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Black Sophists: A Critique of Demagoguery

Abstract

This dissertation investigates the narrative strategies and performative devices of African-American politics in the post-civil rights era. My inquiry focuses on demagoguery--a term dating from classical antiquity--in order to implicate it in African-American political discourses, in particular those of Tavis Smiley's former State of the Black Union, 2000-2010. Indeed, I posit that Smiley's former annual event is an important site for thinking about modern black demagoguery and the aestheticization of black politics. Through close readings and original transcriptions of Louis Farrakhan (b. 1933), Cornel West (b. 1953), and Michael Eric Dyson (b. 1958), I show that the inevitable practice of demagoguery--what the dissertation theorizes as the "allegorical," "epideictic," and "polytropic" modes of emplotment--now threatens to undermine the political opportunities afforded by the success of the modern civil rights movement, even though it sustains the illusion, today, of an autochthonous black public sphere.

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Garry J. Bertholf

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BLACK SOPHISTS: A CRITIQUE OF DEMAGOGUERY

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Garry James Bertholf

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ABSTRACT

BLACK SOPHISTS: A CRITIQUE OF DEMAGOGUERY

Garry J. Bertholf

Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr.

This dissertation investigates the narrative strategies and performative devices of African-American politics in the post-civil rights era. My inquiry focuses on demagoguery—a term dating from classical antiquity—in order to implicate it in African-American political discourses, in particular those of Tavis Smiley’s former State of the Black Union, 2000-2010. Indeed, I posit that Smiley’s former annual event is an important site for thinking about modern black demagoguery and the aestheticization of black politics. Through close readings and original transcriptions of Louis Farrakhan (b. 1933), Cornel West (b. 1953), and Michael Eric Dyson (b. 1958), I show that the inevitable practice of demagoguery—what the dissertation theorizes as the “allegorical,” “epideictic,” and “polytropic” modes of emplotment—now threatens to undermine the political opportunities afforded by the success of the modern civil rights movement, even though it sustains the illusion, today, of an autochthonous black public sphere.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENT.....IV

ABSTRACT.....V

PROLEGOMENON: THE AESTHETICIZATION OF “CHARISMATIC
AUTHORITY”: OR, MODERN BLACK DEMAGOGUERY.....1

CHAPTER 1: SPECTERS OF DEMAGOGUERY: THE *LONGUE DURÉE*.....6

CHAPTER 2: THE CULT OF DEMAGOGUERY: LOUIS FARRAKHAN’S “TRAGIC
DILEMMA”.....36

CHAPTER 3: THE SOUNDTRACK TO DEMAGOGUERY: MICHAEL ERIC
DYSON, *EPIDEIXIS*, AND THE UTILITY OF THE LYRIC.....84

CHAPTER 4: CORNEL WEST, *POLYTROPOS*, AND THE POLITICS OF
KINGMAKING: THE RISE (AND FALL?) OF TAVIS SMILEY.....133

CONCLUSION: ON THE BLACK PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL’S PRIVATE USE OF
REASON; OR, THE BLACK PETIT BOURGEOIS “PUBLIC SPHERE”.....173
 WHAT IS DEMAGOGUERY?.....188

BIBLIOGRAPHY.....191

Prolegomenon

**THE AESTHETICIZATION OF “CHARISMATIC AUTHORITY”:
OR, MODERN BLACK DEMAGOGUEURY**

“Charismatic leadership has emerged in all places and in all historical epochs. . . . Since the time of the constitutional state, and definitely since democracy has been established, the ‘demagogue’ has been the typical political leader in the Occident.”

—Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” 1919

It is fair to say that some of the most seminal works on affective (commonly called “prophetic”) black politics have been couched in Max Weber’s sociology of “charismatic authority”; but few have taken as their aim the understanding of changing institutional apparatuses and media for the creation and dissemination of demagoguery, and new technologies and machinery by which it is reproduced and transmitted.¹ Indeed, technological shifts have opened new outlets and introduced new networks for African-Americans to engage in political activity outside of the so-called “black church,” upending previous notions of traditional or appropriate situations for experiencing black politics. What we call *demagoguery* today, then, is a new practice, in the sense that it

¹ Some works are particularly noteworthy: Stephen H. Marshall, *The City on the Hill from Below: The Crisis of Prophetic Black Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 173-175; Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This!: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), xv, 5-6, 10, 51, 61, 76, 86-101, 132; Barbara D. Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 14, 44, 98, 104, 115, 272; and Fredrick C. Harris, *Something Within: Religion in African-American Political Activism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 14, 33, 147, 163, 183.

most probably bears very little resemblance to Weber's original typology, or perhaps even to what W. E. B. Du Bois once meant by that term.²

In *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), for example, Du Bois pursues his early preoccupation with demagoguery in more specifically religious directions:

The Baptist minister is the elected chairman of a pure democracy, who, if he can command a large enough following, becomes a virtual dictator; he thus has the chance to be a wise leader or a demagogue, or, as in many cases, a little of both. . . . the ranks of the clergy are overcrowded and they present all degrees, from excellent and well-trained spiritual guides to blatant demagogues.³

But this is not the worst. Indeed, Du Bois' anxieties about religion seem to have come to a head in *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (1935):

. . . to most of the four million black folk emancipated by civil war, God was real. They knew Him. They had met Him personally in many wild orgy of religious frenzy, or in the black stillness of the night. His plan for them was clear; they

² W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Demagog" in *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*, April 1922, 252.

³ Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1899), 112-115.

were to suffer and be degraded, and then afterwards by Divine edict, raised to manhood and power; and so on January 1, 1863, He made them free.

