UNSUNG HEROES: THE RHETORICAL POWER OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT
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This paper analyzes several transcribed speeches written and orated by female African-American activists in the Civil Rights Movement, between the years of 1954 and 1965. It attempts to highlight some of the most significant themes present in the transcriptions and establish an argument for the profound and rhetorical nature of black female speechcraft as it is demonstrated in the sources. Several of these speeches originate from widely known female activists, while others are the products of more obscure figures whose contributions to the movement were nonetheless valuable. This paper will argue that four pervasive thematic elements are notably present in the source speeches. First, several speeches are pre-eminently designed to elicit a “call-to-action” within the African-American community to which they are addressed. This desire for action is a common thread that often draws upon the need for African Americans to awaken to racial injustice and actively seek means of remedying the nation’s democratic failings. A second major theme is the presence of religious sentiment as a motivational or galvanizing force in the struggle for civil rights. Many of these speeches liken the pursuit of equality to a spiritual experience that transcends the mundane. Third, powerful imagery and metaphor, as well as passionate language, is utilized frequently by the orators in question to create emotional resonance in their audience. Lastly, many of the speeches take on an academic character that draws upon analytical evidence to make intellectual statements about the progress of the movement and its theoretical objectives.

Previous research on the contributions of African-American women to the Civil Rights Movement has uncovered some important information regarding the scope and intrinsic nature of their involvement in the movement’s progression. Historians such as Bernice Barnett contend that many Southern black women who performed essential roles in the Civil Rights Movement have become largely “unsung heroes and leaders.” However, the relative “invisibility” of these women is not indicative of a lack of female initiative; rather it is the result of insufficient recognition of the efforts put forth by women in both national and grassroots organizations. In “Invisible Southern Black Women Leaders in the Civil Rights Movement,” Barnett argues that the role of women in the struggle for civil rights was largely overshadowed by a predominantly male cast of charismatic speakers and activists who took on seemingly more dynamic and public personas than their female counterparts.

“Invisible” also draws attention to the fact that although African-American women performed a wide array of crucial leadership roles over the course of the Civil Rights Movement, they faced “three interlocking systems of oppression” that constituted the most significant barriers to pursuing ongoing activism. Racism, sexism, and class bias affected the efforts of African-American women in a way that was unparalleled in the male sphere of civil rights activity. Black women who worked closely with white employers often risked their economic livelihoods when they engaged in overt support for the movement, while many outspoken black male leaders who occupied ministerial positions in churches did not face these same challenges. These religious leaders were often only held accountable to their congregations and were free to expound on the virtues of the movement without fear of unemployment.

Barnett argues that patriarchal conditions in the African-American community and society at-large also took their toll on the effectiveness of female civil rights leadership, with many women finding they were unable to acquire funding for projects as a result of gender discrimination. This focus on patriarchy informs Barnett’s eventual conclusions regarding the marginalization of African-American women in the chronicles of civil rights history. She argues that the “invisibility” of black female activists has arisen partially due to research that has emphasized the superior role of “elite male professionals within the Black community,” and the achievements of prominent groups of black men

3 Ibid., 162.
4 Ibid., 163.
5 Ibid., 174.
6 Ibid., 175.
that occupied central or controversial positions within the movement. Feminist scholarship, Barnett contends, has also done black female activists a disservice by, until recently, “focusing almost exclusively on the activism of white women.”

In “Passing the Torch: African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement,” LaVerne Gyant argues that the “triple barriers” of race, gender, and class faced by African-American women during the Civil Rights Movement empowered them to rise above society’s challenges and seek freedom from racial oppression. Based on her interviews with female civil rights leaders, Gyant is able to outline some of the defining characteristics of black female activists in the movement and dissect their unique perspectives on their own leadership roles as well as those of their male counterparts. According to Gyant’s research, African-American women saw themselves as belonging to a “strong sisterhood network” that transcended class barriers and created an environment of solidarity and support. Many of these women understood the extended longevity of the struggle for civil rights and realized the importance of education as a means of increasing the legitimacy of their aims. Rural women in particular, gained a strong reputation for being “towers of strength... determined to change the system.”

