego. Thus, these...women exhibited in their lives and their writing a remarkable sense of self-worth, self-confidence, and power, despite the traditional spiritual autobiography’s treatment of the self as a deceiving antagonist.⁵⁴

Foote knew her desire to fulfill God’s call to preach inevitably invited the indignation of patriarchal Christian authority. Her embrace of Entire Sanctification, and its implicit invitation toward self-love, enabled her to counter her own reticence and that of her familiar and ecclesial naysayers. To self-worth and self-confidence, the womanist might rightly add redemptive self-love.

Because Foote experiences Entire Sanctification, a perfecting of the soul which aligns her with divine will, those who question her call become the adversaries of holiness and, therefore, God. Still, she begins with herself. She acknowledges that she had, without warrant, always prohibited female preaching. While likely true, the

⁵² John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*. 3rd Ed., Vol. 5. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 3rd ed. 1872), 203. *Italics mine*.

⁵³ Haywood, *Prophesying Daughters*. 2.

⁵⁴ Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit*. 15.

rhetorical effect of this statement and her general unwillingness (it takes four angelic appearances and a vision of the Trinity to convince her to preach) bolster her argument against those who oppose her preaching. By citing her own ignorance, impotence, and disinclination, she cuts the audience's objections out from under them before they can wield them against her. No critic can prove more critical than Foote. She did not choose the prophetic burden; God placed it on her.⁵⁵ Sanctification compelled her submission to God more than her submission to *man*.

Her husband having already expressed hesitance over her holiness teaching, her pastor, Jehiel C. Beman, became the primary opponent to Foote's preaching. When she initially informed him of her call, he rejoined that she would realize her error when she attained more spiritual maturity.⁵⁶ He later lamented Foote's leadership amongst the laity and accused her of attempting to split the church with her holiness doctrines.

Undoubtedly, he understood and had a distaste for the democratic undertones of her sanctification experience.⁵⁷ Still, his rejection could have had a profoundly negative social and psychological impact on Foote. William H. Myers highlights this in his analysis of contemporary call narratives and the desire for communal affirmation, "what the callees desire most is help understanding the experience. Therefore, people who know something about this kind of experience are sought out, whether they are relatives or not...The people they choose to tell vary. The person most frequently told is the

⁵⁵ Cummings and Latta, 676.

⁵⁶ Foote, 71.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

pastor,”⁵⁸ and “rejection by the pastor makes it most difficult for the callee to get sanctioned in the community.”⁵⁹

Regardless of her pastor’s resistance, Julia Foote, after her heavenly visitation, represented herself as “serenely confident, as a result of [her] ‘sanctification’ by the Holy Spirit.”⁶⁰ She responded to Beman’s sneers and insults of her intelligence and education with diminutive ire: “My gifts are very small, I know, but I can no longer be shaken by what you or anyone else may think or say,”⁶¹ and later, “man’s opinion weighed nothing with me, for my commission was from heaven, and my reward was with the most high.”⁶²

After years of feminism and womanist activism, we may miss the power of these words as an affirmation of self-love and spiritual authority. For example, when Black Spiritual Autobiographies begin with the announcement, “I was born,” they affirm the humanity of the rhetor in a social context that denies their humanity from the beginning of life. The story that follows “I was born,” establishes how they re-claimed their humanity and learned to love themselves despite their context. If simple statements such as “I was born” carry the weight of the rhetor’s humanity, how much more weight does it carry when a Black woman declares God told her, “You are now prepared, you must go where I have commanded you”⁶³ or proclaims back to her pastor, “I can no longer be

⁵⁸ William H. Myers, *God’s Yes Was Louder than My No: Rethinking the African American Call to Ministry*. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1994), 47.

⁵⁹ William H. Myers, *God’s Yes Was Louder than My No*. 48.

⁶⁰ Andrews, 14.

⁶¹ Foote, 72.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 78.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 71.

shaken by what you or anyone else may think or say.”⁶⁴ In these affirmations of her humanness and calling, she affirms her experience of sanctification and restoration to the divine image. As such, she retains the capacity to hear and respond to the divine voice as well as any man. She retains the capacity to receive divine love and love herself regardless of white supremacy or patriarchy in the Black church.⁶⁵

Apocalypse

Most rhetoric scholars assume the apocalyptic genre has an escapist bent motivated by end-times anxiety. This assumption primarily arises from an almost exclusive rhetorical analysis of privileged, white eschatology as seen in the escapist narratives of Evangelical and Fundamentalist Dispensationalism. While the electoral clout of white eschatological escapism has necessitated this emphasis, it has created an opening in our discipline, especially when reading women like Julia Foote. Not a diversionary doctrine driven by white, middle-class fear, marginalized communities looking for an “unveiling” of divine purposes in their suffering have historically produced apocalyptic rhetoric. Indeed, the genre contains futuristic images of divine wrath and the destruction of oppressors, but these notions remain secondary to the highly visualized, dramatic *revelation* of God’s intentions for the oppressed community.

Rodney Jones says that genres link people together and link people with specific activities, identities, roles, and responsibilities. Both in biblical apocalypse and African

⁶⁴ Ibid., 72.

⁶⁵ “The challenge of knowledge, the claiming of human agency, the affirmation of one’s own humanity created in the image of God are essential dimensions of womanist approaches to theological anthropology.” Elaine Robinson, *Race and Theology*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012), 36. Kimberly Johnson also notes that this is an aspect of womanist preaching, “Culturally critiques the black church, the black community, and the oppressive aspects of this nation that continue to restrict women.” Johnson, 115-116.

American apocalypse, the audience's desired activity, identity, roles, and responsibilities are precisely what apocalypse attempts to shape. It utilizes heavenly, visionary, sometimes future-oriented⁶⁶ rhetoric to make the audience a certain *kind* of person – liberated, just, imaginative, prophetic. Barry Brummett captures this idea well in his analysis of apocalyptic rhetoric:

[Apocalyptic] is a mode of thought and discourse that empowers its audience to live in a time of disorientation and disorder by revealing to them a fundamental plan within the cosmos. Apocalyptic is that discourse that restores order through structures of time or history by revealing the present to be a pivotal moment in time, a moment in which history is reaching a state that will both reveal and fulfill the underlying order and purpose in history.⁶⁷

Brummett rightly accents the *revelatory* rather than *wrath*, *futuristic*, or *escapist* aspects of apocalypse.

Similarly, Bobbit and Mixon's essay on the apocalyptic rhetoric of Dr. King carefully disassociates apocalypse and pessimism. They suggest four alternative characteristics: (1) involves a perception of crisis, (2) recounted as narrative, (3) deterministic, and (4) transcendent.⁶⁸ By *deterministic* they mean apocalyptic rhetoric expresses "the inevitable culmination of the plan of God." For them, apocalypse has a future-orientation that minimizes human political involvement. However, they miss that the objective of the future-oriented aspect

⁶⁶ Future-orientation is a result of the genre, not an inherent aspect of it. The future orientation arises out of the genre's desire to communicate that the universe will balance itself under God's justice. When a past-orientation is more useful, as we will see later with Foote's use of Edenic imagery, apocalypse is equally comfortable there. After all, in biblical apocalypse, the future orientation is always to the pristine, Edenic past restored.

⁶⁷ Barry Brummett, *Contemporary Apocalyptic Rhetoric*. (New York: Praeger Publications, 1991), 9-10.

⁶⁸ David Bobbitt and Harold Mixon, "Prophecy and Apocalypse in the Rhetoric of Martin Luther King, Jr." *Journal of Communication and Religion*. Vol. 17, no 1 (March 1994), 30.

of King's apocalyptic rhetoric lies precisely in motivating the *present* hearers to take advantage of *this* moment, "Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood."⁶⁹

As a doubly-oppressed person, Julia Foote intentionally, applies apocalyptic imagery from the position of marginality. Her sub-genre choice of an apocalyptic narrative⁷⁰ displays the *present* or *realized* divine plan that transcends the crisis of white supremacy and patriarchy.

Apocalypse does create some individual anxiety in Foote, but more it reminds her of God's abiding presence, advocacy, attentiveness, and action to redeem the world and deliver the chosen people *through* their time of trial. Like her use of Spiritual Autobiography, her use of apocalypse as a sub-genre within the Spiritual Autobiography reminds her readers, mainly the insiders to her proto-womanist holiness community, of God's ongoing activity in the present. Her apocalypse aims to liberate the minds and bodies of her audience. It contains no hint of escapist or diversionary intentions. The appearance of angels, the vision of a restored Eden, and images of a sea of converts all motivate a *this-worldly* response from Foote. She does not employ apocalypse for escape but engagement. She employed apocalypse as a means of assuring her audience of God's redemptive love lavished on her and proclaimed through her prophetic discourse. Her re-

⁶⁹ Emphasis mine, cited in Bobbit and Mixon, 33.

⁷⁰ Though, she might say the genre *chose her*.

narrating of Eve's story exhibits helps us see a concrete application of the apocalyptic genre.

A Second Eve

Womanist theory uniquely contributes to a biblical hermeneutic of lack of women's liberation. Whereas white, patriarchal hermeneutics habitually attempt a kind of privileged impartiality and objective distance from the text, Black church hermeneutics have embraced the subjectivity of the Black experience when reading the Bible. Rejecting white individualism and privatized spirituality as universal hermeneutical grids, the Black church has often interpreted the Bible through a collectivist, communitarian, political lens. More, they read the Bible by placing themselves in the center of the story of divine deliverance, making themselves subjects and agents in the stories rather than objects "over" the narrative. Kimberly Johnson notes that this subjective entrance into the text permits, particularly Black women, to aggressively destroy destructive female images and linguistic violence within the biblical text or perpetuated by popular, privileged readings.⁷¹

As a proto-womanist, Foote offers an enchanting example of this hermeneutic. In her climactic vision, the angelic intermediary escorts her to a heavenly realm where she sees a tree with branches so large she cannot see its ends. After an encounter with the divine Trinity and a walk to the shore, the angel returns her to this tree. This time, "it hung full of fruit"⁷² she had not previously noticed. Having received divine commissioning and cleansing, she can discern things she could not previously detect. The

⁷¹ Johnson, 115-116.

⁷² Foote, 70.

Holy Spirit plucked some of the tree's fruit and handed it to her. She sat down and ate it. It tasted like no fruit she had ever eaten.

When the vision begins, the tree has an apocalyptic kind of hyperbolic symbolism: it unveils (apocalypse) the reign of God extending an unfathomable length. The tree reminds a biblically informed reader of the Tree of Life in Revelation 22, its twelve different fruits and cosmic healing properties. This connection grows stronger when we consider, in conjunction with this tree, Revelation 22 promises the servants of God a vision of God's face, which Foote receives in the encounter.

In the second encounter with the tree, Foote fills the tree with apocalyptic significance and douses it with redeemed Edenic significance. In Genesis 3, Eve, in an absence of divine approval, initiated taking the forbidden Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.⁷³ After Eve plucks from the tree, she gives some to her husband, who eats with her. Foote employs this Edenic imagery by casting herself as a second Eve. This second Eve not only has divine approval, but the Holy Spirit plucks the forbidden fruit (of preaching) from the tree and *gives* it to her. Foote, the second Eve, does not *take* the fruit without permission; she receives it as a gift to enjoy and savor. She receives divine authority to preach, not by thievery of forbidden fruit, but divine imperative and will. Whereas Eve gave to her husband and he also ate without permission, Foote, in the absence of her husband, receives sustenance from the very Spirit of God.

In reinterpreting the Edenic imagery and employing an alternative hermeneutic that seeks to unshackle women from destructive feminine images and linguistic violence in the Bible, Foote re-frames the narrative such that Eve, and all women with her, now

⁷³ Genesis 3:6

finds redemption. No longer of her own initiative (Foote, after all, expressed quite a bit of reticence), Eve has now received divine permission, affirmation, and love to proclaim the redemptive story of this tree and its message of the endless reign of God. No longer the temptress or the Jezebel, through womanist hermeneutics, God restores Eve to her place of submission to the divine Trinity (as opposed to male authority) and her mission of publicly proclaiming divine deliverance to all humanity (as opposed to doing the domestic or support work).

Redemptive self-love means re-reading the Bible in a way that highlights God's redemptive love for women rather than reading in a way that subjects women to endless submission and secondary status. It means restoring women to their original place of equality with men. Such a reading entails reinstating Black women to their original place of equality with whites. At one time, God inhibited Adam's race from having access to the Tree of Life by placing an angel with a flaming sword outside Eden. Julia Foote, a second Eve, now regains that access to the Tree of Life through an angelic mediator, a commission of the Father, a gift of the Spirit, and a washing of the Son.

Foote Washing

Elaine Flake reminds us that womanist preaching's ability to reach the hearts, minds, and souls of African American women hinges on its hermeneutic and its facility to "employ an analysis of Scripture that reconstructs the Word of God in ways that are liberating to women as well as men and that reflects the totality of the African American experience."⁷⁴ In particular, for Flake, the Black church has hindered Black women's

⁷⁴ Elaine Flake, *God in Her Midst: Preaching Healing to Wounded Women*. (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2007), xiv.

liberation because of a default patriarchy. For Flake, dismantling this patriarchy entails, among nine other things, an interpretation of the Bible that posits Jesus as an advocate and friend of Black women.⁷⁵ As a proto-womanist, Julia Foote's call narrative and visionary experience provide a perfect example of a Christological hermeneutic of advocacy. Foote's encounter with Christ moves her from victim to victor, reversing generations of abuse and victimization. Jesus takes her by the hand, strips her of her clothing, and cleanses her, all as acts of affection and approval.⁷⁶

A straightforward intertextual interpretation of Foote's encounter with Jesus, where Jesus cleanses her, reminds the reader of John 13, where Jesus washes his disciples' feet. Contextually, Christ confirms his affection for his disciples even though their faith falters, and they deny him at his arrest. With this textual connection in place, Foote places herself in the role of an apostle, whom John says Jesus "loved...unto the end." Foote's identification with these loved ones and their apostolic offices adds another layer to her redemptive self-love. Because Christ loves her, she can love herself even in her wavering faith. Cuffe states that such rhetorical moves, which identify African American women with New Testament apostolic personalities, function to liberate their identity and establish their autonomy as Black women "birthed and commissioned by a faith conversion"⁷⁷ and, indeed, direct calling.

Further, in appealing to John 13, Foote not only claims herself as an apostle who received a cleansing just as the original disciples did, but Foote also casts her pastor and

⁷⁵ Flake, *God in Her Midst*. 13-21.

⁷⁶ Foote, 70.

⁷⁷ Cuffe, 52.

other naysayers in the role of either Judas or Peter. If they persist rejecting Foote's calling, they analogically align with Judas. If they repent and embrace Foote's calling, they fall in the category of restored Peter. As a proto-womanist, Foote concerns herself with the redemptive love of God for the entire community. Anyone willing to embrace her message can find restoration.