It was all foolish, bizarre, and tawdry. Gangs of dirty Negroes howling and dancing; poverty-stricken ignorant laborers mistaking war, destruction and revolution for the mystery of the free human soul . . .⁴

Clearly, Du Bois understands religion and the “arts of the demagogue” alike—that is, as distractions from “real” politics.⁵ In stark contrast to Du Bois (and any number of other committedly pessimistic scholars, cf., Carter G. Woodson’s *History of the Negro Church*, Benjamin E. Mays’ *The Negro’s Church* and *The Negro’s God as Reflected in His Literature*, Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, St. Clair Drake’s and Horace Cayton’s *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, and E. Franklin Frazier’s *The Negro Church in America* to name a few) Zora Neale Hurston, Hortense Powdermaker, and Arthur Fauset, for examples, were much more anthropological in their treatment of African-American religion.⁶

In *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (2008), Barbara Savage cautions against “scholarly notions about the incompatibility of charismatic forms of religion and activism.” “This short-sightedness,” writes Savage, “speaks . . . to the inherent limitations of the tools of empiricism and intellectualism, especially in their

⁴ Du Bois, “The Coming of the Lord” in *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1935), 124.

⁵ “. . . that he cannot be bribed or led astray by the arts of the demagogue”; see Du Bois, *The Negro Church* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1903), 205.

⁶ Savage, “Illusions of Black Religion” in *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us*.

encounter with religion.”⁷ Politics and religion, it turn out, are not necessarily mutually exclusive alternatives. “During the civil rights movement,” writes Savage, “the perception emerged that black religion and politics were innately compatible and mutually reinforcing.”⁸

To be sure, the formal qualities of what I am calling modern black demagoguery overlap more or less neatly with those of charismatic leadership. Indeed, the demagogic narrative strategies and performative devices that I theorize below come to seem expressive only as simulacra repeating earlier “charismatic” gestures of black (and especially Baptist) preachers. At the same time, however, this dissertation takes up questions of charismatic authority beyond its appropriateness in political and religious contexts, calling our attention to the importance of technology and how it necessarily complicates the debate to which Savage is referring (though even here we need to remember that the religion/politics debate is ongoing). This is the most distinctive departure of my study from previous ones: the argument that the aestheticization of black politics increases the illusion, today, of a transparent, accountable, and autochthonous black public sphere.

Let it be said clearly, this dissertation does not rehabilitate perennial questions about the relation between charismatic authority and organized political activism, nor does it weigh into the debate about the kind of institutional apparatus needed for social movements to emerge and succeed.⁹ Instead, I argue that Tavis Smiley’s former State of

⁷ Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us*, 14.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 270.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 272.

the Black Union is an important site for thinking about the phenomenon of modern black demagoguery different than charismatic authority, even though the former has any number of “charismatic” trappings. What Weber calls the charismatic leader, however, is now defunct, since for many the act of consuming Smiley’s event was its *raison d’être*. What the modern black demagogue offers his audience today, therefore, is quite simply ephemeral catharsis without dangerous political consequences. What the State of the Black Union forces us to think about, in this regard, then, is not the (false) dichotomy between religion and politics—a dichotomy whose chasmal divide has already been deconstructed—but to entertain the possibility that with the aestheticization of black politics has come the commodification of charismatic authority itself.

Chapter One

SPECTERS OF DEMAGOGUERY: THE *LONGUE DURÉE*¹⁰

On Saturday, March 20, 2010, Tavis Smiley played ringmaster to a circus of black demagogues at Chicago State University. Indeed, Father Michael Pfleger’s invocation provided the inevitable curtain-raiser to the final plenary session of The Smiley Group, Inc. The show was broadcast live and featured performances by Michael Eric Dyson, Cornel West, Jesse Jackson, and Louis Farrakhan to name a few. Anyone acquainted with Smiley’s former annual State of the Black Union, therefore, will know well the spectacle here described. Indeed, the only revision here is the title under which it was advertised, “We Count! The Black Agenda is the American Agenda.” But this sideshow and its

¹⁰ “The *longue durée* is the endless, inexhaustible history of structures and groups of structures. For the historian structure is not just a thing built, put together; it also means permanence, sometimes for more than centuries (time too is a structure). This great structure travels through vast tracts of time without changing; if it deteriorates during the long journey, it simply restores itself as it goes along and retains its health, and in the final analysis its characteristics alter only very slowly”; see Fernand Braudel, *On History*, trans. Sarah Matthews (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 75; “what Fernand Braudel would call the ‘*longue durée*’ but which I prefer to call ‘*anthropological time*’ [emphasis mine]—a time made up of overlaps, new beginnings, and sometimes sudden innovations drawing from a very ancient cultural fount and practically common to all humanity. . . . time characterized less by the slowness of its changes . . . or by its cyclical nature than by its ability to always recycle the same elements, returning to its past, copying itself without repeating itself exactly”; see André Burguière, *The Annales School: An Intellectual History*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 61; 233.

prequels are a provocation to me, since they raise the subject of this dissertation: the phenomenon of modern black demagoguery.

Tavis Smiley's former annual State of the Black Union—which functioned as a kind of “community theater” for African-Americans to give vent to their growing disillusionment with American politics—was an important stomping ground for the modern black demagogue and *his* fan base.^{11,12} Indeed, most of my interventions begin and engage directly with the State of the Black Union. Nevertheless, before we come to grips with some of the most recent and more compelling manifestations of modern black demagoguery, we need pause only briefly here to take account of a few works to which we would no doubt do well to pay heed. Michael Signer's *Demagogue: The Fight to Save Democracy from Its Worst Enemies* (2009) offers a good point of departure, not just because it is perhaps the most comprehensive writing on demagoguery to date, but also, more significantly, because it fails to appreciate and betrays an ignorance of modern black demagoguery.

¹¹ “These public and private spaces provide audiences with a place to negotiate with others—in a highly social way—what cultural expressions . . . mean”; see Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., “It Just Stays with Me All of the Time: Collective Memory, Community Theater, and the Ethnographic Truth” in *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 77; “Elegant *surface splendor* is the hallmark of these mass theaters . . . their glamour aims at edification. . . . the architecture does perhaps bombard the patrons in its attempt to create an atmosphere. . . . The community of worshippers . . . can be content, for its gathering places are a worthy abode”; see Siegfried Kracauer, “Cult of Distraction: On Berlin's Picture Palaces” in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed., trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 323.