Gyant contends that many women were motivated to take on leadership roles in the movement as a result of long-abiding desires to improve social conditions for their families as well as future generations. African-American women often testified to the strength they witnessed in their mothers, fathers, and grandmothers when it came to “fighting the everyday battles of oppression, racism, and sexism.” This level of perseverance in the face of adversity came from belonging to an established culture that had long weathered the negative consequences of discrimination and understood the importance of engaging in forward momentum that reinforced the need for social change. Gyant describes the importance of religion and spirituality to African-American women engaged in this unrelenting struggle. For them, “the church represented a refuge from the evils that plague African-Americans every day.” Religion was a means of restoring integrity to the soul and expressing messages of “faith, hope, and courage.”

Gyant’s use of interviews with African-American female activists is particularly useful in conveying her subjects’ perceptions of leadership and their own leadership roles. Many believed that a strong leader “articulated the things people were feeling, thinking, and saying” and remained unflustered when encountering setbacks. However, when queried as to their own level of involvement in the movement, some women were unwilling to label themselves as leaders in a formal sense because much of their activism took place at a community level. Gyant argues that while African-American women were aware of the focus on African-American men as more prominent and formal movement leaders, they were not necessarily resentful of this dynamic; rather, many believed that “the roles of both men and women were vital and that each one deserves its place in the history of the movement.”

Belinda Robnett further elaborates on the ways in which African-American women contributed to the Civil Rights Movement and addresses their roles as both organizers and under-appreciated leaders. In her book, How Long? How Long?: African-American Women and the Struggle for Civil Rights, Robnett also explores the complex factors of race, class, gender, and culture, detailing how these intersecting components shaped the progression and outcome.
come of the Civil Rights Movement. She argues that although gender equity was a relatively foreign concept at the time of the movement, this did not deter many black women from joining the struggle for equal rights. According to Robnett, rather than balking at inherent gender inequalities, African-American women took up the cause partly as a result of a historical continuum that preceded the movement itself; this continuum included a “legacy of activism” that, while it often placed women in an awkward position between the struggles for racial as well as gender equality, had the effect of priming them for the demanding ideological undertaking of the Civil Rights Movement.

An important aspect of Robnett’s historical research is her focus on female grassroots leaders in the movement, whom she refers to as “bridge leaders.” Restricted from occupying formal leadership positions often reserved for men, many women turned to the important task of organizing events by distributing flyers, raising funds, and increasing awareness of important boycotts in their communities. Robnett argues that the psychological responses black female activists evoked were of particular importance to their role as instigators of rebellion in the movement. Prominent female activists such as Ella Baker and Septima Clark would harness the power of emotional volatility to draw people into civil rights initiatives by bridging a connection between the experiences of oppression in the African-American community and the overarching political goals of the movement. How Long? argues convincingly that black female activists were critical when it came to developing the collective identity of the Civil Rights Movement and communicating themes of resistance, perseverance, and racial equity to their communities and beyond.

Historians such as Rhoda Lois Blumberg have also investigated the diverse leadership roles undertaken by women, both black and white, during the Civil Rights Movement. In “Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Reform or Revolution?” Blumberg explores the ways in which female activism fits into the contextual framework of a tumultuous social movement. She is able to determine that the Civil Rights Movement created a unique and unprecedented environment that enabled women to expand their roles in society by affording them with opportunities to pursue a political cause in new and unexpected ways. Sit-ins, freedom rides, and voluntary incarceration were radical departures from what was commonly seen as “women’s work.” However, despite their forays into the world of political activism, women were usually still expected to perform their traditional duties as purveyors of domestic stability. And yet, Blumberg argues that, despite being grounded in the ordinary, women nevertheless perceived a rising awareness of their own agency in political and social affairs. By exploring the ways in which the Civil Rights Movement contained revolutionary qualities, Blumberg treats the movement as a vehicle that drove women to reconsider their subordinate position in the established gender hierarchy.