However, something more happens in Foote's encounter with Christ than merely an intertextual reference to John 13. Foote's community transcends her immediate audience; it includes her ancestors. Jesus' advocacy for Foote must redeem not only the present community but also the suffering of the historic community of Black women. It must address systemic and generational violence against Black women's *humanness*. Because of this larger understanding of community, we should read Jesus' washing of Foote in light of her earlier story about an enslaver beating her mother and washing the wounds with "strong salt water" because she refused to submit.⁷⁸ The one who beat her also washed her wounds, then when her shirt struck to her back, the enslaver's wife ripped the shirt off so hard that skin came with it.

Like her mother, Foote had struggled to submit to Jesus.⁷⁹ However, unlike her mother's enslaver, Jesus' advocates for Foote's flourishing. Rather than strong salt water, Jesus washes her with warm, soothing water. Every aspect of the sensual narrative moves Foote and the community of Black women, from victims to victors, through the cleansing act of Jesus. It reverses the generational wounds inflicted on her mother and others. Thus,

⁷⁸ Foote, 9.

⁷⁹ Multiple times Foote references apocalyptic visions where she feels the threat of Hell looms over her for her refusal to obey the angelic message.

the narrative is full of meaning: it presents Jesus as an advocate and friend of women, it addresses violence on a systemic and generational level, it intertextually mimics the foot-washing scene of John 13, it validates Foote's apostolic claims, and most significantly for Because of this imagery, Foote, her audience, and her ancestors can now love themselves in redemptive self-love.

CONCLUSION

Tamura Lomax argued that, while cultural criticism of Black feminism offers unique insights into cultural production and subversive rhetoric, scholars need to do further work on the stories of Black women and girls who stake their identity and purpose in life in Christian belief. Thus, we need a more sustained engagement that “explores the significance of Christianity, and specifically the Black Church, in Black America and diasporic women's and girls' lives.”⁸⁰ This chapter on Julia Foote has sought to do just that by placing her not merely within the tradition but within the biblical narrative. Julia Foote asserted her humanity and, thereby, virtue-ized Black women's self-love via religious rhetoric. With narrative as her “weapon of choice, [she] literally battled for the souls and humanity of black people in nineteenth-century society while opposing racial and gender discourses being promulgated by the colonial hegemony.”⁸¹

I argued in this paper that Foote functions as a proto-womanist who chiefly concerns herself with centering the voices of Black women in discourses of knowledge and productions of power. Later womanists built their notions of redemptive self-love on

⁸⁰ Tamura Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), Kindle loc. 381.

⁸¹ Cuffe, 47.

the prior work of women like Foote, who established her *humanness* via the subversive use of the dominant culture's genres (Spiritual Autobiography), drew logical conclusions from the dominant culture's doctrines (Entire Sanctification), applied apocalyptic imagery for the benefit of marginalized communities, and utilized a hermeneutic that reimagined texts traditionally used to promote violence against women (Eve) in a way that directly redeemed both her own story and also those of her ancestors (Jesus's foot-washing).

Foote's employment of such strategies not only reinforced her own redemptive self-love but virtue-ized Black women's experiences. It wove a narrative of divine and self-love that expanded beyond her and her ancestors to redeem all Black women. Not merely a system of religious doctrines and beliefs, Foote's faith provides "a conceptual framework for living everyday life,"⁸² just as faith continues to provide a framework for millions of Black women to survive in a world of white supremacy and patriarchy. Foote functioned as a proto-womanist, a prophet of deliverance, a supplanter of ideologies, and a planter of redemptive self-love.

⁸² Patricia Collins, "What's in a Time: Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond." *The Black Scholar*. Vol. 26. (1996). 9-17.

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CHAPTER 4: IDENTIFICATION, INSURRECTION, AND *IMITATIO CHRISTI* IN *THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER*

INTRODUCTION

Before the Great Awakening, white Christian enslavers expressed minimal interest in converting enslaved Africans to Christianity.¹ Some of this indifference initially stemmed from their supposition that enslaved persons lacked fully human qualities. However, much of their reluctance rose from the egalitarian threads embedded within the biblical narrative. No matter the number of hierarchy-sustaining scriptural proof-texts they later employed, enslavers always sensed a latent liberationism lurking within the biblical text.² One need not believe in Nommo-ic word magic to see that calling an enslaved person “brother” subversively speaks equality into existence.

The religious revivals during the Great Awakening had a significant impact on the system of slavery. While it took a Civil War to unshackle enslaved peoples, the Great Awakening provided modes of resistance previously unmined. First, after the Great Awakening, “mission societies were set up to instruct Africans in the doctrines of Protestant Christianity,” which gave Black and white Christians a common vocabulary.³ Second, given Protestant Christianity’s emphasis on the biblical text, *reading* became an aspect of the conversion process for some enslaved persons, opening a whole world of

¹ Makungu M. Akinyela, “Battling the Serpent: Nat Turner, Africanized Christianity, and a Black Ethos.” *The Journal of Black Studies* Vol. 33, no. 3, (January 2003): 259.

² Nicholas May, “Holy Rebellion: Religious Assembly Laws in Antebellum South Carolina and Virginia.” *The American Journal of Legal History* Vol. 49, No. 3 (July 2007): 237.

³ These doctrines demonstrated the universal depravity of humanity and, therefore, the imperfection of and limitations on slave owner’s authority. They also displayed a series of messiah figures whose lives and rhetoric challenged unjust authorities. Further, they discussed a God who sided with slaves over against masters, displaying His allegiance *to them* by resurrecting the dead. Akinyela, 261.

possibilities for revolution both within and without the religious sphere. Third, even though most enslaved persons never had the opportunity to read, the Great Awakening's Protestant, revivalist bent emphasized an experience-driven, rather than doctrine-driven, religiosity. By emphasizing conversion experiences, Great Awakening evangelists "made Christianity more accessible to illiterate slaves,"⁴ thereby creating space for religious experiences outside the orthodoxy of their enslavers. Religious experience provided the emotional energy, individual impetus, and subversive symbolism to resist enslavement and reinterpret both the Bible and the social order in ways that benefited those enslaved.⁵ Finally, the Great Awakening supplied an ethnically and ethnically diverse group of Africans with a shared ethnic identity and ethical framework inevitably threatened institutional slavery and its profiteers.⁶

These revolutionary undercurrents underwrote religious-saturated insurgences throughout the mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Stono rebellion

⁴ A.J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the American South*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 132.

⁵ Kevin Pelletier, "David Walker, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and the Logic of Sentimental Terror," *African American Review* Vol. 46, no.2-3 (Summer/Fall 2013): 260.

⁶ Akinyela, 256.

(1739),⁷ the Prosser rebellion (1800),⁸ the plot of the Vesey rebellion (1833),⁹ David Walker's 1829 *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* encouraging rebellion, and Henry Highland Garnet's *An Address to the Slaves of the United States* arguing for a religious responsibility to rebel against enslavers,¹⁰ all "galvanized white anxieties" and "linked slave revolt with slave religion."¹¹

The role of religion in these revolts coincides with the developing leadership of Black preachers. Particularly in rural communities where "large masses of ignorant, more often illiterate, slaves participated in whatever social and religious relationships, they were allowed, the preacher became one of the most powerful figures in controlling the life patterns of this group of people."¹² They functioned as problem-solvers, hope-bringers, prophetic energizers, workers on the plantation, intimate associates with other enslaved people, mediators, and sages. Often in their mid-life, they had a reputation for

⁷ In Charleston, SC (1739), sixty to one hundred enslaved people destroyed property and killed white people indiscriminately. The Stono Rebellion fostered a culture of fear of further violence in the South. The Stono events were explicitly tied to religion with the insurrectionists intentionally choosing Sunday because 1) it was enslaved people's day off, 2) the white enslavers were in church and defenseless, and 3) it represented a day of resurrection, release from bondage in the Christian tradition. May, 242.

⁸ Richmond, VA. Thousands of enslaved, highly skilled artisans, led by Gabrielle Prosser, plotted to kidnap the governor. Utilizing religious assemblies to recruit and train his followers, Prosser appealed to biblical texts to energize his troops and criticize oppressors. The fallout was a Slave Religion Law in South Carolina that forbade gatherings of enslaved persons for religious purposes. Virginia also used laws to target the religious gatherings of enslaved persons. There are questions about how well these laws were enforced. May, 247.

⁹ In Charleston, SC. Vesey, a free man, recruited amongst enslaved population around Charleston. The conspiracy was exposed before it could be enacted and the city of Charleston charged one hundred and thirty one people. Vesey's rationale was entirely religious and demonstrated to white enslavers the undeniable connection between the Black church and slave rebellions. Akinyela, 261.

¹⁰ Steven H. Shiffrin, "The Rhetoric of Black Violence in the Antebellum Period: Henry Highland Garnet." *The Journal of Black Studies* Vol. 2, no.1. (September 1, 1971): 45-53.

¹¹ May, 242.

¹² Nancy Bullock Woolridge, "The Slave Preacher – Portrait of a Leader." *The Journal of Negro Education*. Vol. 14, No. 1 (Winter, 1945), 28.

their hard work and calming effect on other enslaved people. Most importantly, many had a talent for oratory that occasionally combined with literacy, made regional social contacts possible.¹³

For these preachers, the Bible functioned as a moral and religious source of prophetic energizing, especially for revolt, which “made use of religion both as a pretense for insurgent activity and as a source of moral justification for the uprising itself.”¹⁴ David Walker’s *Appeal*, for example, made use of prophetic rhetoric as a condemnation of white Christianity’s moral hypocrisy and apocalyptically condemned enslavers and their enablers to divine wrath. Indeed, the *Appeal* had such a reach that when news of Nat Turner’s revolt reached the ears of Virginians outside of Southampton, “the governor of that state pronounced the *Appeal* partly to blame”¹⁵ because Walker’s theological and moral contentions that enslaved persons had a Christian duty to obtain freedom by force if necessary.

The connection between Turner and Walker, whether real or imagined, increased enslaver fears “that his revolt might still grow into a broader insurrection. Their anxiety led to hysteria and violence,”¹⁶ not to mention legal and social fallout.¹⁷ Indeed, due to Turner’s revolt, in other states such as Maryland:

¹³ Woolridge, “The Slave Preacher – Portrait of a Leader.” 32.

¹⁴ May, 243.

¹⁵ Stephen Kantrowitz, *More than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829-1889*. (New York: The Penguin Press, 2012), 28.

¹⁶ David S. Cecelski, *The Fire of Freedom: Abraham Galloway and the Slaves’ Civil War*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 10.

¹⁷ “In the wake of Nat Turner’s rebellion in 1831 in Southampton County, Virginia, and in response to fears of slave insurrections, in 1832 the Maryland legislator proposed a statute to remove all free black from the state. The bill required manumitted slaves to renounce their freedom if they wished to stay behind with

All African Americans were forbidden from assembling or attending religious meetings unless the gathering was led by a licensed white clergyman or other respectable white person. Under this scheme religious gatherings would continue, but they were envisioned as happening under close supervision, requiring that white people be present until the close of the meeting and constables break up unsupervised gatherings.¹⁸

Virginia, Turner's home state even, "declared it illegal for slave or free blacks to 'preach, exhort, or conduct, or hold any assembly or meeting, for religious or other purposes, either in the daytime or at night.'"¹⁹ Indeed, they further forbade teaching an enslaved person to read or write.

These political and economic realities also created tensions over ecclesial and hermeneutical authority. White Christians responded by using religious instruction as a mechanism of social control,²⁰ while Black congregants increasingly saw the binary of spiritual egalitarianism and somatic enslavement as irreconcilable. Ecclesial and hermeneutical authority must apply to whites and Blacks alike no matter the impediments against or implications for enslavers.²¹

We observe these tensions, as well, in scholastic *interpretations* of Nat Turner's 1831 revolt, the bloodiest slave insurrection in American history. Whereas scholars have

their families." Catherine Clinton, *Harriet Tubman: Road to Freedom*. (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2004), 34.

¹⁸ Martha S. Jones, *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Right sin Antebellum America*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 79.

¹⁹ May, 252.

²⁰ Stephen B. Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990), 14.

²¹ Randolph Ferguson Scully, "'I Come Here Before You and I Shall Not Go Away:': Race, Gender, and Evangelical Community on the Eve of the Nat Turner Rebellion." *Journal of the Early Republic* Vol. 27, no. 4 (Winter, 2007): 662.

appreciated the economic realities encumbering human trafficking in 1831 Virginia,²² the role of religion in Turner's rebellion often gets discounted or diminished. For example, Fabricant, Gross and Bender, reduce *The Confessions of Nat Turner* to a mere political statement made by Thomas Gray, Turner's attorney. To them, we cannot trust Gray's transcription of Turner's tale because Gray has turned Turner either into a vengeful villain manufactured to vanquish white fear about further slave rebellions²³ or someone who merely promotes the "interests of the Southern slaveocracy."²⁴ Even Asante, who writes extensively about Turner's religious visions, calls him "a man completely controlled by visions and self-persuasion."²⁵ To him, Turner exploits proof-texts from the Bible to prop up his self-anointed messiahship and self-focused hermeneutic. While Asante takes Turner's religion seriously enough to speak of it as the spark of Turner's radicalism, he does not see it as anything other than self-deception and communal opportunism, "And like messianic spirits before and after him, he moved in an *artificial environment, created by his own deception and maintained by that of his followers.*"²⁶

Whereas Fabricant, Gross and Bender see Turner's religious fanaticism as a problem of text versus voice, Asante appears agreeable to accepting that the text

²² "The revolt of enslaved Africans led by Nat Turner in 1831 was preceded by several years of political and economic uncertainty in the southern United States and a rapidly changing international situation that had a direct effect on the U.S. economy and slave system." Akinyela, 260.

²³ Seymour L. Gross and Eileen Bender, "History, Politics, and Literature: The Myth of Nat Turner." *American Quarterly* Vol. 23, no 4 (Oct., 1971).

²⁴ Daniel S. Fabricant, "Thomas R. Gray and William Styron: Finally, A Critical Look at the 1831 Confessions of Nat Turner" *The American Journal of Legal History*. Vol. 37, no. 3 (July 1993): 332-361.

²⁵ Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 144.

²⁶ Emphasis mine. Asante, 144.

transmits Turner's authentic, albeit delusional, voice.²⁷ The former rob Turner of his agency and the latter his sanity. Regardless, all we are left with is a villainous Turner, one who, one way or another, plays into the hands of hegemonic interests. As Nikki M. Taylor has pointed out, "anytime a member of a marginalized, powerless group is hailed as a hero, an equally powerful counternarrative casts them as a villain. Vilification is, in fact, typical for those who use violence as the means of liberation."²⁸

Despite scholastic disregard, skepticism, or vilification, neither the enslaved persons nor their enslavers discounted religion's role in Turner's rebellion,²⁹ even if they doubted the truth of Turner's apocalyptic tale. Within months of Turner's trial, the Virginia legislature passed a law banning the teaching of enslaved persons to read or write,³⁰ banning both free and enslaved Blacks from conducting their own funeral services,³¹ and most significantly, banning them from "preaching or gathering for church

²⁷ Asante is not alone in this. Thomas Gray appeared unsure of whether Turner believed his own story, and commentators at the time (James Trezevant, William Parker) question Turner's sanity. David F. Allmendinger, *Nat Turner and the Rising in South Hampton County*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014), 23.