¹² It would seem (and will become clear below) that modern black demagoguery is a deeply gendered phenomenon, at least at the State of the Black Union.

No one can read Michael Signer's *Demagogue* and have left any illusions about demagoguery, apart from the fact that its only practitioners have been white. Notwithstanding Signer's high pretensions to exhaustiveness—that is, he attends thoughtfully to the history of demagoguery from classical antiquity to the present—it is precisely African-American history that is missing from his account. Perhaps we cannot expect to find, in a history of demagoguery already sweeping, histories of black demagogues as well. But in so far as Signer's *Demagogue* broaches “Demagoguery in America,” the title of the second and second-longest chapter of his book, it ought to come to grips with the emergence and significance of the modern black demagogue.

Signer's unshakeable faith in James Fenimore Cooper's *The American Democrat, or Hints on the Social and Civic Relations of the United States of America* (1838) has him disqualifying Louis Farrakhan, for example, after failing the demagogue test. “As Cooper recognized,” writes Signer, “true demagogues meet four rules: (1) They fashion themselves as a man or woman of the common people, as opposed to the elites; (2) their politics depends on a powerful, visceral connection with the people that dramatically transcends ordinary political popularity; (3) they manipulate this connection, and the raging popularity it affords, for their own benefit and ambition; and (4) they threaten or outright break with established rules of conduct, institutions, and even the law.”¹³ According to Signer, then, Farrakhan meets neither the third nor fourth rules.

¹³ Michael Signer, *Demagogue: The Fight to Save Democracy from Its Worst Enemies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 35.

(Signer’s misreading here of Farrakhan will be taken up in the second chapter so that my reader may see for her/himself what the venerable minister brings of his own to Cooper’s quadripartite classification.) Indeed, Cooper’s analysis becomes something of a litmus test for Signer’s own demagogues, who are contingent on or overdetermined (and in Farrakhan’s case overlooked!) according to those four criteria.¹⁴

What we call *demagoguery*—what I am calling modern black demagoguery—is a new practice, in the sense that it seldom brings to mind those ancient qualities ascribed to it in the *Rhetoric* or most probably bears even very little resemblance to what Du Bois once meant by that term.¹⁵ For Aristotle, the demagogue (or “leader of the people”) championed the cause of the multitude with whom he curried favor and from whom he found political empowerment.¹⁶ Already in 1897, however, black writers (Du Bois among

¹⁴ Cooper’s quadripartite classification of the demagogue rears its head time and again in the hermeneutic passages of Signer’s *Demagogue*; *Ibid.*, 37, 93, 114-115, 126.

¹⁵ See W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Demagog [sic],” *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*, April 1922, 252; “The Conservation of Races” in *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 24; “Back to Africa” in *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, 333; “The Talented Tenth: Memorial Address” in *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, 352; “A Lunatic or a Traitor” in *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, 340; “Marxism and the Negro Problem” in *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, 543; “The Negro Since 1900: A Progress Report” in *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, 416; *The Philadelphia Negro* (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 112, 115; *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Signet Classic, 1995), 46, 82, 136, 196; *Black Folk Then and Now: An Essay in the History and Sociology of the Negro Race* (New York: Henry Holt, 1945), 188; *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward An Autobiography of a Race Concept* (Piscataway: Transaction, 2002), 195, 217, 303; *The World and Africa: An Inquiry into the Part Which Africa Has Played in World History* (New York: International Publishers, 1965), 193, 236.

¹⁶ “Now there are two kinds of demagogy, one which functions within the ranks of the few themselves (for a demagogue can arise even when there are very few indeed), the other when members of an oligarchy act as demagogues to the common crowd. . . . Of the second, a good example was Larissa, where the Citizen-Guardians played the demagogue to the common crowd because they were elected by them. . . . also where the courts are not manned by the citizen-body, for demagogy to influence verdicts may lead to change in constitution”; see Aristotle, “Why Oligarchies are Overthrown” in *The Politics*, ed.

them) opened out the term to suggest also opportunism, *ad hominem* rhetoric, and political chicanery.¹⁷

In April 1922, W. E. B. Du Bois published an editorial in the *Crisis*, which has hitherto remained untheorized. Unsurprisingly, Marcus Garvey plays the tacit culprit in an all-too-familiar Du Boisian polemic titled “The Demagog [*sic*].” Even though Garvey himself goes unmentioned in the text, the editorial’s title refers, no doubt, to Marcus Garvey.¹⁸ In this piece and elsewhere Du Bois is relentless in his denunciation of Garvey’s so-called demagoguery. Indeed, there is so much in “The Demagog [*sic*]” that prefigures later etymologies of that term that I will use Du Bois’ polemic as the originary point and urtext alongside and against which Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* and Malcolm X’s autobiography, respectively, will be compared, especially since most

Trevor J. Saunders, trans. T. A. Sinclair (New York: Penguin, 1992), 315. “When states are democratically governed according to law, there are no demagogues, and the best citizens are securely in the saddle; but where the laws are not sovereign, there you find demagogues. The people become a monarch, one person composed of many, for the many are sovereign, not as individuals but as an aggregate. . . . such a people, in its role as a monarch, not being controlled by law, aims at sole power and becomes like a master, giving honour [*sic*] to those who curry its favor. Such a democracy is the counterpart of tyranny among monarchies. . . . while the people is sovereign over all, *they* [emphasis his] rule over the people’s opinion, since the multitude follows their lead”; see Aristotle, “Varieties of Democracy” in *The Politics*, 250-251.

¹⁷ “Meanwhile *demagogy* and *demagogie*, fw *demagogós*, Gk, rw *demos*—people, *agogós*—leader, *agein*—lead, carried from the Greek the predominantly unfavourable sense, of ‘irresponsible agitator’ rather than ‘popular leader’, in a familiar kind of political prejudice”; “The sense of representing **popular** interests and values has survived, but is often overridden by either (a) right-wing criticism of this, as in *demagogy*, which has moved from ‘leading the people’ to ‘crude and simplifying agitation’ . . .”; see Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Revised ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 97, 238.