Blumberg closely examines the revolutionary qualities of the Civil Rights Movement, arguing that the movement took on an “unstructured, emergent, and emergency nature” that created a chaotic and insistent environment demanding immediate and decisive action from movement participants. This level of urgency facilitated the bending of established gender hierarchies and the expansion of women’s roles in what would otherwise have been a more rigidly patriarchal social structure. Blumberg argues that in a frenzied atmosphere of revolutionary activity and heightened emotions, “personal qualities and abilities are more important than credentials.” She cites the involvement of black female activists such as Ella Baker in major organizational undertakings, usually reserved for men, such as the administration of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference as an example of this phenomenon. Blumberg also refers to the case study of the Montgomery Bus Boycott as an example of an important event that was initiated by black women in the absence of

22 Ibid., 8.
23 Ibid., 60.
24 Ibid., 9.
25 Ibid., 9.
willing black male leadership. Given the many socially empowering opportunities that the Civil Rights Movement afforded women, Blumberg believes that it is not difficult to ascertain how these events allowed them to “gain a new appreciation of their own rights and abilities in the process of fighting for the rights of their class, race or nationality.” She terms this evolution of self-concept a “transformation in consciousness” and contends that women in the Civil Rights Movement underwent such a metamorphosis and became emboldened to take on new and increasingly challenging roles in society.

This paper will explore the ways in which African-American women articulated their passion for the Civil Rights Movement and their dedication to the struggle for racial equality through the use of compelling speechcraft. In doing so, it will conclude that these women were capable of harnessing their rhetorical prowess in a way that is both impressive and deserving of recognition. Although public speaking was a less common leadership role for African-American women during the movement, the opportunities for female orators to address crowds nevertheless occasionally presented themselves. The resulting speeches were often dramatic and profound in nature, featuring not only demands for meaningful action, but also a strong focus on spiritual integrity, emphatic language, and an intellectual understanding of the movement.

As Gyant so accurately surmises in *Passing the Torch*, religion and spirituality played a significant role in inspiring women to undertake the seemingly insurmountable challenges presented to them in their fight for equality. This spiritual influence becomes undeniably evident in many of the speeches this paper analyzes, and the profound effect of such language will hopefully remain intact. The assertions made by Belinda Robnett regarding the power of emotional engagement will also take form as persuasive female speakers demonstrate their ability to reach their audiences with stark testimonials, soul-stirring anecdotes, and graphic imagery. And, perhaps most importantly, Rhoda Lois Blumberg’s assertions regarding the female “transformation of consciousness” will be resoundingly confirmed as multiple women vocalize bold and articulate messages of equality, allowing these “unsung heroes” to regain their voices.

Throughout the course of the Civil Rights Movement, women were often required to act decisively in order to define the movement’s trajectory and imbue the unglamorous aspects of social movement activism with a sense of moral obligation and heightened responsibility. For many African-American women, this involved working in the community to raise awareness by organizing demonstrations, working as voting rights educators, and participating in mass meetings. Prominent African-American activist Mary McLeod Bethune emphasizes the importance of purposeful action as a means of generating significant momentum for the movement in her 1954 speech, delivered one month after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. She imparts:

We must be upward and doing if we would keep abreast with truth. So it is today my earnest plea that we work cooperatively and with great precision toward the dissemination of the truths that will undergird the realization of a full integration. What are the facts? Who can best give them to the people? ...What organized groups already have the platforms and the facilities that we need? ... You must work too to discover the common needs which may become common tasks of many people.

Bethune clearly articulates the need for human mobility in order to ensure the implementation of desegregation policy. Her desire for cooperation and precision is aimed at creating a large and capable taskforce that is able to effectively disperse accurate information about racial integration to the public. She is aware of the need for a network of inspired and like-minded individuals in order to facilitate enlightenment on issues of race and ensure that basic organizational needs are met through collective activity. Women such as Bethune played the very important role of “micro-mobilizers” in the Civil

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32 Blumberg, “Reform or Revolution?,” 135.
33 Ibid., 136.
34 Ibid., 136-137.
35 Gyant, “Passing the Torch,” 637.
36 Blumberg, “Reform or Revolution?” 36-37.
37 Gyant, “Passing the Torch,” 639.
Rights Movement, and were often responsible for helping their communities to conceptualize the movement as a means of enacting positive and enduring change in the realm of racial equality.40 Bethune’s call to action in her 1954 speech undergirds a greater awareness of the need for mass participation in order to successfully build an infrastructure of constituents that are “convinced of the legitimacy of [their] participation” and have been “persuaded to act.”41