²⁸ Nikki M. Taylor, *Driven Toward Madness: The Fugitive Slave Margaret Garner and Tragedy on the Ohio*. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016), 119.

²⁹ "Then on August 13, the sun rose with a strange greenish tint; later, it turned to blue, and in the afternoon a dark spot was visible on its surface. The Richmond *Whig* reported that this occurrence 'stimulated' the slaves' 'religious devotion,' but to Turner it was a new sign, and according to one contemporary account he told his followers, 'as the black spot passed over the sun, so shall the blacks pass over the earth.'" Eric Foner, *Nat Turner: Great Lives Observed*. Ed. Eric Foner (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1971), 3.

³⁰ "Indeed they went on to revise and implement the slave codes in order to restrict blacks so stringently that they could never again mount a revolt. The revised laws not only strengthened the militia and patrol systems, but virtually stripped free Negroes of human rights and all but eliminated slave schools, slave religious meetings, and slave preachers. For Nat Turner had taught white Virginians a hard lesson about what might happen if they gave slaves enough education and a religion to think for themselves." Oates, 140.

³¹ May, 252.

service.”³² Even a November 1831 letter from Gov. John Floyd (Virginia) to Gov. James Hamilton, Jr. (South Carolina) highlights the role of religion and Black religious leaders in inciting the insurrection. After discussing the religious efforts of abolitionists, such as teaching enslaved persons to read, Floyd writes,

Then commenced the efforts of the black preachers, often from the pulpits these pamphlets and papers were read – followed by the incendiary publications of Walker, Garrison and Knapp of Boston, these too with songs and hymns of a similar character were circulated, read and commented upon – We resting in apathetic security until the Southampton affair...From all that has come to my knowledge during and since this affair – I am fully convinced that every black preacher in the whole country east of the Blue Ridge was in the secret...that their congregations, as they were called knew nothing of this intended rebellion, except a few leading and intelligent men, who may have been head men in the church.³³

In other words, Floyd sees Black preachers and church elders as key conspirators in a more extensive system of insurrectionary intentions, of which Turner played only one role.

This chapter, therefore, takes Turner’s religious claims as seriously as his audience did, seeing his words neither as an elaborate fabrication of Thomas Gray nor as a product of self-delusion. Textual and psychological analysis lay outside our interests. We must struggle with the Turner of the text. Thus, I take Turner’s religious rhetoric as precisely the kind of claims we should expect from a prophetic persona incarnating the biblical storyline and imitating (i.e., embodying) Jesus’s prophetic persona for liberationist purposes.

³² Steven Taylor, “The Political Influence of African American Ministers: A Legacy of West African Culture.” *The Journal of Black Studies*. Vol. 37, no. 1 (Sept. 2006): 7.

³³ Greensberg, 110.

Turner's legacy may endure and evolve in the works of Harriet Beecher Stowe, G.P.R. James, Martin Delany, Thomas Wentworth, William Lloyd Garrison, and William Styron, but he does so as "a myth, as an imagined configuration of convictions, dreams, hopes and fears."³⁴ This chapter, instead, interprets Turner not as a mythic man but a man-made-by-myth. We begin by accenting our analysis of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* with Brown and Anderson's concept of conscious identification, which provides invaluable insight into Turner's agency maintenance. After delineating our methodology, we address questions of text and voice, as *The Confessions*' interaction between Thomas Gray and Nat Turner gives us insight into how Turner's conscious identification concretely worked.³⁵ Our final efforts explore the conscious identification and *imitatio Christi* present within the prophetic "call narrative" portion of Turner's tale.³⁶

RHETORICAL, PROPHETIC IDENTIFICATION

Kenneth Burke originally proposed that whenever persuasive efforts occur, the orator and audience must identify with one another and become consubstantial or in union with each other in some material or symbolic way. Specifically, the speaker secures persuasion by symbolically assisting the audience through audibly naming and associating with qualities held in common interest.³⁷ The common interest matters for Burke precisely because identification assumes a prior division:

³⁴ Gross and Bender, 487.

³⁵ We will be using the version published by the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. Depositor: Paul Royster.

³⁶ We focus on this section of the narrative for two reasons: (1) I hope to make this part of a larger work on African American prophetic call narratives, and (2) it provides a nice pericope with minimal text-critical problems other than those inherent to the text as a whole.

³⁷ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*. (London: University of California Press, 1950), 65-69.

Identity is affirmed with earnestness precisely when there is division. Identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity. If men were wholly and truly of one substance, absolute communication would be of man's very essence...For one need not scrutinize the concept of 'identification' very sharply to see, implied in it at every turn, its ironic counterpart: division. Rhetoric is concerned with the state of Babel after the fall.³⁸

Because of the division between speaker and audience, and the necessity of the audience *identifying* with the speaker, Burke sees the audience as an equal participant in the making of the rhetorical act. Maurice Charland points this out in his discussion of Constitutive Rhetoric, "[Burke] does not posit a transcendent subject as audience member, who would exist prior to and apart from the speech to be judged, but considers audience members to participate in the very discourse by which they would be 'persuaded.' Audiences would embody a discourse."³⁹

For the prophetic tradition, the qualities held in common interest usually involve some shared notion of the *sacred*. As Andre E. Johnson argues, "For a *prophet* to ground herself in anything not recognized as *sacred* by the audience would be to render that message unimportant. This means that the prophet is indeed part of the community fabric and understands the beliefs of the audience."⁴⁰ With Brown and Anderson's Conscious Identification we see that what community participation means for an oppressed rhetor looks different than participation as a member of the dominant discourse.

³⁸ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*. 23.

³⁹ Maurice Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the People Quebecois." *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*. Vol. 73, no. 2 (1987),

⁴⁰ Andre E. Johnson, "The Prophetic Persona of James Cone and the Rhetorical Theology of Black Theology." *Black Theology: An International Journal*. Vol. 8, No. 3. (2010), 274.

Brown and Anderson's Conscious Identification

Brown and Anderson's "A Survey of Black Woman and the Persuasion Process"⁴¹ builds on, and in some sense reverses, Burke's identification theory, arguing that Black women employ identification as a means of *resisting* the oppressor's persuasive efforts. They define identification as "verbal and nonverbal sign-cues that can be substantially associated among persons within an immediate interpersonal or public communicative situation,"⁴² which occur before the appearance of resistance in a sequential strategy of persuasive appeals. The oppressor offers cues, singling out specific behavioral characteristics and attitudes they desire these women to identify. Two distinctive varieties of identification occur in the interaction: unconscious and conscious. Unconscious identification occurs when women unconsciously identify with the characteristics or attitudes placed upon them by the oppressor. The oppressor may communicate oppressively, but the woman misses the verbal cues and unwittingly opens herself to the possibility of persuasion.

Conscious identification, however, entails an intentional effort for the woman to understand and interpret the communicative layers and cues coming from the communicator's lips, mainly when they play to the oppressor's favor. Thus, whether the woman identifies with the oppressor's values or asserts her identity vis-à-vis the oppressor, she at least does so consciously. Conscious identification necessitates an exhaustive understanding of the oppressor's symbolic, linguistic, material, and religious

⁴¹ Delindus R. Brown and Wanda F. Anderson, "A Survey of Black Woman and the Persuasion Process: The Study of Strategies of Identification and Resistance." *The Journal of Black Studies*. Vol. 9, no. 2, (Dec. 1978): 233-248.

⁴² Brown and Anderson, 235.

universe. The conscious identifier takes advantage of this knowledge and the fixed social roles within the dominant discourse in order to subvert its power and establish new meaning. Only then can opposition occur. Glen McClish notes the consequence of this for dismantling the constructs of power:

A speaker who demonstrates mastery of the tradition that oppresses him as he employs the arguments and *topoi* of his own subculture...epitomizes both the paradox and the power of the black antebellum voice...Because they must command the dominant language while critiquing the power relations on which it is based, the combination of diverse forms and strategies – what I have called rhetorical amalgamation – is required to create both fitting and discursive spaces from which to launch their progressive ethic. African-American rhetoric establishes agency not by dismantling the master’s house, but by transforming it into something that suits their aims.⁴³

Conscious identification creates locales of liberation and resistance because it energizes women to name the truth about the oppressor’s actions and invent remedies for the social maladies inflicted on them. In short, when Black women rightly interpret the oppressor’s actions and words, they can subversively apply them to their own advantage instead of the oppressor’s. Despite the enemy’s efforts to rhetorically influence Black women’s identity and activities,⁴⁴ the conscious identifier now has weapons to ward off the war against her identity, beliefs, and, to a degree, her body.

Depending on the context, resistance may take either a passive or active approach.

Passive resistance employs verbal restraint, layering, “tactful, discrete, and diplomatic

⁴³ Glen McClish, “William G. Allen’s ‘Orators and Oratory’: Inventional Amalgamation, Pathos, and the Characterization of Violence in African-American Abolitionist Rhetoric.” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* Vol. 35, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 63.

⁴⁴ Including special efforts to “maintain blacks in a state of ignorance,” “muzzling the oral communication of slaves,” and prescribing “servile behavior for all blacks.” Cal M. Logue, “Transcending Coercion: The Communicative Strategies of Black Slaves on Antebellum Plantations.” *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 67, no. 1 (1981): 33-35.

actions,”⁴⁵ thereby leaving the resistor relatively invisible.⁴⁶ Active resistance, alternatively, asserts one’s identity and visibility. It uses hostility, confrontation, even violence to sway the oppressor’s actions, if not their conscience. Either way, for Brown and Anderson, resistance roots itself in recreating something new out of the oppressor’s repressive rhetoric.

Nat Turner’s Conscious Identification

A cursory reading of *The Confessions* confirms Turner’s familiarity with the biblical narrative, particularly the prophetic and apocalyptic portions. The Bible provided the hermeneutical grid through which Turner “could make inferences and judgments about the immediate social milieu.”⁴⁷ However, this hermeneutical grid does not mimic that of white enslavers. Turner’s familiarity with the verbal cues and symbolism of white Christianity remains necessary for conscious identification, but his ability to invoke those cues and symbolism to challenge the oppressor’s worldview functions as the basis of his resistance.

By appealing to Christian scriptures and apocalyptic imaginations, and applying them to himself messianically, Turner’s call narrative shows he had the familiarity necessary for conscious identification. In this, he “ironizes the very process of biblical ‘interpretation’ by reversing ordinary modes of typological reading and rendering [his]

⁴⁵ Brown and Anderson, 243.

⁴⁶ This invisibility, however, allows women to avoid the burden of open argumentation with the oppressor and make the most of her minimal social opportunities within an oppressive milieu.

⁴⁷ Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*. 151.

own narrative as *the typological basis for the interpretation of scripture*.⁴⁸ In white Christianity, a closed canon closed revelation. In Turner's Christianity, the Holy Spirit willingly inserts new messiahs into the narrative that needs embodiment and incarnation. The biblical text, rather than closed, becomes radically energizing, pertinent to every contemporary situation, and continuously open to new interpretive potential. "Turner crafted his prophetic leadership by adopting evangelical rhetoric and styles of authority, while rejecting the institutional framework of the church community and the white paternal oversight that framework entailed."⁴⁹ In other words, we see the roots for conscious identification and resistance in Turner's hermeneutic.

Turner's choice of the genre of apocalypse offers valuable insight here. While rhetoric scholars often dismiss the this-worldly potential of apocalyptic rhetoric, "it is the Apocalypse that is missing from most evaluations of black religion."⁵⁰ Drawing from Kevin Pelletier's work on Sentimental Apocalypticism, we see that religious violence, more than mere threats of violence without religion, exacerbated the unease of white enslavers.⁵¹ Turner, paralleling the two-year-old *Appeal* by David Walker,⁵² incarnates

⁴⁸ M. Cooper Harriss, "Where is the Voice Coming From? Rhetoric, Religion, and Violence in 'The Confession of Nat Turner.'" *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* Vol. 89, no. ½ (Spring/Summer 2006): 150.

⁴⁹ Ferguson Scully, 664.

⁵⁰ Donald G. Matthews cited in Wayne K. Durrill, "Nat Turner and Signs of the Apocalypse" in *Varieties of Southern Religious History: Essays in Honor of Donald G. Matthews*. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2015), 78.

⁵¹ Pelletier, 257.

⁵² "And while no evidence exists that he ever read or even heard about Walker's *Appeal*, Nat felt the same frustrations that Walker did and was swept up in similar religious and revolutionary fervor." Oates, 51. Or as Harding says it, "No record exists of that contact, if it ever occurred. But the contact was not necessary, for Nat Turner had long been convinced that the God of Walker's *Appeal* had always been in Southampton." Vincent Harding, "Symptoms of Liberty and Blackhead Signposts: David Walker and Nat Turner." Ed. Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 96.

the Bible's apocalyptic aspects, which bred both fascination and fear in white audiences.⁵³ He alludes to apocalyptic texts from all over the Bible, employing them to his own advantage because "prophecies of a retributive God, in particular, were a familiar source of fear and constituted the most efficient way to politicize terror in the antebellum period."⁵⁴ White audiences, aflame with apocalyptic fervor from the Great Awakening, knew and felt the terror of the apocalyptic texts Turner employs. In a hermeneutical maneuver hardly unique to him, Turner knew of the white terror associated with apocalyptic texts and turned it against them through conscious identification. Rather than a genre of escapism,⁵⁵ every apocalyptic reference to heavenly battles, heavenly noises, bloody streams and crops, mysterious hieroglyphics, oozing bodies, eclipses, and Spirit-inspired interactions expresses Turner's rhetorical ability to bypass enslavers' objections and appeal directly to divine authority.⁵⁶ "When he finally assumes the duty to work on behalf of [this world's] destruction, it is not from private motives but because he must obey the voice of God...the revolt was not the work of corrupt man but a very angry God."⁵⁷ Rhetoric scholars cannot understand the Black church, its theology, or its prophets without exploring apocalypse not as escapism (itself a binary between this-

⁵³ Pelletier, 261.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 255.

⁵⁵ James Jasinski, *Sourcebook on Rhetoric*. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2001). James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America*. (New York: New York University Press, 1997). Steven D. O'Leary, "A Dramatistic Theory of Apocalyptic Rhetoric." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. Vol. 79 (1999).

⁵⁶ Durrill attempts to explain all of Turner's apocalyptic visions with a natural explanation. While we can appreciate the seriousness with which he takes Turner's claims, I doubt Turner would understand his apocalyptic encounters naturalistically.