¹⁸ David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and The American Century, 1919-1963* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000), 77-78; Colin Grant, *Negro With a Hat: The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey and His Dream of Mother Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 326.

secondary literature on these two most famous primary texts barely mentions or passes quickly over the fact that each offers an analysis of demagoguery.

It is important to note that even as Du Bois polemicized against him, Marcus Garvey attracted an ostensibly unprecedented following; and Garveyism captured—even if only for a short while—the zeitgeist of the late 1910s and early 1920s.¹⁹ Needless to say, Garvey accomplished this despite the accusations of lunacy and subterfuge Du Bois leveled against him.²⁰ What is perhaps most striking about “The Demagog [*sic*]” is Du Bois’ prescient class consciousness. Here Du Bois calls our attention to the divisive consequences of Garvey’s classism. “But it is permanently dangerous,” writes Du Bois, “only as the Demagog [*sic*] finds the cleft between our incipient social classes wide and growing.”²¹ Indeed, Du Bois’ attention to class here is one of the most distinctive departures of this debate from its predecessors, particularly the Du Bois-Washington controversy. As David Levering Lewis explains, “In simplest terms, Washington and Du Bois had competed for and split the allegiances of the same class formation.”²² After Washington, however, that same constituency began to polarize into at least two competing social classes. Despite his seemingly ambivalent attitude toward the emergent class of “low intelligence and poverty,” Du Bois issues a clarion call for racial solidarity:

¹⁹ I call Garvey’s following “*ostensibly* [emphasis mine] unprecedented” because “black people pursued very different kinds of strategy during the period between Hayes-Tilden and white supremacist consolidation. The Colored Farmers Alliance, linked with the Populist movement, claimed at its crest over 1,250,000 members”; see Adolph Reed, Jr., *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 26.

²⁰ “A Lunatic or a Traitor” in *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 340-342.

²¹ April 1922): 252.

²² Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and The American Century, 1919-1963*, 252.

“the ties between our privileged and our educated and ignorant, our rich and poor, our light and dark, are not what they should be and what we can and must make them.”²³

Outside of his class critique of demagoguery, then, Du Bois pursues his preoccupation with Garvey’s politics in more premonitory terms: “He will come,” writes Du Bois, “to lead, inflame, lie and steal. He will gather large followings and then burst and disappear. Loss and despair will follow his fall until new false prophets arise.”²⁴ In “The Demagog [*sic*],” moreover, Du Bois identifies a number of platitudes from which Garvey makes his appeal, including ““They are ashamed of their race,”” ““They are exploiting us,”” and ““They are copying the white man’s color line”” to name a few (““They,”” of course, referring to the upper echelons of “New Negroes”).²⁵ But, despite all of Garvey’s “exaggerations and dishonesty,” Du Bois admits that there exists a “kernel of truth” about class in his rhetoric that “the demagog [*sic*]” uses to destabilize legitimate leadership.

The shifting fault lines of African-American politics—and American politics in general—is captured here in Du Bois’ anxious, outward gaze at his West Indian nemesis. More important than Du Bois’ curmudgeonliness, however, is the consistency with which he uses the term “demagog [*sic*]” to describe the politics of Garvey (and others?). By my informal count, there are at least two other canon regulars with whom the term gained currency: Frantz Fanon and Malcolm X. Central to both Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* and Malcolm’s autobiography is the phenomenon of demagoguery, and there is not

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

another African-Americanist to date who has taken the time or space to ruminate on the uses of demagoguery in this regard. An intellectual history or complete etymology of the nuanced uses of demagoguery in the African diaspora is well beyond the scope of this project. Doubtless idiosyncrasies in the practice or use of demagoguery would emerge should we move away from the heart of the disciplinary canon. That said, it is not just for the sake of coverage and convenience that I should focus my hermeneutics on Du Bois, Fanon and Malcolm, but also, more significantly, because the etymological foundations for the term have already been laid in their seminal work, not least in Malcolm's autobiography. Whereas Du Bois and Fanon both wrote against demagoguery, Malcolm embraces his own association with the term: "Yes," writes Malcolm in the antepenultimate line of his autobiography, "I have cherished my 'demagogue' role."²⁶ Fanon, however, very much like Du Bois, was anathema to the term.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon levels accusations of demagoguery against black intellectuals, who he describes as "vulgar opportunists," "magicians," and "arbiters of truth."²⁷ A close reading of Fanon's *Wretched* (cf., "On Violence" and "Grandeur and Weakness of Spontaneity"), therefore, reveals the importance of demagoguery as a precondition for and practice against which his entire politics of violence (or plea for *ethical* violence!) is predicated. Indeed, Fanon's insistence on violence stems from his anxiety about demagoguery, which he characterizes as "hot air, verbiage, bantering, and

²⁶ Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, ed. Alex Haley (New York: Random House, 1999), 389.

²⁷ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2004), 13, 52, 82.

futile agitation.”²⁸ For Fanon, the practice of violence was a viable, more egalitarian politics for “the people,” whereas demagoguery gave rise to demigods:

Even if the armed struggle has been symbolic, and even if they have been demobilized by rapid decolonization, the people have time to realize that liberation was the achievement of each and every one and no special merit should go to the leader. Violence hoists the people up to the level of the leader. . . . When they have used violence to achieve national liberation, the masses allow nobody to come forward as ‘liberator.’ They prove themselves to be jealous of their achievements and take care not to place their future, their destiny, and the fate of their homeland into the hands of a living god. . . . Enlightened by violence, the people’s consciousness rebels against any pacification. The demagogues, the opportunists and the magicians now have a difficult task. Any attempt at mystification in the long term becomes virtually impossible.²⁹

Needless to say, even as Du Bois and Fanon seem to agree on the qualitative elements of demagoguery, the question whether or not Du Bois and Fanon themselves are mutually implicated still beckons—that is to ask, are Du Bois and Fanon not also demagogues? (How the now infamous msnbc debate between Al Sharpton and Cornel West harks back to Fanon’s critique will become clear in the fourth chapter.)