The call to action illustrated in many of the source speeches is often one that demands unity. In her speech titled, “I Want You to Know What They Did to My Boy;” Mamie Till Bradley implores listeners to take away an important message from the death of her son, Emmett Till. Devastated by the recent loss of her child, who was brutally slain by white racists in Mississippi, Bradley is nevertheless in full possession of her mental faculties. She states, “We are tiny as individuals. But together we cannot be beat. If we stand up and unite ourselves together for a common cause, there is nothing that can stand before us.”42 This sentiment is also echoed by Dorothy Height, a stalwart activist in the Civil Rights Movement and president of the National Council of Negro Women from 1957 to 1997.43 In her 1963 speech at the First Baptist Church in Selma, Alabama, Height addresses a local African-American audience that has been demoralized by confirmations of horrific prison abuses endured by youth activists, as well as news of the racially motivated bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in nearby Birmingham.44 She states:

Many people talk about the way we are divided. Many people act as though Negroes were something perfect, that we were better than human, that there would never be a difference among us. But whatever our differences, I am renewed in my feeling tonight that there is one thing in which we are all united: we want our freedom and we want it everywhere in our country, now.45

From Bradley and Height’s declarations it is possible to ascertain how highly they regarded the concepts of unified action and solidarity when it came to influencing the success of the Civil Rights Movement and ensuring the proliferation of integrated institutions. These African-American female advocates of equal rights felt that true racial equality could only be achieved if movement participants relinquished their pride and petty indulgences in favor of a group work ethic that demanded a willingness to engage in mutually beneficial collaboration. In the case of Dorothy Height’s public address, her inspirational commentary served not only as a humbling reminder to value and preserve togetherness in light of common goals shared by the African-American community, but also as a means of fortifying her assembled listeners against the hardships and losses endured as a result of harsh resistance to movement objectives.

The concept of critical action as a means of furthering movement initiatives was not only restricted to the fulfillment of organizational goals meant to facilitate awareness and cooperation. As Robnett suggests, the willingness of African-American women to participate vigorously in the fight for civil rights was partially the result of a historical continuum that emphasized a “legacy of activism,” wherein multiple generations of women were forced to engage in persistent struggles with abusive institutional powers that sought to undermine them both physically and psychologically.46 African-American women were suitably primed for their role as political instigators in the Civil Rights Movement, and their speeches address the necessity of social change as a means of rehabilitating the avowed democratic spirit of the United States as it is reflected in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

In 1960, Modjeska M. Simkins, civil rights activist and former South Carolina state secretary for the N.A.A.C.P., gave just such a speech at a dinner honoring the Bill of Rights in Washington, D.C. The highlight of her speech comes when she addresses the infringements against the rights of protesters who have been jailed and harassed by “loyalty boards” designed to investigate

and subdue “subversive” activities. Simkins focuses her wrath primarily on the House Un-American Activities Committee (H.U.A.C.), which had been recently responsible for the excessively prolonged imprisonment of four activists. She begins by describing the American Bill of Rights as “the bedrock upon which the prestige and protection of civil liberties are based in the thinking of all honest and honorable men,” and then goes on to bemoan the gross violations of the democratic principles it purports to uphold. Simkins declares: Approximately forty Americans now well known for doing so have made the fatal error of believing that the First Amendment means everything expressed in it. Four of these have languished in jail. Tonight, one hundred sixty-nine years after Congress adopted the Bill of Rights, the constitutional liberties embodied in them are being trespassed upon with contemptuous disregard, even by agents and agencies of the very government which itself guarantees these liberties.

Simkins’ speech demands that African-Americans take notice of the inherent hypocrisies within the American legal system that tarnish the democratic image of the United States and divest blacks of the rights that should be guaranteed to them by long-established law. Of particular importance in Simkins’ speech, is her call for immediate action, which states that in order for America to redeem itself, its citizens must “eradicate any agency or group that would neutralize the potency of our civil liberties.” This desire for America to maintain a national image in support of democratic idealism and civil liberty is also reflected in a 1961 speech by civil rights advocate and journalist Charlotta Bass, in which she informs her audience: “We need faith, and peace, and trust in government that protects our rights and the rights of all people without regard to race, color or religion....At this very moment, we, the American people, are part of a new world crisis. We are challenged by Russia, China, and Africa to stop talking about our free country and act for peace.” The overwhelming desire to mold America into a beacon of racial tolerance and democratic freedom dominates both these speeches. For many African-American women who had fought for years against ingrained systems of degradation that stripped them of their rights and rendered them legally inferior to their white counterparts, the thought of reforming their nation to truly reflect the values it purported to uphold was an alluring prospect.