⁵⁷ Stephen Howard Browne, "'This Unparalleled and Inhumane Massacre': The Gothic, the Sacred, and the Meaning of Nat Turner." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* Vol. 3, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 326.

worldly and next-worldly religion) but as a kind of this-worldly engagement and, even, conscious identification leading to resistance.⁵⁸ After all, “Turner saw the roots of his revolutionary leadership in his ability to interpret God’s word” without the oversight of the oppressor.⁵⁹

Brown and Anderson’s methodology may yet provide other insights into Turner’s rhetorical strategy. Scholars have wondered why Turner never mentions his wife and her suffering in *The Confessions*. However, if we interpret *The Confessions* as an attempt to resist slavers through conscious identification, mentioning his wife may be rhetorically counterproductive. Mentioning his wife and her suffering might have provided enslavers an opportunity to dismiss Turner as a resentful man seeking revenge. By only appealing to apocalyptic scenes and heavenly visions,⁶⁰ he invokes an authority white tyrants cannot easily discard.

Finally, conscious identification may also explain why, as Asante observed, Nat Turner “could conceive no wrong nor commit any crime.”⁶¹ It has nothing to do with an “artificial environment” or “his own deception...maintained by that of his followers.”⁶²

⁵⁸ For example, “Behold me as I stand in the heavens” explicitly references the prophet Isaiah’s apocalyptic vision of the messianic kingdom wherein “the servants, formerly hungry and thirsty, shall be fed and shall drink; the crimes of the society, which will be erased when ‘a new heavens and a new earth’ are created, ‘shall not be remembered, nor come to mind.’” Anthony Santoro, “The Prophet in His Own Words: Nat Turner’s Biblical Construction.” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*. Vol. 116, no. 2 (2008): 126. Neither Isaiah’s words nor Turner’s employment of them assume apocalypse points to anything other than this-worldly events. Apocalypse certainly contains heavenly visions, but those visions almost always provide some meaning or impetus for action on earth.

⁵⁹ James Sidbury, “Reading, Revelation, and Rebellion: The Textual Communities of Gabriel, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner.” Ed. Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 126.

⁶⁰ A cursory reading of *The Confessions* finds several apocalyptic citations from Paul, Ezekiel, Joel 2, Acts 2, and Revelation 5.

⁶¹ Emphasis mine. Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, 144.

⁶² Emphasis mine. Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, 144.

Instead, Turner's objective lies in turning the white enslavers' rhetoric against them. He wants them to feel, with apocalyptic anxiety, the cosmological, moral, and religious ramifications of slavery. Rhetorically, confessing wrong-doing may not only communicate unconscious identification with his oppressors but also communicates a failure of messianic nerve – a messianic nerve he *needed* to come through unambiguously in Thomas Gray's transcription.

AUTHOR AND AGENCY: THE PROBLEM OF *THE CONFESSIONS*

The Confessions of Nat Turner, recorded by Thomas Gray, presents us with the problem of author versus agency. The question orbits around how much of Turner's voice authentically arises from within Gray's authorship. We know Gray acted as Turner's amanuensis, but we also acknowledge Turner had no direct agency in how the document turned out. How much credibility does Gray, a white man who owned thirty-three enslaved persons, have as a transcriber of Turner, a formerly enslaved man currently in jail? Did Gray's own political, economic,⁶³ and social agendas seep into the story?⁶⁴ Like many before him, did Turner say publicly what he knew whites wanted to hear?⁶⁵ Did

⁶³ "Gray picked up fees as defense counsel, but they were not the main chance, as he saw it. *The Confessions* were." Anthony E. Kaye, "Neighborhoods and Nat Turner: The Making of a Slave Rebel and the Unmaking of a Slave Rebellion." *Journal of the Early Republic* Vol. 27, no. 4 (Winter, 2007): 708. In fact, "All told, the *Confessions* sold about forty thousand copies, although some Southern communities appear to have suppressed it, presumably because of its 'incendiary' character." Oates, 144-145. Gray apparently needed the money, as "At the time of Turner's rebellion, the thirty-one-year-old Gray was a man in desperate financial need, a man on the edge of failure as a planter." Kenneth S. Greenberg, *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents*. Ed. Kenneth Greenberg (Boston: Suffolk University, 1996), 8.

⁶⁴ Browne, 311.

⁶⁵ Logue, 39.

Gray arrange and structure *The Confessions* to give authority to his own interpretation of the events?⁶⁶

Santoro suggests we can sense a scarcity of impartiality in Gray's account precisely because Gray asserts objectivity.⁶⁷ For Gross and Bender, *The Confessions* reflects more Gray than Turner. They argue Gray's work primarily aims to assuage the anxiety of white audiences and assure them of the efficacy of the justice system.⁶⁸ For them, the religious rhetoric in *The Confessions* reflects nothing more than Gray's intentions to turn Turner into a blood-thirsty insane man and, therefore, certainly not a serious or systemic hazard to the social hierarchy. Nicholas May also minimizes the role of religion in the rebellion when he says, "despite popular belief in the antebellum South, most slaves were not actually motivated by religion."⁶⁹ Notwithstanding the biblical references so explicit through Nat Turner and other insurrection tales of enslaved persons, May argues, "the average black participants, even if religious, may have been motivated by other factors. The testimonies of Turner's rebels, for example, include little or no mention of religion or God as an incentive to revolt."⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Greensberg, 9.

⁶⁷ Santoro, 116.

⁶⁸ Gross and Bender, 493. We must ask, as well, whether such an effort was even needed. The newspapers at the time were already making this case and shaping public imagination. For example, On August 24th, 1831, *The Richmond Compiler* described Turner as, "mad – infatuated – deceived by some artful knaves, or stimulated by their own miscalculating passions." Greensberg, 61. Further, if Gray's goal were to assuage anxiety, saying that looking at "curdled" the blood in his veins hardly seems like an effective rhetorical tactic.

⁶⁹ May, 255.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 255.

However, the minimization of religion by these scholars may betray a pedagogical predisposition that refuses to take religious impulses seriously. If scholars fail to hear Turner's authentic voice in this text, we cannot merely blame Gray for the cover-up⁷¹ because scholars have also ignored its presence in *The Confessions* and contemporary documents.⁷² Kevin Pelletier's words about scholastic interaction with David Walker have relevance for our discussion on Turner:

By making violence revolutionary and not theological or merely retributive, critics unwittingly temper Walker's incendiary presence by placing him in a tradition in which violence was necessary to preserve the self-evident freedoms that inhere in all persons...Revolutionary violence, then, is not destabilizing or destructive in these views, but normative and constructive of a world where all persons enjoy the rights and privileges of citizenship...As a result of their fixation on the revolutionary, however, scholars have left very little room for discussing the emotionality of those arguments that, like Walker's, are predicated on apocalyptic terror.⁷³

Apocalyptic terror runs on the fuel of religious rhetoric. Though contemporary scholars may wish to minimize such rhetoric, even Turner's executioners knew the religious nature of his revolt, "your only justification is that you were led away by fanaticism."⁷⁴ And, as noted earlier, the State of Virginia took the religious impulses seriously, as well.

Fortunately, some scholars *have* taken Turner's voice and religious rhetoric more seriously. Sundquist, for example, sees *The Confessions* as Turner's final act of resistance

⁷¹ "Gray displayed no scriptural fluency like that in the memoir. He neither identified the passages nor drew attention to the allegory. Those sections of the Confessions written in his own voice lack the religious sensibility of the memoir." Allmendinger, 248.

⁷² The November 4, 1831 account of Turner's capture in *The Norfolk Herald* discusses Turner's commitment to his prophetic status and his insistence on the validity of his apocalyptic visions. It also suggests the importance of Turner's religious authority for maintaining "complete control over his followers." Greensberg, 90.

⁷³ Pelletier, 258.

⁷⁴ Thomas Gray and Nat Turner, "The Confessions of Nat Turner" (1831) ed. Paul Royster, Lincoln: The University of Nebraska-Lincoln. *supra* note 94, at 20.

to his enslavers. He argues for a Hegelian dialectal movement between Gray and Turner wherein Turner deceives Gray, playing off Gray's religio-linguistic ignorance and desire to assuage his audience's anxiety by depicting Turner as insane (and therefore isolated).⁷⁵ Seeing *The Confessions* as a dialectical chess match confirms the importance of conscious identification as an interpretive method:

One can entertain the possibility that [Turner] consciously played the trickster and that the language of irony and double vision that is often associated with African American rhetorical forms and the liminality of slavery was his vehicle of revelation. The ambivalence of [*The Confessions*] arises less in Gray's manipulation of [Turner's] story than in [Turner's] own manipulation of his story and in the shocking millenarian revolutionary violence.⁷⁶

Nat Turner's knack for consciously identifying with his oppressors' rhetoric strengthened because of the Great Awakening. With no prior parallel in American history, the Great Awakening provided religious and spiritual intimacy in both vocabulary and values. Ferguson Scully calls Turner's rebellion "an intimate rebellion" because "blacks and whites in southeastern Virginia had come to share religious ideas and institutions on an unprecedented scale due to the dramatic influx of black men and women into evangelical churches."⁷⁷ He catalogs these commonalities as follows, (1) An emphasis on lived, emotional experience, (2) a willing subjection to ecclesial oversight, (3) celebration of baptism, and (4) a process of church discipline.⁷⁸ Ferguson Scully, of course, notes the different ways these commonalities play out in the lives of Black and white people.

⁷⁵ Logue, 39.

⁷⁶ Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 49.

⁷⁷ Ferguson Scully, 665.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 666.

Nevertheless, however variously applied, the joint religious vocabulary and values provided avenues for conscious identification and resistance. Far from Genovese's "hate-driven mad man,"⁷⁹ Turner exemplified ease with evangelical values and vocabulary which enabled his spiritual empowerment. Gray's oversight of Turner's rhetorical strategy works to Turner's benefit, allowing his voice to resound more clearly. White anxiety, rather than assuaged, got amplified.

This discussion of author versus voice matters, not because the textual tradition or its origins play a primary role in our discussion,⁸⁰ but because through Turner's conscious identification his insurrection and prophetic critique get perpetuated with each reading of *The Confessions*. To secularize Turner's motivations, reduce them to revenge, or to lose them in Gray's pursuit of social tranquility, fails to appreciate Turner's distinctively Christian, decidedly political resistance. In this, Turner refuses to allow Gray's audience to excuse themselves from blame or permit them the tranquility of conscience they desire.⁸¹ Through conscious identification, Turner speaks their vocabularies, articulates their values, models white evangelical morality, and verbalizes their continual vulnerability to apocalyptic violence as long as slavery exists.⁸² By consciously

⁷⁹ Eugene D. Genovese, "William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner: A Meditation on Evil, Redemption, and History*." In *Novel History: Historians and Novelists Confront America's Past (and Each Other)*. Ed. Mark C. Carnes (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 210-211.

⁸⁰ In fact, the rhetorical efficacy of *The Confessions* makes it worthy of study regardless of how clearly or unclearly Turner's voice comes through. The text has provided fodder for nearly two centuries of black nationalists and militant resisters.

⁸¹ Browne, 315.

⁸² This becomes evident in Turner's religious seriousness, his moral convictions not to participate in thievery like his contemporaries did, his submission to his enslaver and eventual return after running away, his attendance at church and his meditation on scripture. All these values were held in high regard by white Christian enslavers.

identifying with and resisting his oppressors, *The Confessions* ensures Turner's mission of apocalyptic terror both transcends his life and situates him "in the very world [he] aims to destroy."⁸³

Authorship of Turner's Document

Given the racial profiling and power maintenance involved in the recounting of Confession narratives, we quickly see how Thomas Gray attempted to subvert Nat Turner's voice to one degree or another. After all, "whenever a dominant discourse is used to account for the discourse (or the materiality) of its opposite, it necessarily precludes the one it purports to elucidate."⁸⁴ Thus, the authorship of Nat Turner's *Confession* is not one of lack of record⁸⁵ but of distortion and representation. Cummings comments, "Consequently, rhetorical researchers are faced not only with the task of discovering and placing black orators into the discipline, but of adjusting facts and reevaluating, reassessing, and reinterpreting fundamental methods and procedures of determining standards for critically judging a speech and the speaking situation."⁸⁶ Therefore, the researcher in Black rhetoric must evaluate the speech on a different set of standards than intended by the propagandists, politicians, and journalists intended. We must as Wicheln's advised, pay attention "to the relation of the surviving texts to what

⁸³ Ibid., 325.

⁸⁴ Jamie L. Carlacio, "Speaking with and To Me: Discursive Positioning and the Unstable Categories of Race, Class, and Gender. In *Calling Cards: Theory and Practice in the Study of Race, Gender, and Culture*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), kindle loc. 1686.

⁸⁵ Melbourne S. Cummings, "Problems of Researching Black Rhetoric." *Journal of Black Studies*. Vol. 2, No. 4. (June 1972), 504.

⁸⁶ Cummings, "Problems of Researching Black Rhetoric." 505.

was actually uttered.”⁸⁷ Herein lies the value of conscious identification for researching Nat Turner. Conscious identification arises from Black scholarship seeking to restore the lost or hidden agency of Black orators. The text of Turner’s Confessions resounds with heteroglossia announcing the presence of the voices of Thomas Gray, Nat Turner, and white audiences⁸⁸ lusting for artifacts to reinforce Black criminality.⁸⁹

CALL AND CONSCIOUS IDENTIFICATION

Turner commenced his call narrative with neither doubt nor defensiveness. From the “days of my infancy,” his ability to speak of events predating his birth and strange markings on his head⁹⁰ convinced his parents and community of his prophetic status. Because “the person possessed from youth with the idea of mission is rare,”⁹¹ the certainty of Turner’s calling required community confirmation,⁹² as “only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being, his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities toward himself and towards other people.”⁹³ However,

⁸⁷ Herbert A. Wichelns, “The Literary Criticism of Oratory.” In *The Rhetorical Idiom: Essays in Rhetoric, Oratory, Language, and Drama*. Ed. Donald C. Bryant. (Ithaca: 1958), 38-39.

⁸⁸ “What counts as fact, as relevant, as sufficiently interesting to merit publication, was of course determined by the audience – and white curiosity and self-interested benevolence in the story of African American character was a significant and, more often than not, distorting presence.” Ernest, *Liberation Historiography*. 164.

⁸⁹ “African American criminality became one of the most widely accepted bases for justifying prejudicial thinking, discriminatory treatment, and/or acceptance of racial violence as an instrument of public safety Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 4.

⁹⁰ “African tradition held that a male with markings like these was destined to become a leader.” Oates, 12.

⁹¹ Asante, 147.

⁹² Ferguson Scully, 670.