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

Alongside Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X has also assumed the mantle of demagoguery. Indeed, Malcolm's ambition to vindicate himself and the practice of demagoguery has him "doing" etymological work in the fourteenth chapter of his autobiography: "Well, let's go back to the Greek, and maybe you will learn the first thing you need to know about the word 'demagogue.' 'Demagogue' means, actually, 'teacher of the people.' And let's examine some demagogues. . . . Socrates . . . Jesus Christ . . . Gandhi . . . Galileo . . . Martin Luther . . ." ³⁰ Malcolm's discussion of these historical figures, however, is ironically demagogic. They are invoked opportunistically in order to give himself authority over his readership. Indeed, demagogic writing like this might persuade an audience to read an autobiography hagiographically. What is striking about Malcolm's etymology here is the extent to which it rehabilitates the practice of demagoguery. According to Malcolm, then, the utility of the demagogue transcends those anxieties that Du Bois and Fanon both attach to the term. "I know," writes Malcolm, "that societies often have killed the people who have helped to change those societies." ³¹ For Malcolm, demagogues like himself are clearly more than just "teachers of the people" (by which he presumably meant "leaders of the people"). Indeed, they were philosophers, martyrs, iconoclasts and reformers. Needless to say, they were all men.

What is perhaps most striking about the etymology of demagoguery is our most promiscuous use of the term. Even though the meaning of the term came full circle for Malcolm, that the popular use of the term has held is unsurprising. Even Du Bois' and Fanon's anxieties about demagoguery seem unsurprising as soon as we move beyond

³⁰ Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 246.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 389.

Garveyism and decolonization to consider critiques of demagoguery across the *longue durée*. Similar anxieties can be felt behind the Progressive and postcolonial epistemes that Du Bois and Fanon inhabited. A surprising cast of classical *personae non gratae* were the philosophers and rhetoricians—interlopers—known collectively as the Sophists, who came to embody similar anxieties about the seductions of rhetoric.³² Demagoguery, it turns out, was always-already a catachrestic term.³³

During the classical epoch there seems to have been some controversy concerning demagoguery and sophistry alike. In *The Politics*, for example, Aristotle cautions against sophistic argumentation: “we must not trust those arguments of sophistry that are designed to delude the multitude, for the facts prove them false.”³⁴ Cautionary, indeed; but Aristotle’s polemic against demagoguery bears an uncanny resemblance to that of Fanon:

³² “Power did not always consider itself as power, and the secret of the great politicians was to know that power *does not exist*. . . . if power seduces, it is precisely—what the naïve realists of politics will never understand—because it is simulacrum and because it undergoes a metamorphosis into signs and is invented on the basis of signs”; see Jean Baudrillard, “Forget Foucault” (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2007), 63-64.

³³ “Gayatri Spivak evoked *catachresis*, a figure from classical rhetoric: the misapplication of words, concepts, and forms: ‘a concept-metaphor without an adequate referent,’ ‘reversing, displacing, and seizing the apparatus of value-coding,’ ‘pervert[ing] its embedded context’ (Bhabha 1994: 183; Spivak 1987). *Catachresis* describes postcolonial praxis as the willful disregard of decorum: mixing metaphors, making inappropriate conjunctions, switching codes to foreground the productive ‘friction’ of worlds which collide”; see David Richards, “Another Architecture” in *Classics in Post-Colonial Worlds*, ed. Lorna Hardwick and Carol Gillespie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 351-352.

³⁴ Aristotle, *The Politics*, 324.

It is the demagogues who bring about this state of affairs. When states are democratically governed according to law, there are no demagogues, and the best citizens are securely in the saddle; but where the laws are not sovereign, there you find demagogues. The people become a monarch, one person composed of many, for the many are sovereign, not as individuals but as an aggregate. . . . such a people, in its role as a monarch, not being controlled by law, aims at sole power and becomes like a master, giving honour to those that curry its favour. Such a democracy is the counterpart of tyranny among monarchies. Hence its general character too is exactly the same: both play the master over the better sort of person, and the decrees of democracy are the directives of tyranny; the tyrants flatterer is the same as, or analogous to, the demagogue, each having special influence in his sphere, flatterers on tyrants, demagogues on peoples such as I have described. They are able to do this primarily because they bring every question before the people, and make its decrees sovereign instead of the laws. This greatly enhances their personal power because, while the people is sovereign over all, they rule over the people's opinion, since the multitude follows their lead. Moreover, the accusers of the officials claim that the decision ought to belong to the people; the people need no second invitation, and so all the offices are brought low.³⁵

³⁵ Ibid., 250-251.

Indeed, the idea of a powerful individual “currying favor” with “the people” perturbed Aristotle and Fanon alike. Alongside Aristotle, then, Plato condemned the Sophists, whereas Aristophanes, for example, satirized them. More recently, in the modern episteme, philosophers have done much in the way of rehabilitating the Sophists (see, for examples, “The Political Work of Art” in Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* and Foucault’s “The Discourse on Language”).³⁶

“The greatest of all Greeks, Socrates,” writes Malcolm, “was killed as a ‘demagogue.’”³⁷ It is not clear, however, whether or not Socrates himself was a Sophist. His ostensible ambivalence about the Sophists and sophism has given rise to speculation