In the case of many African-American women, an unshakable faith in God was the only source of motivation needed to participate in the struggle for equal rights. The church was a place for the spirit to heal from the indignities suffered in the racially charged environments they went about in their daily lives. In a rare transcription of one of her speeches that originated in 1956, Rosa Parks voices her concerns regarding the state of the Montgomery bus system and the damaging nature of its discriminatory practices against blacks. Her chief complaint was that “conditions that existed… were so humiliating and degrading to our spirit…[and] people who enforce such inhuman laws cannot in all fairness themselves feel that they are doing the right thing…from a Christian and human standpoint.” This preoccupation with the integrity of the human spirit was not uncommon during the movement and had its roots in longstanding traditions within black churches that emphasized “collective self-respect” and defiance against “overwhelming odds” and degradation. Diane Nash eloquently demonstrates this connection between spirituality and self-respect in her 1961 address to the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice. She asserts: This movement has been called one of passive resistance.... Rather it might be called one of active resistance.

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48 Ibid., 141.
49 Ibid., 141.
50 Ibid., 142.
51 Ibid., 145.
53 Gyant, “Passing the Torch,” 637.
In regard to our own roles and the role of our Church, I think we need to understand that this is a question of real love of man and love of God. In a word, it is a question of dignity. Many in the African-American community felt that the goals of the movement had strong correlations with the concepts of “freedom” and “equality.” These were not simply terms used to describe the political or legal status of blacks in America. Rather, these words represented a psychological and spiritual transformation for black Americans who sought their ultimate manifestation in society. As Johnnie Carr, N.A.A.C.P. activist and Montgomery Bus Boycott organizer, stated in a 1957 speech at the Women’s Auxiliary Baptist State Convention in Illinois: “The power of God is so strong and the determination of our people so strong. There is no man power to stop it, it may be weeks, months, and even years. We shall be free some day.” Many African Americans viewed true freedom and equality as states of being that needed to be lived in order to be understood fully; this pursuit of personal and collective liberty was a means of enlarging the soul, and the possibility of such spiritual growth inspired “mass religious enthusiasm and ecstasy.”

In his essay, “Religious Revivalism in the Civil Rights Movement,” David Chappell argues that the Civil Rights Movement, although typically defined as a political movement at its core, had deeply religious dimensions within the black community that were not always clear when viewed by outsiders. These spiritual motivations were nevertheless understood to be inherent to the cause, and imbued it with a higher significance that transcended more banal concerns regarding the purely operational functions of integration and equal rights within the socio-political sphere. The pervasiveness of this religious element is made clear in many of the source speeches where religion and God are frequently utilized as a means of creating a reservoir of spiritual strength during trying times of suffering or sacrifice. A touching example of this usage can be seen in Mamie Till Bradley’s aforementioned speech, in which she addresses the murder of her son and the significance of his death as it relates to the fight for equal rights. Despite the horrifying condition of her son’s disfigured body as it lay in a casket open to the public for viewing, Bradley recounts how she reflected on the spiritual implications of Emmett Till’s unexpected sacrifice for the greater principles of freedom embodied in the movement. She states: “When I was talking to God and pleading with Him and asking why did You let it be my boy, it was as if He spoke to me and said: ‘Without the shedding of innocent blood, no cause is won.’ And I turned around then and thanked God that He felt that I was worthy to have a son that was worthy to die for such a worthy cause.”