⁹³ Celucien L. Joseph, “Toward a Black African Theological Anthropology and Ubuntu Ethics.” *The Journal of Religion and Theology* Vol. 2, no. 1 (2018): 27.

once confirmed, such a calling had biblical and apocalyptic character. His childhood calling mimicked that of Samuel, John the Baptizer, and Jesus. Turner picked up on and imitated, specifically, Jesus' theological perceptiveness when perplexing temple priests in Luke 2:22-39. On the heels of a politically and socially subversive birth announcement,⁹⁴ Jesus' childhood arguments in the Temple presaged his eventual prominence. Imitatively, Turner's childhood prophetic perceptions, incredible intellect, and seemingly supernatural literacy⁹⁵ all affirmed Turner "was cut from the best messianic fabric,"⁹⁶ equipped from infancy for incarnation, embodiment, and, indeed, insurrection. Rather than the white Jesus of the enslaver's rhetoric, Turner's imitation of Jesus and other biblical figures revealed a resistant theology wherein "black people are the center of their own spiritual universe,"⁹⁷ a people whose story gets swept up into the story of God's liberation of the oppressed throughout time and place. As with Jesus, so with Turner, dismantling established doctrine articulated by people with ties to unjust political power functioned as an indispensable aspect of a prophetic theology of resistance rooted in conscious identification.

Turner's gradual grasp of his "divine inspiration" did not lead him to instantly organize an insurgency in the name of the Kingdom of Heaven. Instead, he initially

⁹⁴ Luke 1:46-55

⁹⁵ The ability to read, itself, would have been a subversive skill, given that slave owners forbade their slaves to learn to read. By suggesting that his literacy originates in supernatural gifting, Turner employs conscious identification. He knows the oppressor's desire and justification for keeping slaves illiterate, but by claiming supernatural origins, Turner is able to resist those desires and cast a vision for other enslaved persons of a God who wishes to free them from the restraints of white Christian oppression.

⁹⁶ Asante, 142.

⁹⁷ Jeffrey Ogbonna Green Ogbar, "Prophet Nat and God's Children of Darkness: Black Religious Nationalism." *The Journal of Religious Thought* Vol. 53/54, no. 2/1 (1991): 52.

seemed ignorant of any future insurrection and, instead, entered a period of prayer, fasting, and seclusion that embodied and imitated that of both Moses and Jesus in the desert prior to their going public.⁹⁸ However, during a church meeting, Turner “was struck by a particular passage that says, ‘Seek ye the kingdom of Heaven and all things shall be added unto you.’”⁹⁹ He contemplated and prayed on this passage for some time when one day, at his plow like the prophet Elisha, he received his calling through the Spirit reciting that same passage. By identifying the Spirit as “the spirit that spoke to the prophets in former days,” he not only justified his own prophetic vocation, but also subverted white theology, which said the “spirit that spoke to the prophets in former days” no longer speaks. “To the prophets in former days” paraphrases Hebrews 1, which explicitly ties Jesus to the larger biblical narrative and the stream of messianic prophets in the Hebrew Bible. In these literary allusions, Turner cast himself as the next messiah who embodies the lineage of Moses, the Hebrew prophets, and Jesus. Like his predecessors, Turner “is mission-oriented and feels a moral or suprarational need to stand as the deliverer of the people.”¹⁰⁰ Even when Gray asked him whether he felt he made a mistake in his interpretation of his apocalyptic visions, Turner responded by asking, “Was not Christ crucified?” Gray wanted to *identify* Turner with mistaken messiahs and malicious malcontents, but Turner turned white religion against him by citing Christ’s crucifixion, itself a kind of lynching in the Roman world.¹⁰¹ Execution does not, itself, eradicate

⁹⁸ Matthew 4:1-11

⁹⁹ Turner does not cite the entirety of Matthew 6:33, “³³ But seek ye first the kingdom of God, *and his righteousness*; and all *these* things shall be added unto you.” (emphasis mine)

¹⁰⁰ Asante, 139.

¹⁰¹ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 2011), 86.

Turner's messiahship. Instead, it inaugurated a new apocalyptic and eschatological era of revelation¹⁰² wherein Turner and the people he represented, rather than white America, became "united in their sense that the God of Israel was among them in a special way."¹⁰³ They swapped the silent god of whiteness for the speaking God of the prophets, who told Turner of his ordination "for some great purpose in the hands of the Almighty."¹⁰⁴

Over "several years," numerous undisclosed events occurred confirming Turner's calling, teaching him that "I would never be of any use to anyone as a slave." This recognition, combined with the divine revelations, led him to build a following. However, this Jesus-imitating disciple-making gets interrupted by the appointment of a new overseer from whom Turner eventually escaped for thirty days. His fellow enslaved persons assumed he had escaped and expressed astonishment at his eventual, willing return. Asante says, "he returned to the overseer with the internal conflict between freedom and obedience raging within him."¹⁰⁵ However, Turner did not return of his own volition or internal conflict, but rather "the Spirit appeared to me and said I had my wishes directed to the things of the world, and not to the kingdom of Heaven, and that I should return to the service of my earthly master." Read as conscious identification, Turner's return did not merely reflect obedience to the overseer (unconscious

¹⁰² "Nat's identification with the crucified Christ refigures the New Testament Jesus, and inscribes a *newer testament* of God's revelation to humankind in the history of salvation. Harriss, 156.

¹⁰³ Harding, 80.

¹⁰⁴ All throughout the biblical narrative, the name of God chosen by the various narrators always has some significance. For God to reveal God's self as "Almighty" prefigures the apocalyptic scenario Turner later envisions and provides the kind of hopeful energy necessary for a prophet to announce the overthrowing of a powerful empire.

¹⁰⁵ Asante, 143.

identification), which led to further enslavement, but *157aptized157 Christi* and submission to the Spirit, which led to freedom realized in the present *despite* the oppressor's rhetoric. Given the reference to Exodus, when citing the "murmuring" of his fellows, we could even read this portion as Turner's imitation of Moses. He had escaped Egypt only to obey the voice of God and return (Exodus 3) and later liberate Israelites. Andre E. Johnson further proposed that Turner may be imitating Hagar, an enslaved woman, who returns to her mistress under God's direction (Genesis 16) after originally escaping the mistress's oppressive household.¹⁰⁶ Regardless of the Exodus generation-type "murmuring" of his fellows, Turner refused to see himself as an enslaved person beholden to a white man. Instead, as a prophet beholden to the Spirit, he embodied and incarnated God's *eventual* emancipation in the *present* despite his material circumstances. His prophetic task did not lead to the opiated obedience of unconscious identification but to a prophetic engagement of one who had consciously identified and therefore could resist.

Turner became more aggressive in his symbolic resistance when he moved from subtle citations of scripture and random spiritual encounters to violent apocalyptic visions of holy war. Demonstrating familiarity with white Christianity's portrayal of apocalyptic visions as battles between forces of darkness and forces of light, Turner said,

I had a vision – and I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened – the thunder rolled in the Heavens, and blood flowed in the streams – and I heard a voice saying, "Such is your luck, such you are called to see, and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bare it."

¹⁰⁶ Andre E. Johnson proposed this insight after reading the original draft of this chapter.

White Christians had long depicted Jesus and angelic beings as white-skinned through sermons and art. Their purity contrasted with the “darkness” of evil beings. Turner recognized this history, understood the moral and theological insinuations therein, and turned it on its head. While the quote above does not specify the morality of either the forces of light or darkness, this may serve a conscious identification-related purpose. While Turner certainly conveyed Black Nationalist religious themes, Green Ogbar goes further than the evidence allows when he says, “contrary to Anglo-Saxon notions of color and morality, the white spirits represented the wicked, vile, and irredeemably demonic forces of the universe. Conversely, the black spirits were the virtuous, godly, and beneficent harbingers of freedom and justice.”¹⁰⁷ Indeed, Turner’s vision had subversive components in that it consciously identified and countered white notions of morality and color. However, contextually, Turner did not differentiate the forces of light and dark by skin color but by whether or not the individual hearer heeded Turner’s messianic message. After all, he did not eliminate the possibility that white people could repent, as evidenced by his baptism of Etheldred T. Brantley. Through this, Green Ogbar’s assertion has value, “His religion...was suited to serve as a vehicle of resistance to slavery on a physical level while simultaneously encapsulating a psychological liberation aspect.”¹⁰⁸

While certainly a psychological and rhetorical battle symbolically subverting white Christian theology, Turner also saw this battle between white and black spirits as a cosmological, mythological, and theological battle for justice. Against the ancient

¹⁰⁷ Green Ogbar, 56.

¹⁰⁸ Green Ogbar, 56.

“Serpent that was loosened,” Turner waged war as “the embodiment of God’s *justice and, in a sense, vengeance*, sent to punish the wayward and to warn the sinful.”¹⁰⁹ The serpent, contextually, signified the dominance and ultimate defeat of white supremacy and slavery. Black people became the chosen people, Turner their messiah purging the world of the satanic evil of white Christianity. The biblical images of Christ’s crucifixion no longer functioned as the rhetorical tools of white oppressors, but through conscious identification with the biblical narrative, Turner found possibilities for liberation within the religion of the enslaver. He refused to adopt the enslaver’s hermeneutics and offered instead an interpretive scheme and application of biblical texts that centered Black prophetic insight.

Turner did not, however, only offer these opportunities for salvation to enslaved people. White people needed freedom from their oppressive actions, too. Therefore, Turner summoned them to join his messianic movement. Having told Etheldred T. Brantley of his apocalyptic visions, the effect was “wonderful...he ceased from his wickedness.” Brantley thereafter broke out with an oozing skin disease, from which he received healing after much prayer and fasting. Imitating Jesus’ healing of men and women with leprosy as a symbol of his arrival of the apocalyptic kingdom, Turner’s healing of Brantley invited all who believe to receive his messianic, apocalyptic healing.

After this, the Spirit appeared to Turner and told him “as the Saviour had been baptized, so should we be also.” Turner attempted to obey and baptize Brantley, but the white Christians refused to allow Turner to do this. He and Brantley, then, went to a local body of water, and, in the presence of those who had turned them away, “were

¹⁰⁹ Asante, 141.

160aptized by the Spirit.” The baptism portion of Turner’s call narrative continued the repeated refrain “the Spirit appeared to me” and “the Spirit said.”¹¹⁰ These spiritual communications employed messianic and apocalyptic categories to navigate the tension between offering salvation to whites who repent and warning of condemnation for those who did not. Despite the white Christian refusal to permit Turner to use the church baptistery, the Spirit’s prompting provided a path by which Turner could ignore those whites who reviled him. However, it also provided the whites with a living, prophetic witness to the possibility of repentance.

Thus, the significance of Turner’s baptism of Brantley did not lie strictly in Brantley’s conversion but in the conversion *of a white man*. Turner baptized a man who could have, with legal rights, owned him. The reversal of expectations in this narrative runs throughout this scandalous act of resistance. Not only did Turner baptize a white man, upending the religious purity hierarchy of whites over blacks, and not only did Turner do this in the face of a group of disapproving whites, but Turner’s rhetoric invited white people to repent by giving up the power and privilege of their whiteness. He consciously identified the vocabulary and liturgy central to white conversion (baptism) and turned it to his liberative purpose. Like John the Baptist, who baptized Gentiles not only *Jews*, Turner baptized whites, not only blacks, thereby undermining all religious hierarchy.

¹¹⁰ “In seven of the revelations, according to the text, Turner said specifically that the Spirit was present as a voice; it spoke always in biblical language, and on four occasions it quoted scripture. Two appearances involved visions of the Holy Ghost, and one, simply a vision and a voice. Finally, in 1831, he witnessed two signs that the Spirit had told him would appear in the heavens.” Allmendigner, 15.

Unlike white people who rhetorically, theologically, and physically rejected his baptism and ecclesial authority, Turner embraced the possibility of white inclusion in his apocalyptic, messianic movement. Like Israel in the Book of Joshua, called ultimately to utterly destroy the Canaanites, Turner eventually must wield the sword of his messianic mission. However, like Israel's acceptance of the Canaanite sex worker, Rahab, Turner proved more than willing to accept righteous whites who willingly submitted. Such authority historically belonged to the oppressor. White Christianity had for centuries employed the Canaanite genocides in their messianic and colonial agendas. Turner understood the linguistic, rhetorical, and theological maneuvers white Christians made to justify their enslavement of people of color around the world, and he used it against them by applying it to himself.

With this combination of Canaanite Genocide allusions and apocalyptic rhetoric, Turner ignored church polity, rejected the orthodoxy of enslavers, and resisted paternalistic religion through conscious identification. Twice noting the governing body's disapproval of his baptism, he demonstrated familiarity with their arguments, rejected them, and baptized Brantley anyway. He shrugs "evangelical conceptions of authority and their relationship to the racial and gendered hierarchies of the evolving American South."¹¹¹ His authority originated in a voice from elsewhere, a voice not beholden to white enslavers' social and political arrangements.

This voice from elsewhere finds articulation most clearly in the apocalyptic portions of Turner's call narrative such as his interpretation of the eclipse. The final, pivotal piece of the call narrative portion of *The Confessions*, the part that led him to

¹¹¹ Ibid., 684.

violence, involved the darkening of the sun reminiscent of Joel 2. One reason for Turner's repeated appeals to apocalyptic visions in nature is Black religion's theology of harmonization with the created order.

The greatest power any human being can attain is the acuity to channel the Cosmic Energy provided by Spirit and to manifest that power on the earthly plane of existence by righting the wrongs and injustices created by those who are spiritually lost or misguided. Within African cultures, the greatest power on earth is the ability to create harmony in place of disharmony, order where once where there was chaos.¹¹²

In apocalyptic symbolism, the darkened sun did not signify a natural phenomenon to appreciate scientifically, but symbolized creation's upheaval and the need for Turner to recreate harmony and order. In Genesis 1, the sun rules creation; thus, a darkening of the sun indicates a reversal of creation, a return to chaos. Turner interpreted the darkening of the sun as a reversal of the white man's "order." They had argued from Genesis that God ordained whites to rule blacks, but in the scenes in the sky and the dimming of the sun, Turner used conscious identification to reinterpret the order of creation. His insurrection, rather than instigating chaos, thwarted it. Rather than destroying order, the fall of the white man's order allowed for a new, Black-centered world of harmony.

In an imitation of Christ, Turner answered a question with a question, indicating that he doubted the uniqueness of his apocalyptic interpretation of the eclipse. Gray asked Turner at this point if he knew of other conspiracies of slave rebellion. Turner replied, "can you not think the same ideas, and strange appearances about this time in the heavens might prompt others, as well as myself, to this undertaking." Thus, like Israel preparing to invade the Promised Land and destroy all the Canaanites (empowered at one point by a

¹¹² Knowles-Borishade, 496.

divine display of power over the sun), Turner commenced his own Canaanite genocide by casting the Christian white enslavers in the role of the unbelievers. A war, not of a loose cannon or a lone insurrectionary, but a war of a conscious identifier, a man who knew the symbols, rhetoric, language, cues of his oppressor and used them for his own liberationist purposes.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I argued that rhetorical scholars should continue to engage the intersections of rhetoric, race, and religion, particularly apocalyptic and prophetic rhetoric, as means of understanding Black resistance in America. I have applied Brown and Anderson's reframing of Burkean identification theory to *The Confessions of Nat Turner* in this effort. In this, we have seen that Turner effectively consciously identifies with the enslaver's rhetoric, expressing thorough familiarity in addition to that, and therefore had the capability to resist it. In these observations we take another step away from an anti-religion bias reducing the religious motivations of people like Nat Turner to economic and political concerns. Indeed, the Black religious tradition does not separate secular and sacred motivations.