³⁶ “The cultivated Sophists, who were not erudite or scientific men, but masters of subtle turns of thought, excited the admiration of the Greeks. For all questions they had an answer; for all interests of a political or religious order they had general points of view; and in the ultimate development of their art, they claimed the ability to prove everything, to discover a justifiable side in every position. . . . the expert Sophist knew how to turn the subject of discussion this way or that way at pleasure, and thus the doors were thrown wide open to all human passions. . . . This Sophistic principle appears again and again, though under different forms, in various periods of History”; see G. W. F. Hegel, “The Political Work of Art” in *The Philosophy of History* (Mineola: Dover, 1956), 268-269; “For, even with the sixth century Greek poets, true discourse—in the meaningful sense—inspiring respect and terror, to which all were obliged to submit, because it held sway over all and was pronounced by men who spoke as of right, according to ritual, meted out justice and attributed to each his rightful share; it prophesied the future, not merely announcing what was going to occur, but contributing to its actual event, carrying men along with it and thus weaving itself into the fabric of fate. And yet, a century later, the highest turn no longer reside in what discourse *was*, nor in what it *did*: it lay in what was *said*. The day dawned when truth moved over from the ritualised [*sic*] act—potent and just—of enunciations to settle on what was enunciated itself: its meaning, its form, its object and its relation to what it referred to. A division emerged between Hesiod and Plato, separating true discourse from false. . . . And so the Sophists were routed”; “Ever since the exclusion of the activity and commerce of the sophists, ever since their paradoxes were muzzled, more or less securely, it would seem that Western thought has seen to it that discourse be permitted as little room as possible between thought and words”; see Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 218; 227.

³⁷ Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 246.

among classicists and philosophers alike. It seems plausible, then, that, like Malcolm, Socrates might have “cherished” his “demagogue role.” From this vantage point, twentieth-century critiques and defenses of demagoguery are unsurprising, indeed classical in origin. (African-Americanists would also do well to pay heed not just to demagoguery’s connections to sophistry, but to *epideixis* as well.)³⁸

³⁸ Betraying his apathy to consider this history, for example, is Henry Louis Gates, Jr., whose immaculate conception of a “truly indigenous black literary criticism” overlooks the important nexus between signifyin(g) and *epideixis*; see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xxii. “signifying sounds not too different from the traditional category of rhetoric known as ‘epideictic,’ a term used for a display piece, a speech the sole purpose of which is to put the orator’s gifts on display (*epideixis*), and not with any practical intention. Yet to assimilate black signifying to the ‘Eurocentric’ tradition of classical rhetoric is to lose ‘what we might think of as the discrete black difference.’ And so Gates takes pains to track the concept to Africa instead”; see D. G. Myers, review of *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Criticism*, by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The New Criterion* 8, no. 6 (1990): 62; for “epideictic oratory” see Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 110, 184-185, 246. Having begun his story *in medias res*, Gates’ mistake lay in not emphasizing that the rhetorical tropes of Esu that he theorized were, across the *longue durée*, always-already signifyin(g)—that is to say, the vernacular tradition that Gates mythologizes postdates “sophistic *epideixis*”; “Traditionally, the ‘invention of rhetoric’ is credited to the sophists”; see Jeffrey Walker, *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 26, 67. Clearly he understands the classical episteme as a condition of possibility; see Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 52, 81, 88. Yet *The Signifying Monkey* remains hinged on an effortful and ideologically overdetermined teleology of the African diaspora. Compare the following passages: “the presence of a monkey in the Yoruba myth, repeated with difference in Cuban versions, which stands as the trace of Esu in Afro-American myth, a trace that enables us to *speculate freely* [emphasis mine] on the functional equivalence of Esu and his African-American descendant, the Signifying Monkey”; “*For reasons extremely difficult to reconstruct* [emphasis mine], the monkey became, through a displacement in African myths in the New World, a central character”; “What is clear is that Esu’s role as the first interpreter survived the Middle Passage”; “It is as if Esu’s friend, the Monkey, left his side at Havana and swam to New Orleans”; “only the Monkey survived the passage from Cuba to the United States. Perhaps the racist designation of the Afro-American as a monkey informed the North American features of this figure. . . . And whereas the rich parallels between Esu and the Monkey *cannot be demonstrated historically* [emphasis mine], these are the rhetorical figures of the critic’s enterprise that I am positing a relationship between, a functional and rhetorical

Here we have moved well beyond the scope of Signer's most recent project. The alternatives to Signer's narrative that we have outlined are a testament to the reach of demagoguery, which no doubt continues to occupy what Robin Kelley has called "the black radical imagination."³⁹ In fact, demagoguery, as we have seen, has been a hotly contested issue for African-Americans across the twentieth century. Over four decades separate the publications of Du Bois' polemic and Malcolm's self-vindication, and yet Malcolm seems to have been a victim of the same sort of demagoguerization that Garvey experienced. Perhaps we cannot tell the story of twentieth-century demagoguery without Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler in it, but a compromise away from Signer's own disciplinary canon might have made room for demagogues like Garvey or Malcolm. Or again, casting a different light on Farrakhan would surely have enriched Signer's *Demagogue*. But, despite his Eurocentrism (or disciplinary determinism?), Signer's *Demagogue* does provide us with a good point of entry into thinking about the qualitative

equivalency and complementarity"; Ibid., 13-14; 15; 16; 20; 42. *Essentially*, for Gates (as for Melville Herskovits and Richard Price), all roads lead to Africa; "both Herskovits and Price share a fundamental assumption regarding the history and culture of peoples of African descent in the New World, namely, that their history and culture has to be anthropologically argued out in terms of an authentic past (whatever its name, whatever its modality) persisting in the present"; see David Scott, "That Event, This Memory: Notes on the Anthropology of African Diasporas in the New World," *Diaspora* 1, no. 3 (1991): 278. Needless to say, we might do well to connect the sophists to their modern outgrowths in positing demagoguery as a "contemporary sophistic"; see Susan C. Jarratt, "Sophistic Pedagogy, Then and Now" in *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 107.

³⁹ "The black radical imagination, as I have tried to suggest throughout this book, is a collective imagination engaged in an actual movement for liberation. It is fundamentally a product of struggle, of victories and losses, crises and openings, and endless conversations circulating in a shared environment"; see Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 150.

elements of demagoguery, so much so that we will use Signer as a touchstone for the next section of this chapter.