In her emotionally provocative speech, Bradley not only communicates the enormity of her loss as a mother, but also manages to touch on the importance of generating widespread awareness of racial hatred and violence in an effort to prevent such atrocities from occurring in the future. By acknowledging that she is “pulling the lid off” her son’s brutal murder, Bradley is recognizing that violence, when left unexposed, continues to occur behind a veil of ignorance that empowers perpetrators with the comforting assurance of their obscurity. Bradley’s decision to hold an open-casket funeral for her son allowed the specter of racial violence to take a physical form that shocked and devastated those who observed it. Nevertheless, Bradley derives strength from her belief that the hand of God was ever-present in the affairs involving Emmett Till. Her belief in a divine purpose for her son allows her to find solace in the fact that he did not die in vain.

Mary McLeod Bethune further utilizes religion as a means of inspiring her audience to take heart in Christ’s ability to transcend the hostilities between warring racial factions. In one of her anecdotes, she describes how a statue of Christ, financed by the fundraising efforts of women, was erected at the mountainous and contested border between Chile and Argentina. On the day of the statue’s unveiling, “Chileans and Argentinians met and watched in breathless

58 Chappell, “Religious Revivalism,” 582.
59 Ibid., 581.
silence as the cover was taken off and the lovely face of Christ looked upon them.” All those who gazed upon the statue were so captivated and awestruck by its spiritual presence that they forgot their disputes and made an abiding agreement to pursue peaceful coexistence. Many African-American female activists would later reminisce about the “heady, once-in-a-lifetime” experience of their years spent in the movement; for them, the movement itself was “touched with divine significance” and was a truly soulful experience. Anecdotes such as Bethune’s showcase this preoccupation with the divine as a means of creating powerful spiritual associations that could bridge the gap of acceptance between the African-American community and civil rights opponents.

In addition to fostering strong spiritual connections to the movement, black female orators also understood the importance of using vigorous and inspirational language to instill a sense of passion for the civil rights cause in their listeners. Robnett argues that the “anger and humiliation” many African-American women felt as a result of racial degradation were key motivating factors when it came to organizing rebellious activities in support of the movement. Fifteen-year-old Barbara Posey effectively conveys these powerful emotions in a passionate speech delivered in 1960 at the 51st Annual N.A.A.C.P. Convention. She emphasizes:

We don’t plan to buy where we can’t eat and if the business men in the community won’t help us, then we won’t buy. We do not plan to finance our own embarrassment…. Now to our white brothers who don’t want to have these things, I have a little message for you: You may go and dig up your outmoded laws, your Ku Klux Klan,… your water hoses, tear gas, police department, state guard – all of no use, because this is the space age and segregation and discrimination must die.

Speaking on behalf of young people engaged in the struggle for civil rights, Posey’s comments resonated with many black youth who had taken heart in the victory of the Brown decision, but had grown restless and frustrated by the “incremental rate of progress in school desegregation and the limited scope of civil rights reforms.” Her adamant statement that African-American youth “don’t want promises – we want to eat, and we want that ballot. We want it now, and we plan to get both the ballot and a Coke,” is a powerful testament to the urgency and determination with which many black students pursued integration through demonstrations such as sit-ins at “white only” lunch counters. This impassioned speech epitomizes a fiery determination to affect immediate and meaningful change, as well as a bold message of social and political entitlement. Posey’s ultimate solution to the social injustices that plague the African-American community is to empower the black vote in an effort to “secure help from federal, state, and local officials” that will support desegregation policies and encourage equal rights enforcement.

African-American women further wielded language as a tool to stimulate the imaginations of their audiences and provoke various emotional responses to metaphorical stimuli that often stressed the importance of perseverance and determination. Frances H. Williams provides a particularly striking example of such linguistic ability in her 1957 address to the North Carolina State Conference of the National Student Y.W.C.A. In it she asks:

So the real decision as to what you as an individual shall do – granted you are a Southerner and live in the South – lies in the answer to another question: What do you want from life? The ease and comfort of a silken cocoon woven out of the tears and heartbreaks of others – or the inner calm of knowing that the stars are yours because you paid the

64 Ibid. 8.
65 Chappell, “Religious Revivalism,” 582.
70 Ibid., 121.
price to claim them for your own. Of this no prison, no
torture, can deprive you. What you really want, you get.72