Additionally, in our analysis, we see the necessity of rethinking our understanding of prophetic and apocalyptic rhetoric, not as foretelling or escapist rhetoric, but as a rhetoric of this-worldly engagement. Turner did not merely experience opiated visions of another world that satisfied him with the *status quo*. He acted against his oppressors precisely because prophetic and apocalyptic rhetoric remained relevant to *this* life.

Conscious identification involves participation in a specific discourse community, even if only for pragmatic benefit. In this analysis of Nat Turner's conscious

identification, I wished to highlight a few important points. First, as rhetoric scholars we need more attentiveness to the listening that precedes a rhetorical moment. Turner's tale conveys a prior listening to his community, the biblical text, the oppressive community's mythological rhetoric, a possible familiarity with other confessional and criminalization narratives, potentially David Walker's *Appeal*, and, of course, Thomas Gray's attempt to subvert Turner's agency. Each of these plays a role in Turner's conscious identification and prophetic resistance.

Second, African American prophetic call narratives, give us profound insight into Black rhetorical theology and liberationist efforts. This chapter brings these two items together because, in Turner's prophetic call narrative, he highlights Turner's awareness of white, Christian rhetorical theology, his own sensitivity to the religious rhetoric within his own community, and his attentiveness to the cosmos around him as a rhetorical agent. We cannot understand Turner and his motivations without understanding his calling. And we cannot understand his calling unless we understand what and to whom he listened. He *confesses* to all of that in a document wherein his agency is often lost or questioned.

Finally, our neo-Aristotelian, Greco-Roman emphasis on *persuasion* may hinder our ability to see how resistance rhetoric works in situations of audience stagnation. For prophetic figures like Turner, martyrdom may encompass the intended effect.¹¹³ Because they know beforehand the unlikelihood of persuasion, prophets understand their own death as the ultimate rhetorical act. Turner remains willing to die for his cause because death *displays* the message in a way that preserves it in the mind of the reader:

Whatever the motives of the prophet, his value lies in his reception, the quality of the *ethos* presented to his auditors. Charisma, we are reminded,

¹¹³ James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America*. 33.

is only validated when recognized; it is a social phenomenon. And if the recognition of charisma depends on recognition of the quality of the birth, the calling, only in the quality of the death, it stands to reason that sainthood is always *posthumous*.¹¹⁴

In some sense, the prophet's life, death, and calling can only find validation after death and by a later community. This point, of course, has been articulated by others in our field before me. Andre E. Johnson has spoken of the pessimistic prophets who encounter intransigent audiences.¹¹⁵ Edwin Black's *Rhetorical Criticism* also highlights the overly simplistic assessment of speaker-audience causation, particularly when failing to account for the moral pre-dispositions of the audience and their resistance to the speaker's virtues. Maurice Charland, further, correctly notes that because "the audience members...participate in the very discourse by which they would be 'persuaded,'"¹¹⁶ an audience affects the speaker and the speech. Prophetic rhetoric, then, helps scholars assess these rhetorical situations by supplying us with speeches where the expected effect remains minimal. They know their audiences are not necessarily free to be persuaded because their prior moral commitments predate and are "logically prior" to persuasion.¹¹⁷ In short, in assessing speeches from the African American Prophetic Tradition, we can catch up to Nat Turner and the Hebrew prophets when they say, "Hearing they do not

¹¹⁴ Darsey, 33.

¹¹⁵ Andre E. Johnson, *No Future in this Country: The Prophetic Pessimism of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner*. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2020), 3-22.

¹¹⁶ Charland, 133.

¹¹⁷ Maurice Charland, *Constitutive Rhetoric*. 133.

hear, and seeing they do not see.”¹¹⁸ Of all rhetors, prophets know their “duty is to speak to the people, ‘whether they hear or refuse to hear.’”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Isaiah 6:9

¹¹⁹ Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1962), 22.

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CONCLUSION: THE END OF WORDS FROM ELSEWHERE

I have argued throughout this dissertation that, in response to their call narratives, our four figures each *embody* the rhetorical tradition of the biblical prophets who brought “words from elsewhere” to intransigent audiences. This concluding chapter cauterizes various components of my analysis by comparing them as a collective and considering what contributions call narratives from the African American Prophetic Tradition offer critical communication studies at the intersection of race, rhetoric, and religion. We begin by re-orienting prophetic rhetoric and, specifically, the African American Prophetic Tradition, within the field of communication.

As delineated in biblical studies and rhetoric, prophetic discourse has often taken on the categories defined by white, male rhetors or scholars. As noted, James Darsey’s, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America*, argues that both “Old Testament prophecy and the received notion of American virtue...provides the essential motive for the radicals examined are products of a patriarchal theology that explicitly holds virtuous action in opposition to ‘effeminacy.’”¹ However, such a clear conclusion seems convenient when one confines the scope of their criticism to figures who exalt America’s virtues and experience America from the position of racial and gendered privilege. After all, rhetors and prophets from African American Prophetic Tradition, have rarely reified America’s virtues. Nor have womanist scholars or rhetoricians championed the patriarchal presumptions of America, white churches, or sometimes Black churches.

¹ James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America*. (New York: New York University Press, 1997), xi.

Diverging from Darsey, Kerith Woodyard describes a “prophetic liberating principle” within both the Bible and the African American Prophetic Tradition. This principle, the hermeneutical grid of prophetic figures descending from the Hebrew Bible, justifies an academic re-evaluation of prophecy’s presumed penchant for patriarchy. As prophets cross-examine the ideological constructs of their culture, they characteristically critique systems of dominion and power like patriarchy. Thus, “to limit the American radical tradition to Euro-American males does an injustice to the radicality of the very biblical tradition that gives rise to the prophetic voice”² of figures like Maria Stewart, Julia Foote, Nat Turner, and Richard Allen.

Woodyard’s investigation of the ideological constructs of our discipline ring prophetic and have the possibility of encountering intransigent audiences. Afterall, a rhetorical genre we struggle to comprehend with neo-Aristotelian tools threatens some of our most time-honored traditions concerning communication’s *telos*. Yet these traditions and thoughts became commonplace when critical studies primarily consisted of middle-class, white, heterosexual males. Woodyard, thus, prophetically proclaims the need to rethink our foundational (and foundationalist) assumptions. These include the importance of *persuasion* and *effect*, and an expansion of *effect* to include *witness*, or as Edwin Black calls it, “the preservation of morally significant events”³ in the minds of the hearers.

However, this overhaul of our discipline does not mean we must dispense with all the tools we have developed. Instead, I have demonstrated in these chapters that we can

² R. Craig, “The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America, by J.F. Darsey [Book Review].” (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 635.

³ Edwin Black, “Excerpts from Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method.” in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*. 5th Ed. Ed. Carl R. Burgchardt and Hillary A. Jones. (State College: Strata Publishing, Inc. 2017), 51.

revise and remold the tools we have already developed for liberative purposes. Brown and Anderson led the way with conscious identification. I followed their lead with cluster analysis. Thus, we have arrived at a place where we can adequately reflect on the comparisons, contrasts, and contributions of the African American Prophetic Tradition and its call narratives as primers for such a remolding and self-reflexivity.

Prophetic Rhetoric Calls for a Revival of Interest in Religious Rhetoric

One overarching difficulty in studying prophetic rhetoric and prophetic call narratives arises with scholars attempting to make sense of rhetorical artifacts, auditors, and rhetors who do not share the scholar's worldview. Quentin Schultz calls this the "God-Problem" and labels it "one of the most recurring themes in communication studies."⁴ The God-problem gets exacerbated by our discipline's enduring allegiances to Enlightenment assumptions which have deemed religion an "unpopular, potentially even subversive research agenda that called into question the naturalistic assumptions of modernity."⁵

Nor does it help that scholars often see religion as rigid and repressive. Unquestionably, investigating religious rhetoric with a hermeneutic of suspicion has value. However, a *merely* repressive appraisal of religious language lacks scholastic rigor and reeks of reductionism, given that religious rhetoric also empowers, inspires, and frames liberative work within historically oppressed communities like the Black church. As James Cone says, "Christian theology is language about God's liberation of the weak

⁴ Quentin J. Schultze, "The 'God-Problem' in Communication Studies. *Journal of Communication Research*. No. 28 (March 2005), 1.

⁵ Schultze, "The 'God-Problem' in Communication Studies. 1.

as defined by Scripture in relation to our contemporary situation.”⁶ Communities like exilic Israel and the nineteenth-century Black church found religious rhetoric ripe with revolutionary rhetoric. Thus:

Too many scholars wrongly assumed, given their own secular assumptions or religious ignorance, that deep devotion to religious beliefs and communities were all alike – and that it was intellectually wise to divide the world into two camps, namely, the religious folks who ignorantly held on to ancient myths, and the secular intellectuals who saw through such religious cant and advocated for truth and justice.⁷

By disregarding religious rhetoric as a salient site of scholastic inquiry, rhetoric scholars miss a major rhetorical paradigm, potentially reshaping and challenging our understanding human communication. Consider the origins and location of *meaning*. Whereas critics locate meaning in the text, the interpreter, or the speaker’s intentions, religious rhetors sometimes originate meaning in divine communication.⁸ Meaning is attained not merely through hermeneutical methodology but methodology in conversation with the contemporary situation and the ethical framework through which one *hears*. For prophetic rhetoric, *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* all labor in *both* the proclamation and reception of the message.

From a materialist view, rhetorical critics may *rightly* see God as irrelevant, non-existent, or too distant to provide meaning. Humans create meaning, they do not receive it. However, Brian Kaylor argues that communication scholars should at least analyze

⁶ James Cone, *Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation, and Black Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 9

⁷ Quentin J. Schultze, “The Nature and Future of Religious Communication Scholarship.” *Journal of Communication and Religion*. Special Issue Vol. 33, No. 2. (November 2010), 193.

⁸ Schultze, again, highlights this, “What should we make of the fact that communication textbooks, for instance, assume that human beings themselves create meaning rather than discover at least some of it? Is there no meaning whatsoever outside of our minds and cultures?” Schultze, “The ‘God-Problem’ in Communication Studies.” 4.

God as a presumed speaker or a member of the audience. “Rhetorical scholars are left with how the rhetor perceives God and the impact of such a belief on the rhetor’s message. The fact that God cannot be examined should not discourage scholars from considering the residual effect of a rhetor’s belief in God as an audience member.”⁹

Schultz goes further, “What would the field of communication studies look like if we posited the existence of God as a speech agent? What kind of follow-up questions would we then ask? What refreshing and interesting questions might emerge in our scholarship and teaching?”¹⁰

Regardless of the individual critic’s disposition toward religion, religious rhetoric endures despite modernity’s eager eulogies. For, “when the rhetor gestures to God, they pull back the curtain for the scholar to see the world from their vantage point.”¹¹ The theological or a-theological questions critics might have about the existence of the divine or the possibility of divine-human interaction remain secondary to the fact that the rhetorical artifact, the person who produced the artifact, and the audience of the artifact all often assume the reality of the divine and the possibility of direct, divine communication and meaning. Thus, “the critic’s task is not to discern the divine will, but rather how the rhetor’s expectations of divine expectations shapes the message.”¹²

⁹ Brian Kaylor, “Accounting for the Divine: Examining Rhetorical Claims of God’s Inspiration.” *Journal of Communication and Religion*. Vol. 34 No. 1 (May 2011), 76.

¹⁰ Schultze, “The ‘God-Problem’ in Communication Studies.” 6.

¹¹ Kaylor, “Accounting for the Divine.” 82.

¹² For example, Kaylor compares God to a boss who 1) provides motivation for a presentation, 2) might attend a presentation, and 3) whose response might determine how the audience might also respond to the presentation. I add to this, that in religious rhetoric, 4) God sometimes oversees the production, dictates the words, or even edits the presentation depending on the level of inspiration the rhetor claims. Kaylor, 84.

Therefore, for the sake of understanding our past and thoughtfully perceiving our future, religious rhetoric requires our continued consideration.

Given the clear complexity of this, particularly in a pluralistic world and a discipline that must re-evaluate our positionality, Schultze says communication scholars have three options:

1. Embrace naturalism while remaining open to the possibility of meaning outside humanly constructed systems of communication.
2. Openly accept the possibility of a “holy other” who cannot communicate with us, or at least rarely does.
3. Affirm theism with all of its own mysteries.¹³

To Schultz’s list, I employed a fourth option in this dissertation:

4. Embrace naturalism and the lack of a possibility for meaning outside humanly constructed systems of communication while taking seriously the rhetorical impact of the fact that the rhetor and/or audience maintain a theistic worldview.

In this, the critic need *not* remain open to the possibility of meaning outside of human constructs and symbolism. Rather, she commits to meaning as a purely human creation (thus taking the historical, social, and rhetorical situation seriously) while appreciating that the orator and audience do not operate with the same assumption.

This approach benefits rhetorical critics because it asks for self-reflexivity from the scholar and inhibits early judgments on the rhetors. It invites scholars to see that while they may consider the Bible an oppressive text, they allow their subjects to find liberation within its pages. After all, given what we know about our own prophetic figures’ reliance on the biblical text, Alston-Miller rightly notes, “accepting the Bible as a patriarchal text that has been appropriated to oppress women can lead to rejecting it (and

¹³ Schultze, “The ‘God-Problem’ in Communication Studies.” 10.

texts that include it) too quickly, which removes it from the women who used the Bible to marshal arguments against patriarchy.”¹⁴

Further, when rhetoric scholars appreciate how religious rhetoric works, it provides more critical tools for launching effective rebuttals that make sense within the language world of the worshipper. Scholars need not adopt a theistic view before analyzing religious rhetoric in this approach. They simply need to take seriously religious rhetoric’s multifaceted, material impact in history and the context of their rhetorical artifact.

Indeed, through inquisitiveness and curiosity regarding religious rhetoric, rhetoric scholars can return to the discipline’s religious rhetorical roots:

This viewpoint is held in common by Plato and Aristotle, as well as by thinkers such as Descartes... The tradition I call classical includes all those who believe that by means of self-evidence, intuition – either rational or empirical – or supernatural revelation, the human being is capable of acquiring knowledge of immutable and eternal truths, which are the perfect and imperfect reflexion of an objective reality.¹⁵

Then, a study of religious rhetoric has both ancient and (post)modern aspects. It takes the social, economic, political, and racial components of the rhetorical artifact seriously while acknowledging, at the very least from the rhetor’s perspective, that meaning, truth, indeed words, can originate “from elsewhere.” Prophetic rhetoric and call narratives call for more investigation into these alternatives, possibilities, and modifications of our discipline’s ideological underpinnings.