For the most part, Signer's *Demagogue* is an Aristotelian critique of the practice, which subscribes to the "demagogue-cum-tyrant" notion found in *The Politics*.⁴⁰ In fact, his subtitle (cf., "The Fight to Save America From Its Worst Enemies") functions as a kind of telos for Signer's monograph as a whole. "The demagogue," according to the book's dust jacket, "is a dangerous byproduct of democracy, an authoritarian leader who owes his initial rise to the democratic support of the masses and who will go to almost any extreme to expand his power."⁴¹ Indeed, the dust jacket goes so far as to describe demagogues as "fascinating, often violent usurpers of freedom."⁴² Between these ominous forecasts and the "Rally of Victory" (*Reichsparteitag des Sieges*), which appears as the cover art to the dust jacket, there is very little room for Signer's reader to interpret the demagogue otherwise. To be sure, Aristotle's anxieties about demagoguery, which found an echo in the writings of Du Bois and Fanon, come up time and again in the hermeneutic passages of Signer's *Demagogue*. "In most of these cases," writes Signer, "the leaders threatening to convert democracy into tyranny were demagogues: political figures who fashioned themselves as leaders of the masses and who would go to almost any extreme to hold and expand their power."⁴³ Chief among my concerns in this section, then, is the relationship between power and demagoguery, particularly the kinds of

⁴⁰ Signer, *Demagogue*, 39.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, dust jacket.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 20.

authority to which demagogues make their appeal or the kinds of audience over which they have authority; and here Signer's invocation of Cooper is most instructive.

According to Cooper, the demagogue's "politics," recalls Signer, "depends on a powerful, visceral connection with the people that dramatically transcends ordinary political popularity."⁴⁴ "This popularity," writes Signer, "enables the demagogue to carve out a space that he alone dominates, to undermine legitimate constitutional authority, and, in the most extreme instances, when democracy succumbs to tyranny, to create his own state within the state."⁴⁵ Signer's use of the word "visceral" here is especially telling, for it is the kind of catch-all that falls short of explaining fully the powerful grip of the demagogue to which Cooper was referring. Perhaps it is not so much that Signer forgets to theorize the aesthetics of demagoguery as that he cannot. To discern that history, we need to understand how, exactly, demagogues have carved out rhetorical spaces for themselves to dominate; or, how they connect viscerally with "the people" in order to dramatically transcend ordinary political popularity. These are important questions. In fact, if Cooper's quadripartite classification of the demagogue were still up for grabs, we might posit his first and fourth rules governing demagoguery as constitutive of the second rule, which is of greater significance to the question concerning aesthetics. To be sure, demagogues "fashion themselves as a man or woman of the common people, as opposed to the elites" *and/or* "threaten or outright break with established rules of conduct, institutions, and even the law" *in order to* create "a powerful, visceral connection with the people that dramatically transcends ordinary political popularity." Taking Cooper as

⁴⁴ Ibid., 35.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 36.

our own point of departure, then, we find that a foundation for an aesthetic theory of demagoguery has already been laid, a foundation from which we will engage modern black demagoguery along a trajectory Signer has not considered fully. However apposite, Cooper's third observation (i.e., "they manipulate this connection, and the raging popularity it affords, for their own benefit and ambition") is epiphenomenal to the question concerning aesthetics.

The modern black demagogue is, of course, known mainly for his flamboyant display of hydroponic rhetoric and histrionic talents. In fact, the grip of the demagogue, I will argue, is hinged on his repertoire of intellectual history, homiletics, and musical gestures. Indeed, modern black demagoguery is very much a performance; it requires of its practitioner, whether he be a politician in the literal or figurative sense of the term, the ability to move the masses by their own visceral fears and to transcend party politics. The perfection and performance of certain intellectual-historical, homiletic and musical tropes authorize his shtick. Intellectual history, religion, and music are the kinds of authority to which demagogues make their appeal; black (tel)evangelicals are the ideal audience over which they have authority. Once we consider that these performances are being broadcast live and consumed by megachurchgoers and voters alike, the blurring boundaries between constituencies and fan bases (or citizens and consumers) loom large.

What is ultimately at stake in this dissertation, however, might have less to do with aesthetics (i.e., our unshakable faith in and/or critical distance from the demagogue)

than with what I see as the demagogue's own "tragic dilemma."⁴⁶ This "tragic dilemma," then, is bound up both with something of what Roland Barthes calls "the tragic mode of the spectacle," or what Theodor Adorno would call the fetish character in demagoguery and the regression of listening, and what Walter Benjamin calls the *aestheticization of politics*.^{47,48,49} Louis Farrakhan's tragic dilemma, for example, inheres in the fact that, in order to keep pace with modernization, he must demagog inside the same culture industry which has sought his demagoguerization—that is to say, the media has more often than not caricatured him as an opportunist, *ad hominem* rhetorician, and political trickster—a demagogue. But what I am calling the demagogue's tragic dilemma (the antinomies of demagoguery?) describes the modern dilemma from which he has no escape because of the mutually conflicting and dependent conditions of mass politics. In other words, it would seem that the aestheticization (or aestheticized, mass mediation) of politics is a precondition for large-scale political efficacy. We need to take account of the ways in

⁴⁶ What I am calling the demagogue's "tragic dilemma" here most probably bears close resemblance to what David Scott meant by that term. "Framed by Aristotle's conception of hamartia or 'tragic flaw' and Hegel's idea of tragic 'collision,'" Scott issues a clarion call to read *The Black Jacobins*, for example, "as a tragedy of colonial modernity." "Toussaint," writes Scott, "is a tragic subject of a colonial modernity to which he was, by force, conscripted. His tragedy inheres in the fact that, inescapably modern as he is obliged by the modern conditions of his life to be, he must seek his freedom in the very technologies, conceptual languages, and institutional formations in which modernity's rationality has sought his enslavement"; see David Scott, "Toussaint's Tragic Dilemma" in *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 167-168.