When Williams speaks of a “silken cocoon woven out of the tears and heartbreaks of others,” she is describing the desire of many African-Americans to insulate themselves from the atrocities that were committed as a result of ongoing racial hatred in the Southern United States. She describes her own encounter with this self-imposed barrier to knowledge and relates how her all-consuming fear of confronting the reality of racial violence led her to “hide from the facts of life” and avoid the responsibility of pursuing change.73 Williams eventually accepts that in order to truly claim her place as an equal member of society, she must come to know the nature of such violence and understand what motivates it in order to eradicate it. Her metaphor is one that encourages her listeners to seek the truth and fight back against injustice so that they may know the true pleasure of having earned their freedom through unshakable determination in the face of adversity. She states that in order to accomplish this feat “there is but one requirement and that is to rise and greet the day. The work is always there.”74

Civil rights activist and accomplished nurse Della D. Sullins provides another example of powerful metaphorical speechcraft in her 1959 address to the Tuskegee Civic Association, an organization with a “proud history of racial protest and reform” that helped facilitate local initiatives to desegregate schools and register African-American voters.75 In her speech, Sullins addresses the “massive resistance to change” that is occurring in the South as efforts to desegregate schools foment racial turmoil.76 She observes: Peacefully the South has slept, satisfied with its “way of life,” but suddenly it awakes at midnight, a frightened, confused, upset South which has suddenly discovered that the veranda on which the veranda-sitters once sat is rotted and the mint from which the julep was once sipped has wilted.77

The realization is that there can no longer be a ‘Southern way of life’; there must and will be an American way of life.77

In this detailed metaphor, Sullins evokes a startling image of the South as a crumbling and irrevocably damaged entity with an altered infrastructure that is no longer able to support those who have exploited its prior tendency to reinforce racial bias and separation. The “veranda-sitters” she refers to are those who have become comfortable with segregation and are now forced to come to terms with the withering away of a “Southern way of life” that functioned on longstanding traditions of discrimination. Sullins informs her audience “it is past midnight for the South. She has awakened and cannot return to her peaceful sleep.”78 For the South, there is no reverting to old patterns of subjugation that once defined the experience of the black community. All eyes now rest on the region, carefully evaluating its progress toward integration.

In addition to their use of metaphors to elicit identification with the conceptual elements of the movement, African-American women mastered the art of descriptive speech that rarely shirked from the use of powerful imagery to illustrate horrific or inspiring scenarios. One such example arises in Mamie Till Bradley’s speech, wherein she provides a startling description of Emmett Till’s mutilated body when she first encounters it in the undertaker’s parlor and finds it completely unrecognizable. She states:

What I saw looked like it came from outer space. It didn’t look like anything that we could dream, imagine in a funny book or any place else. It just didn’t look like it was for real. And I had to stand up there and find my boy. I couldn’t find him in five minutes, because that was not the Emmett that I had sent to Mississippi. The first thing that struck my attention was a big gash in his forehead.... I said they must have done this with an ax.79

By accessing such potent and straightforward language, African-American women were able to transport the harsh realities of racial violence to the forefront of their listeners’ minds and create a persuasive argument for immediate and

72 Williams, “1957,” 71.
73 Ibid., 62.
74 Williams, Women, 70.
76 Sullins, “1959,” 113.
78 Ibid., 117.
meaningful action. In their role as “bridge leaders,” many black female activists acted as intermediaries between larger civil rights organizations and under-motivated black communities.\(^{80}\) In this way, their emotionally charged rhetoric and undiluted testimonials served to illuminate the broader goals of the movement and foster a profound connection between committed activists and potential participants. In the case of Emmett Till, his mother’s public statements detailing the atrocities committed against him served as a means of drawing widespread attention to the horrible consequences of racial hatred in the South.