¹⁴ Monika R. Alston-Miller, “The Influence of the Pauline Epistles on Maria W. Stewart’s Rhetoric, A Political Gospel.” *The Journal of Communication and Religion*. Vol. 38, No. 2 (Summer 2015), 113.

¹⁵ Chaim Perelman, “Reply” in David A. Franks, “Arguing with God, Talmudic Discourse, and the Jewish Countermodel: Implications for the Study of Argumentation.” *Argumentation and Advocacy*. Vol. 41. Fall 2004.

Prophetic Rhetoric Calls for Awareness of Alternative Influences on American Rhetoric

Despite decades of critique, academic disciplines continue to work with Enlightenment tools and binaries from an era when women, persons of color, and non-Westerners did not have a seat at the table. While having its own interactions with the Enlightenment and Modernity, the Black church was primarily forged in the fires of slavery and found liberation and resistance possible via the texts of the Hebrew Bible. Indeed, their use of the Bible highlights the larger formative contributions of the Hebrew Bible on American rhetoric at-large. James Darsey underscores this:

But a view of the American tradition that sees only its mundane and businesslike side, that stresses its origins in the Enlightenment, might be accused of stressing Locke to the exclusion of Calvin, thus providing a confusing and inelegant view of its shape. Our preference for Matthew Arnold's Hellenistic ideals risks obscuring the Hebraic side of our culture. The transformation of freedom into a moral concept and its pairing with duty is defalcated and tenuous in Locke. The disciplinarian side of the American character is more readily attributed to our Puritan heritage.¹⁶

Understanding how these non-Greco-Roman traditions formed American identity, generally, and Black identity, specifically, remains as relevant as ever. With the elections of Barak Obama and Kamala Harris in the last fifteen years, understanding aspects of the Black rhetorical tradition and its affinity for the prophetic has particular political and democratic salience for our nation. What John Ernest says about history remains relevant to rhetoric, "We need to re-envision the theater of history so as to recognize the historical authority of a wider range of performances, performances designed specifically to

¹⁶ Darsey, 201.

promote a liberating application of the past.”¹⁷ Prophetic rhetoric and call narratives provide the first step in that re-envisioning process. They seek, specifically, to call for a *remembrance* of the sacred and an imaginative reflection on what the future *could be*.

Prophetic Rhetoric Invites Fresh Perspectives on Politics, Statecraft, and the Secular-Sacred Binary

Because the African American Prophetic Tradition has roots in the Hebrew Bible and, thus, functions as a subset of religious rhetoric, Western scholars still implicitly working with modernity’s dichotomies may see it as contrary to the neo-Aristotelian emphasis on politics and statecraft. Below we discuss more fully the dismantling of these binaries, but for now we merely note that Black theology and prophecy, as evidenced in our call narratives, do not rend religion from politics. The African American Prophetic Tradition’s interest in politics rivals the Neo-Aristotelian’s, however, it does take a decidedly different direction by focusing on moral judgments and declining the delusion of detachment and objectivity. In their call narratives, Maria Stewart and Nat Turner clearly understand the categorically political consequences of their rhetoric and their disassembling of secular-sacred binaries. These prophetic figures *demand* the deconstruction of modernity’s binaries by revealing them as oppressive, not mere implications of their rhetoric. Stewart, for example, articulates her call narrative in response to the challenge of her being *public* as a Black woman. She continues to ask, “What if I am a woman?” and argues for the biblical, traditional, and social contributions of women in prophecy and politics. Turner, similarly, subverts Thomas Gray’s white,

¹⁷ John Ernest, *Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794-1861*. (Chapel Hill: The North Carolina University Press, 2004), 36.

political interests and leverages his call narrative and the embodied rhetoric of martyrdom to preserve the moral significance of Black freedom in the mind of white and Black hearers. Thus, from the outset of their prophetic messaging, an aspect of their thesis involves the expansion of the definition of *political* beyond white, male elite interests to include the resistance rhetoric and *witness* of those on the margins.

Prophetic Rhetoric Provides Insight into Ideograph Subversion

Like much postmodern and feminist discourse and criticism, the African American Prophetic Tradition, as exemplified in our call narratives, has an interest in the liberative dismantling of ideology and critiques of the will to power. As the shells of ideology and power, ideographs provide unique opportunities for dismantling and demystifying ideological agendas like white supremacy, patriarchy, and nationalism.

The unique contribution of prophetic rhetoric to ideograph and ideological subversion lies in the fact that prophetic rhetoric's primary opposition is idolatry. Whereas in the ancient world, an idol was a physical object representing a false claim about "ultimate reality" or the "ultimate truth" of the world, our contemporary conceptions of ultimate reality and truth are represented in our language-based ideologies. In a sense, then, from the prophet's perspective, a critique of the verbal symbols of ideology (ideographs) parallels the biblical prophets' critique of material symbols of idolatry (idols). Idols and ideologies get critiqued by prophetic figures *not* merely because they are wrong but because they are *unjust* and support systems of injustice. Prophets arise, precisely, to counter these false claims of ultimate reality and call, instead, for justice.¹⁸

¹⁸ Andy Crouch, *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 55.

Maria Stewart challenged gendered ideographs of the Cult of True Womanhood when she asked, “What if I am a Woman?” while speaking about politics and religion in public. Throughout the speech and her call narrative, this question functions less as an interrogative and more like a direct statement. The form of the statement **is** stereotypically female: an interrogative with a direct use of a female pronoun. Yet she asks no real question. Instead, she makes a statement through the question: I *am* a woman. Her direct assertion of her identity (not a role like wife, mother, servant) conjoins female content with a masculine structural shell. She, thus, intentionally subverts the categories and ideographs of male-female (and their accompanying roles and rhetoric), confusing them and breaking down the implications of such binaries for Black women in the public sphere.

Also, Richard Allen employs the ideographs of *labour* and *gospel* throughout his autobiography. Allen combines these ideographs, which function in white protestant circles as opposites, to provide a perspective by incongruity whereby the only true preachers of the gospel refuse to separate the body and work from the spirit and salvation. In this, Allen justifies the superiority of his own prophetic calling, his church plant, and his split from the larger white Methodist movement. Thus, both figures chose to become *heretics* to the dominant culture by *intentionally* misusing ideographs. They experienced and rhetorically thrived as exiles from the dominant political, religious, white, masculine consciousness.

Prophetic Rhetoric Invites Exploration of Unstudied Rhetors, Particularly Black Women

To explore rhetorics outside the Greco-Roman traditions inherently entails the mining of rhetorical artifacts produced by figures outside the Greco-Roman traditions. Our collective cultural and disciplinary ignorance of such figures communicates how whiteness and patriarchy still dominate our discipline. Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch have relevant comments:

I marveled, in fact, at the number of times after a panel presentation of my research that I would receive a line of response like: How can what you're saying be true? African American women in the nineteenth century were slaves. They couldn't really read and write, could they? They didn't publish anything, did they? Where would they have done that? Where/How did you find any evidence for these sorts of claims? In other words, the lives, work, and contributions of women of African descent were functioning during that time within what I came to call an atmosphere of deep disbelief. Such questions suggested that as a group, African American women were perceived as a monolithic blob of humanity with inferior prospects and quite questionable value.¹⁹

Their experience verifies my own. Having presented at NCA on a few occasions I have found myself as one of the few – and sometimes the *only* – white person in the room listening to papers on Black rhetoric. Sometimes I have been the only *male* in the room when delivering or listening to papers on Black women's rhetoric.

Prophetic rhetoric challenges our patriarchy and racism and calls us to re-imagine rhetoric apart from the strictures of our white, masculine traditions. Indeed, for white scholars, it calls us to begin with presence and listening. What Schultz says about religiously sensitive scholarship applies, as well, to racially sensitive scholarship:

Perhaps listening, not speaking, is the basis for religiously sensitive scholarship...In the Hebrew and Christian tradition the idea of listening came out of the concept of 'being obedient.' To listen was to risk personal and collective change by considering the wisdom from outside the self and

¹⁹ Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch, *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies*. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), kindle loc. 183.

tribe. Today academicians are paradigmatically tribal creatures who tend to listen only intra-collegially. This is why, in my view, the religious turn in postmodernism is so remarkable. By admitting the relative chaos in academe, postmodern scholars are challenging their own legitimation in society. Such listening could be scholars' own undoing or salvation – depending on how they frame the situation.²⁰

We cannot understand American rhetoric, American radical rhetoric, or American feminist rhetoric without taking Black rhetoric into account. African American rhetors have challenged the very notions of *America*, *masculinity*, *femininity* for centuries. At this moment, we have a unique opportunity to listen to and exalt their radical, prophetic voices.

James Darsey began this discussion with prophetic rhetoric, but his failure to include the voices of people of color or women severely limited his scope, insights, and conclusions. Reading and studying prophetic rhetoric and call narratives helps us re-engage that discussion from the margins, which benefits a wider audience than the rhetorical communities we study. Listening to and exalting voices from the margins may also help us further develop theoretical models for understanding both oppressive rhetoric and rhetorics of resistance. As Woodyard has noted, “If rhetorical scholars engage the project of building our theoretical understanding of prophecy to mirror the prophetic-liberating principle inherent in the Hebrew Bible, we will more fully come to terms with the ‘exigencies of oppression’ confronting not only women but every disaffected group or class.”²¹ Indeed, coming to terms with the exigencies of oppression naturally leads to

²⁰ Schultze, “The ‘God-Problem’ in Communication Studies.” 16.

²¹ Kerith M. Woodyard, “Depatriarchalizing in Rhetorical Theory: Toward a Feminist Prophetic Tradition.” *Ohio Communication Journal*. Vo. 48 (October 2010), 37.

realizing and investigating prophetic rhetoric's most counter-intuitive assumption: some audiences are unpersuadable.

Understanding “Failed” Rhetoric: Prophecy and the Unpersuadable Audience

Neo-Aristotelian rhetorical traditions assume the primacy of persuasion or effect as the *telos* of oratory. As Bitzer has said, “a work of rhetoric is pragmatic; it comes into existence for the sake of something beyond itself; it functions ultimately to produce action or change in the world; it performs some task.”²² The pragmatism of this assumption has not gone unchallenged in communication studies. For example, Edwin Black argued that neo-Aristotelianism's pragmatic criticism is circular and too simplistic in their notions of causation. In the end, Black argues that neo-Aristotelianism ends up reaffirming the critic's perspective while never actually assessing the speech. For Black, effect is impossible to determine, and any certitude around it merely reflects the scholar's bias.²³ The results-orientation dismisses prophetic rhetoric out-of-hand based on its inability to or disinterest in producing effect.²⁴

Figures in the African American Prophetic Tradition have long known with Maurice Charland that:

Rhetorical theory's privileging of an audience's freedom to judge is problematic, for it assumes that audiences, with their prejudices, interests, and motives, are *given* and so extra-rhetorical...much of what we as rhetorical critics consider to be a product or consequence of discourse,

²² Lloyd F. Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation” in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*, 5th Ed.. Ed. Carl R. Burghardt and Hillary A. Jones. (State College: Strata Publishing, Inc., 2017), 35.

²³ Edwin Black, “The Purposes of Rhetorical Criticism” in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism: 5th Ed.* Ed. Carl Burghardt and Hillary A. Jones. (State College: Strata Publishing, 2017), 45.

²⁴ Black, “The Purposes of Rhetorical Criticism” 45.

including social identity, religious faith, sexuality, and ideology is beyond the realm of rational or even free choice, beyond the realm of persuasion.²⁵

The Hebrew prophet Isaiah said this very thing *in his call narrative*, “seeing they will not see, hearing they will not hear.”²⁶ Scholars from Aristotle through Wichelns thought persuasion was the point of rhetoric;²⁷ Isaiah presumed persuasion intermittently impossible.

Because prophetic rhetoric works with different expectations than Greco-Roman rhetoric, an evaluation must use alternative or adapted tools that can “illuminate, and provide some means for evaluating, the dynamic when prophecy fails.”²⁸ My analysis of Nat Turner provides a unique opportunity to evaluate such rhetoric because Turner understands the immanence of his death during the interview with Thomas Gray. Indeed, Turner has *chosen* death as an aspect of a cruciform embodiment of prophetic discourse. For Turner, martyrdom is an embodied, reasonable, rhetorical response to audience intransigence.

Recognizing his audience’s obstinacy, Turner embraces martyrdom *not* because he thinks verbal or moral rhetoric may convince his audience, but because his objective before an unpersuadable audience is simply *in witness*, the preservation of a morally significant event in the mind of the hearers. Martyrdom presupposes the audience’s violent rejection of the prophet’s message; thus, the prophet cannot find validation in

²⁵ Maurice Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the People Quebecois. *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 73, No. 2. (May 1987), 133.

²⁶ Isaiah 6:9-10.

²⁷ Herbert A. Wichelns, “The Literary Criticism of Oratory.” in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism, 5th Ed.*. Ed. Carl R. Burghardt and Hillary A. Jones. (State College: Strata Publishing, Inc., 2017), 22.

²⁸ Darsey, 113.

immediate effect. If the message has any effect at all, as Darsey says, it comes after the prophet's death:

Whatever the motives of the prophet, his value lies in his reception, the quality of the *ethos* presented to his auditors. Charisma, we are reminded, is only validated when recognized; it is a social phenomenon. And if the recognition of charisma depends on recognition of the quality of the birth, the calling, only in the quality of the death, it stands to reason that sainthood is always *posthumous*.²⁹

At best, the prophet's life, death, and calling, often produce *effect* in a later audience.

With traditional neo-Aristotelian standards, prophetic rhetoric, messages of martyrdom, and engagement with intransigent audiences positions prophetic rhetoric as a unique contributor to the field of rhetorical criticism by moving our discipline further away from the centrality of effect. Prophets understand before hand that their audiences are not necessarily "free to be persuaded" because their prior moral commitments predate and are "logically prior" to persuasion.³⁰ Prophets understand that audiences are interpolated, fictively and rhetorical *created* prior to and even after the rhetorical moment. Still, in the context of interpolation and intransigence, the prophet's duty lies in speaking "to the people, 'whether they hear or refuse to hear.'"³¹

In a contemporary setting, this explains Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's reflection on Elizabeth Cady Stanton's "tragic view," that "feminism cannot change the human condition."³² Kohrs Campbell recognizes the likely failure of persuasion, so feminist

²⁹ Darsey, 33.

³⁰ Charland, 133.

³¹ Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1962), 22.

³² Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "Stanton's 'The Solitude of Self': A Rationale for Feminism." *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, No. 66 (1980), 308.

rhetoric tries to interpolate, mythologize, and re-narrate the audience away from patriarchal ideology into narratives of liberation and justice. This re-narration, however, requires audience buy-in that often goes against the material interests of men and, sometimes, the immediate material interests of the women. Thus, feminists recognize their audiences are not free subjects. Their history has determined and constrained their identity and imagination. The prophetic tradition calls this “sin,” and describes it as an effective force of death and oppression, caging and shackling individual and collective *response* to messages of liberation. Sin gives power to patriarchy and interpolates its prisoners, thus, minimizing the effect of the prophet’s liberating rhetoric and agenda.