Although African-American women were not typically considered to be “traditional” leaders during the Civil Rights Movement, this does not appear to have prevented many of them from expounding educated and critical assessments of the movement’s goals and direction. Accomplished teacher, social worker, and civil rights advocate Margaret C. McCulloch takes on the challenge of describing the new societal dynamics African Americans can be expected to face as a result of desegregation.\(^ {81}\) In her 1962 speech to the South Carolina Council on Human Relations she explains that while desegregation is an important step toward racial equality, other factors must also be taken into consideration to create an environment that is truly receptive to black integration. She orates:

> We must be concerned not only with desegregation in the Deep South but with such problems as family disorganization, illiteracy, automation of agriculture and now of industry,... and meeting the new employment demands for much better educated workers. It helps us understand how these changes that have redistributed Negroes from being a rural Southern, farm folk to being a... big-city proletariat have also altered the nature of our race relations problems and created new problems calling for new approaches.\(^ {82}\)

For McCulloch, the answer to the question of how to get the most virulently racist demographics to accept desegregation lies in the ability of individuals and groups to initiate widespread reforms of critical infrastructures necessary for the social and economic success of the black population. McCulloch stresses that in order for this to occur, education is required to create an “informed, enlightened, [and] complex goodness” that is motivated to pursue intellectual solutions to existing problems.\(^ {83}\) Her academic approach to the civil rights cause showcases her talent for creating analytical perspectives and communicating important social objectives to her audience.

Pauli Murray, a well-educated African-American female activist, epitomizes the intellectual trend that is evident in the source speeches. An accomplished attorney and women’s rights advocate, Murray not only addresses the importance of equal rights for the black community as a whole, but also the need for African-American women to rise up and take their rightful place in society alongside their male counterparts. Her 1963 address to the National Council of Negro Women in Washington, D.C. elaborates on the unique circumstances faced by African-American women and draws correlations between racial discrimination and gender inequality. She argues:

> Despite the common interests of Negro and white women, however, the dichotomy of the segregated society has prevented them from cementing a natural alliance. Communication and cooperation between them have been hesitant, limited, and formal. Negro women have tended to identify all discrimination against them as racial in origin and... have had little time or energy for consideration of women’s rights. But as the civil rights struggle gathers momentum, they begin to recognize the similarities between paternalism and racial arrogance.\(^ {84}\)

During the Civil Rights Movement, many African-American women “held leadership skills ‘in abeyance lest they might undermine the security and threaten the masculinity of Black men.’”\(^ {85}\) This was primarily a result of patriarchal conditions existent within the African-American community,

\(^{80}\) Robnett, “Micromobilization,” 1662.


\(^{82}\) Ibid., 204-205.

\(^{83}\) McCulloch, “1962,” 212.


\(^{85}\) Gyant, “Reform or Revolution?,” 614.
which stipulated that men were expected to occupy roles of traditional and highly visible leadership, while the role of women was far more obscure and less readily recognized. Murray confirms this disparate dynamic in her speech, stating that there is “the tendency to assign women to a secondary, ornamental or 'honoree' role instead of the partnership role in the Civil Rights Movement which they have earned by their courage, intelligence, and dedication.” By addressing the ongoing struggles faced by African-American women, despite significant strides toward the ultimate goal of racial equality, Murray is intellectually analyzing the Civil Rights Movement in terms of its gendered implications for the African-American community as a whole. Her conclusion that black women need to assume more positions of leadership in order to assert themselves as gender equals in the fight for civil rights, suggests that she is trying to encourage women to expand their perception of themselves as active and visible contributors to society.

In conclusion, the rhetorical contributions of African-American women to the Civil Rights Movement were often ignored or de-emphasized in favor of the abundant and charismatic orations of their male counterparts. As a result, many of their speeches were never recorded and those that remain intact are rarely celebrated. However, this lack of attention to black female speechcraft of the Civil Rights Movement should by no means be interpreted as an understandable avoidance of historical material that is not worth investigating; in fact, the complete opposite is true. Many African-American women understood that provocative speechcraft was a powerful tool for motivating listeners to take action and lend their efforts to the ongoing fight for racial equality. By adding a religious element to their public addresses, black women were able to create powerful and deeply ingrained associations between the spiritual integrity of African Americans and the concept of social equality. Their effective uses of symbolism and impassioned language were designed to elicit emotional responses from their audiences, and their intellectual grasp of the movement allowed them to make complex statements regarding the future implications of equality for the black community. In their speeches and public addresses, African-American women proved themselves to be capable of enormous feats of expressive oration, and demonstrated the integral nature of their participation in the Civil Rights Movement.

86 Gyant, “Reform or Revolution?,” 644.
88 Ibid., 240.
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