As it has come to us from the nineteenth-century into the present, the African American Prophetic Tradition continues to wrestle with the lack of effect. Whether Dr. Martin Luther King’s increasing pessimism toward the end of his life, or the protest rhetoric of Black Lives Matter, Black prophetic rhetoric understands the minimal impact of their appeals; even when utilizing ideographs white Americans find favorable (patriotism, freedom, etc.). All available means of persuasion have been utilized, yet prophecy and protest continue without a hearing. As Alasdair MacIntyre says:

The facts of incommensurability ensure that protestors can never win an *argument*; the indignant self-righteousness of protestors arises because the facts of incommensurability ensure equally that the protestors can never lose an argument either. Hence, the *utterance* of protest is characteristically addressed to those who already *share* the protestors’ premises... This is not to say that protest cannot be effective; it is to say that protest cannot be *rationally* effective.³³

³³ Alasdair MacIntyre quoted in Walter R. Fisher, “Narration as Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument.” In *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism, 5th Edition*. Ed. Carl R. Burgchardt and Hillary A. Jones. (State College: Strata Publishing, 2017), 275.

Prophets protest, but they do not presume their protest can rationally persuade their opponents. They do not choose *irrationality*; they merely recognize the limited effect of rationality. Thus, their primary objective lies in *witness*. This is why Nat Turner “does not see his battle merely in the secular sense of a slave insurrection...He continued to present his narrative in the metaphysics of a holy war.”³⁴

In the end, Kenneth Burke asks, “If a man takes great pains to obtain the approval of his group, does he not thereby give evidence that he needs *to be approved*?”³⁵ Burke implies an affirmative answer, but prophetic rhetoric points toward a negative one. Prophets enter rhetorical situations using identification *consciously*, to ensure their witness is preserved no matter if it persuades. Thus, prophets exhibit a steadfast refusal to adapt to audience expectations. The audience’s approval or applause remains irrelevant because, from the prophet’s perspective, the audience’s moral universe has shackled them into oppressive ideologies and idolatries (sin) that drive what they approve and applaud.

Provides Further Insight into Resistance Rhetoric

Much value lies in studying the rhetoric of oppressors, as Burke said, so we can understand what kind of medicine these medicine men “concocted, that we may know, with greater accuracy, exactly what to guard against, if we are to forestall the concocting of similar medicine.”³⁶ However, scholars who study the various sites of oppression

³⁴ Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 147.

³⁵ Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, Ltd. 1984), 81.

³⁶ Interestingly, Burke ends this quote with “if we are to forestall the concocting of similar medicine in America” (Emphasis mine). He does not notice that such medicines had been served by the spoon of white supremacy in America for a few centuries. Kenneth Burke, “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle.’” in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*, 5th ed. Editors: Carl R. Burgchardt and Hillary A. Jones. (State College: Strata Publishing, Inc. 2017), 211.

(gender, race, class, etc.) have also noted the value of studying resistance rhetoric the meaning-making mechanisms of those who resist oppression. In America, the resistance rhetoric of the Black, Afro-centric, and African American Prophetic Tradition deserve further analysis:

In the context of historical and current oppression, African rhetoric is also a rhetoric of resistance. Clearly, given a community forcibly transferred to America during the holocaust of enslavement and systematically oppressed since then, a central aspect of the corpus of African American rhetorical practice is rooted in and reflective of constant resistance.³⁷

By studying resistance rhetoric across disciplines, we may observe that oppression's intersectionality may find opposition in the intersectionality of resistance rhetoric and tactics. In various resistance rhetorics, including prophetic rhetoric, we see an intentional refusal of respectability, a resolute rejection of audience expectation, a criticism of civility, and a disavowal of decorum. In other words, a study of prophetic rhetoric may offer insights back and forth with other resistance rhetorics. After all, all "resistance is necessarily a response to, and in its varied expressions partly determined by, the varied manifestations of power. The realm of the imaginary, the visionary, the utopic is discovered and cultivated by those who define themselves as pressed and limited in some significant ways by power, as a means of resisting such power."³⁸

³⁷ Maulana Karenga, "Nommo, Kawaida, and Communicative Practice" In *Understanding African American Rhetoric: Classical Origins to Contemporary Innovations*. (London: Routledge, 2003), 6.

³⁸ Vincent L. Wimbush, "Introduction: Interpretating Resistance, Resisting Interpretations," *Semeia*. Vol. 79 (1997), 6.

Prophetic Rhetoric Challenges Modernity's Artificial Binaries

One reason the study of prophetic rhetoric challenges the discipline of communication and rhetoric lies in its rejection of modernity's binaries still lively and operative in our discipline. Indeed, prophetic rhetoric highlights that such binaries are not only foreign to our figures but function in the context of a colonial agenda designed to solidify the hegemony of white men. Reggie L. Williams discusses the social implications of *splitting* theology and religion into false binaries:

The project of theology in colonialism was split in this assembly; it was primarily doctrinal and conceptual, lacking content for Christian conduct. That split was necessary to justify the domination of foreign human bodies that accompanied classifying human beings by race, securing the advantages of whiteness, and accommodating the practices of colonialism...Colonial Christianity engineered a modified theology that was bred to resist empathy and the practice of incarnation.³⁹

Given the colonialist, racist, and patriarchal breeding of these binaries and our figures' rejection of such, we must rethink them.

Admittedly, many figures from the African American Prophetic Tradition, even Maria Stewart and Richard Allen, operated to a degree with Enlightenment assumptions. Still, these assumptions were not wholesale adopted. Stephen G. Hall notes the complicated nature of nineteenth-century Black participation in Enlightenment thinking, "Although they usually rejected the tendency common among Enlightenment theorists to divide the world into a classic binary – the civilized and the savage – these [nineteenth-century Black] intellectuals were strong proponents of the Enlightenment vision of the

³⁹ Reggie L. Williams, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance*. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 43.

world suffused with reason.”⁴⁰ Reason, keep in mind, does not contrast with religion.

Rather, religion provides the foundation for reason. Reason evidences a rational creator.

The African American Prophetic Tradition’s refusal to bifurcate religion and reason mirrors the Hebrew prophets’ refusal to bifurcate the spiritual and material worlds.

As Gerhard von Rad notes, prophets make:

...no distinction between spiritual and material – the two are intertwined in the closest possible way; and in consequence he (sic) is also unable properly to differentiate between word and object, idea and actuality. Such thought is thus characterized by an inherent absence of differentiation between the ideal and the real, or between word and object; these coalesce as if both stood on the plane of being... Thus, in a very realistic sense, what happens in language is that the world is given material expression.⁴¹

In the prophet’s *biblical* view, the cosmos exists because words and reality, religion and reason, spiritual and material, and secular and sacred exist together. This holistic, harmonious view of the world calls into question modernity’s binaries and creates the conditions for justice. This explains why abolitionist and civil rights activists seamlessly employ the language of religion and rights, secularity, and sacrality.⁴²

The rejection of modernity’s binaries aligns with the resistance efforts and civil rights efforts of feminist rhetorical scholarship. Royster and Kirsch comment, “our move is also to disrupt the public-private divide by suggesting a more fully textured sense of what it means to place these women in social space, rather than private space or public

⁴⁰ Stephen G. Hall, *A Faithful Account of the Race: African American Historical Writing in the Nineteenth Century*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 18.

⁴¹ Gerhard von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 61.

⁴² Martha S. Jones, *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Right sin Antebellum America*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 72.

space.”⁴³ Black freedom and women’s liberation are concurrently personal, political, and intersectionally correlated.⁴⁴

In the ongoing evolution of resistance and struggle...we join those who want to recognize, not only the artificiality of public-private dichotomies as demonstrated, for example, through feminist analyses of public and private spheres, but also to recognize that dualities (two-ness, double-consciousness, margin-center relationships) are more often than not multiplicities.⁴⁵

For Royster and Kirsch, a metaphor of concentric circles of social relationships, cross-generational connections, and geographic distances explain the rhetoric of women and racial minorities far better than “a less-productive view that attempts to track boundaries between public and private domains.”⁴⁶ Tamura Lomax uses stronger language when addressing the oppressiveness of binaries in sexual rhetoric, “A sexual discourse of resistance compels us to rethink cultural texts and notions that divide the black body and black soul, misread black sexuality as a thing to exploit, and encourage black sexual shame and secrecy.”⁴⁷ Thus, intersectional oppression operates linguistically and socially via the openly hidden confines of conceptual binaries constructed to bolster white male hegemony. Prophetic rhetoric and resistance rhetorics help “us see beyond one of our

⁴³ Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch, *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies*. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), kindle loc. 380.

⁴⁴ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, “The Rhetoric of Women’s Liberation: An Oxymoron.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. Vol. 59, No.1 (Feb. 1973), 84.

⁴⁵ Jacqueline Jones Royster, “Introduction: Marking Trails in Studies of Race, Gender, and Culture.” In *Calling Cards: Theory and Practice in the Study of Race, Gender, and Culture*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), kindle loc. 123.

⁴⁶ Royster and Kirsch, *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*. Kindle loc. 43.

⁴⁷ Tamura Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), Kindle loc. 1698.

most-basic underinterrogated assumptions, the concept of ‘woman/female-man/male’ and helps us to notice new terrains for exploration, documentation, analysis, and interpretation that push us to a more richly rendered view of rhetoric as a diversely articulated human enterprise.”⁴⁸

Instead of a binary-riddled rhetoric, the African American Prophetic tradition joins with the resistance rhetoric of feminism and Afrocentricity to propose a hermeneutic and rhetoric of harmony. Understanding that figures in the prophetic tradition use biblical texts, scholars can help alleviate oppressive uses of the Bible not through a hermeneutic of suspicion but through a hermeneutic of harmony by proposing thoughtful interpretations of the Bible that create liberation and harmony in the world. Such an effort aligns with the liberative hermeneutics within the African American Prophetic Tradition and Afro-centric rhetoric because “within African cultures, the greatest power on earth is the ability to create harmony in place of disharmony, order where once where there was chaos.”⁴⁹ As in the Bible, harmony is created through speech acts where the oppressed community seeks common cause.⁵⁰

Scholars need not even share the prophetic figures’ religious worldview, but the common cause can heal the wounds of modernity’s binaries. As Jones and Kirsch conclude, “Even if and when we find ourselves disagreeing in the end with their values, ideologies, or beliefs, we will still look and listen carefully and caringly, contemplate our perceptions, and speculate about the promise, potential, and realities of these rhetors’

⁴⁸ Royster and Kirsch, *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*. Kindle loc. 640.

⁴⁹ Adetokunbo F. Knowles-Borishade, “Paradigm for Classical African Orature: Instrument for a Scientific Revolution?” *Journal of Black Studies*. Vol. 21, No. 4, June 1991, 496.

⁵⁰ Knowles-Borishade, “Paradigm for Classical African Orature.” 498.

lives and work.”⁵¹ Such deconstruction, however, requires moral courage on the part of critics.

Prophetic Rhetoric is a Call to Critical Moral Courage

Committing to honesty in a white academy and church, which have historical and material interests dedicated in some ways to *misinterpreting* the world, takes moral courage. When I first entered the communication department at the University of Memphis, I had never heard of Quintilian, but I wanted to become something like his “good man speaking well,”⁵² a person who could articulate justice and goodness in a world of injustice. This commitment shaped my scholarship and led me to seek models who engage texts and criticism with moral courage.

Edwin Black, among others, modeled the power of such moral commitments when he challenged communication critics to consider that the problem with the “Coatesville Address” may not lie within the speech or the orator but within the white audience’s prior (im)moral commitments. These (im)moral commitments to white supremacy led Chapman’s audience to *misinterpret* lynching as just and good. Black, then, notes that the speaker, the text, and the audience all intermingle in myriad of morally complex ways:

Our perceptions of this event will be colored by our moral dispositions. Hence, there would conceivably be those who would perceive it as a hideous expression of mob violence; there would be those who would perceive it, clinically, as the concrete illustration of an abstract sociopathic

⁵¹ Royster and Kirsch, *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*. Kindle loc. 1977.

⁵² Quintilian, *Quintilian on the Teaching of Speaking and Writing*. Ed. James J. Murphy. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), xviii. Later studies have demonstrated the classist nature of Quintilian’s understanding of who “good” people can be, and certainly the sexist nature of *goodness* only being applicable to “man.” These are all valid critiques. I merely quote him here to show the depth and history of Rhetoric’s disciplinary moral commitments, even if those needed expanded and rethinking through the years.

idea; there would be those who would refuse to perceive the event at all, who would dismiss it and put it out of mind.⁵³

Black explains that the intransigence of an audience may indicate prior moral commitments, not necessarily stylistic shortcomings. His essay called critics to consider the moral consequences of a discourse. Herein he laid the groundwork for future scholars to further explore the connection between moral commitments and academic criticism. Klumpp and Hollihan, for example, take up Black's call when they argue, "There is a task for the rhetoric critic that goes beyond interest in 'mere' rhetoric. The critic that emerges – the interpreter, the teacher, the social actor – is a moral participant, cognizant of the power and responsibility that accompanies full critical participation in his/her society."⁵⁴

Molefi Kete Asante's Afrocentric rhetorical criticism also prioritizes ethics:

The aim of good criticism is to pass judgment, and judgment is concerned with good and bad, right and wrong, criticism is, therefore, preeminently an ethical act...The Afrocentric critic is also concerned with ethical judgments but finds the aesthetic judgment equally valuable, particularly as the substantial ground upon which to make a decision about the restoration of harmony and balance. Indeed, Afrocentric criticism essentially combines ethics and aesthetics.⁵⁵

For Asante, good criticism asks whether the orator contributed to the moral harmony between people and people, people and the divine, or people and themselves.

As a white critic, my goals of hearing, highlighting, citing, and learning from the marginalized voices in this dissertation springs from a desire to deepen my moral

⁵³ Black, "Rhetorical Criticism." 49.

⁵⁴ James F. Klumpp and Thomas A. Hollihan, "Rhetorical Criticism as Moral Action." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 75. (February 1989), 84-96.

⁵⁵ Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 193.

commitment to justice. I not only desire the critical skills to interpret the events described in the “Coatesville Address,” but I desire to be the kind of critic and person who can interpret them with moral courage. Moral courage does not merely necessitate academic aptitude but insists on adherence to moral commitments. Moral commitments lead naturally to prophetic rhetoric, which makes both ethical appeals and also knows beforehand that some audiences are not necessarily “free to be persuaded”⁵⁶ because their moral commitments are “logically prior” to persuasion.”⁵⁷ Prophetic rhetoric takes seriously the need for moral courage from the speaker, the audience, the text, and, yes, even the critic. Especially the white critic working with racial, rhetorical, and religious “words from elsewhere.”

⁵⁶ Charland, 133.

⁵⁷ Charland, 133.

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