⁴⁷ Roland Barthes, "The World of Wrestling" in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 16.

⁴⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening" in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays On Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (New York: Routledge, 2008).

⁴⁹ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 242.

which demagoguery and mass politics alike have been shaped and constituted by the media (i.e., the press, radio, television, and now the Internet) beyond the ken of the demagogues and politicians immersed in them. Perhaps the vicissitudes of mass politics were even beyond the ken of Du Bois himself, whose ostensible logocentrism (i.e., his own political thoughts were disseminated primarily through the medium of writing) might have foreclosed any magnanimous, more counterintuitive critiques of demagoguery. Not only politicking but the materiality and immediacy of politics itself transformed in the wake of the Industrial Revolution.⁵⁰ In moving away from an Aristotelian or Du Boisian critique of demagoguery, let it be said clearly, I am not excusing the demagogue, but neither am I accusing him of disingenuousness. Even Signer himself, whose monograph really metonymizes something of the fight to save democracy from its worst enemies, still understands the utility of the demagogue. As he explains, “demagogues occasionally can have a positive, progressive effect, if the system of law they subvert is intrinsically corrupt.”⁵¹ The time is ripe to ask how the coevality and coevolution of mass media and politics—and “the modern world, where radio and television afforded manipulative leaders entirely new opportunities to become demagogues”—might be linked to the early-twentieth-century discourse on black demagoguery and crisis of the modern black demagogue.⁵²

The grip of the demagogue after all is hinged and contingent upon many and various *suspensions of disbelief, quid pro quos* whereby audiences (and televangelical audiences more readily than others) tacitly agree to suspend, if only provisionally, their

⁵⁰ “He became an immediate sensation”; see Signer, *Demagogue*, 126.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 123.

better judgment in exchange for the promise of entertainment (cf. Adorno's and Horkheimer's "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*; demagoguery as a sort of opiate of the masses?).⁵³ In most cases, I would argue, the demagogue is even able to pull epistemological rank over the public intellectuals in attendance; and this is because the demagogue is, as the saying goes, preaching to the choir. Here, though, the public intellectuals, too, are at the mercy of the demagogue, whose passionate appeal runs counter to their counterintuition. The use value of Farrakhan, for example, is captured more pithily in Adolph Reed than anywhere else:

For many the act of consuming the event is the principal gratification. In that sense going to a Farrakhan speech is identical to going to a hip-hop concert; it is the happening place to be at the moment. Farrakhan is a masterful performer and spellbinding orator. He offers his audience a safely contained catharsis; visceral rebellion without dangerous consequences, an instant, painless inversion of power and status relations. As a talented demagogue, Farrakhan mingles banalities, half-

⁵³ "This image makes it easy to comprehend the social bases of the contemporary decay of the aura. . . . Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get a hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction. . . . the masses seek distraction"; see Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 223; 239; "Farrakhan has no power or influence in our official institutions. He can neither make nor enforce any law or public policy. He has no constituency outside his own small, esoteric organization (most estimates of the Nation of Islam's membership range between 20,000 and 30,000), which may even be in decline. His main claim to fame is that he commands the attention of a willing news industry that accords him visibility and the mercurial celebrity of an entertainer"; see Adolph Reed, Jr., "Behind the Farrakhan Show," *The Progressive* 58, no. 4 (1994).

truths, distortions, and falsehoods to buttress simplistic and wacky theories. The result is a narrative in which he takes on the role of racial conscience and, in Malcolm's old phrase, 'tells it like it is.' He cajoles, berates, exhorts, instructs, and consoles—all reassuringly, without upsetting the framework of conservative petit-bourgeois convention.⁵⁴

Alongside his pretensions to the Baptist Church (a politics of religious crossover?), Farrakhan's invocations of Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr., and biblical allusions to Genesis, Chronicles, Ezekiel, Matthew, and the Good Shepherd, for instances, all function as kinds of *deus ex machina* to prepare his audiences for cognitive dissonance—*suspension*—and resolution. The demagogue maneuvers these tropes, therefore, to make the present the mistress of the past and not the servant.

In the following three chapters, this dissertation will examine in depth the cult of demagoguery surrounding the black preachers, politicians, and public intellectuals—"leaders"—collectively known here as The Smiley Group, Inc. (not to be confused with the holding company by the same name—that is, unless otherwise noted). My central preoccupation in the next chapter, however, is with Louis Farrakhan. My performance history of the State of the Black Union, which recently celebrated its decadal anniversary,

⁵⁴ "The Rise of Louis Farrakhan" in Adolph Reed, Jr., *Class Notes: Posing As Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 50-51; and just like Malcolm, Farrakhan's rhetoric "stands in the way of making sense of the dynamics propelling Afro-American political life and is, of course, a demagogue's dream"; see Adolph Reed, Jr., "The Allure of Malcolm X and the Changing Character of Black Politics" in *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 221.

will include close readings of at least two performances of Louis Farrakhan for exemplary purposes. (I will also read closely Farrakhan's most recent performance at the "We Count! The Black Agenda is the American Agenda" "conversation.") Both of them epitomize his modern style of demagoguery. I have already mentioned that Tavis Smiley's former annual State of the Black Union functioned as a kind of "community theater" for African-Americans to give vent to their growing disillusionment with American politics and that it was an important stomping ground for the modern black demagogue and his fan base.⁵⁵ This was especially true for the venerable minister, Louis Farrakhan. In fact, there is so much in his 2005 and 2006 performances there that typify modern black demagoguery—its problematic features, to be sure, but its potentiality (*Entwicklungsfähigkeit*) as well—that the following chapter will engage directly with what I am tempted to describe as Farrakhan's demagogic *Gesamtkunstwerk*, focusing my hermeneutics on his performances of memory (storytelling?) and religion.^{56,57,58} Suffice it

⁵⁵ Ramsey, "It Just Stays with Me All of the Time: Collective Memory, Community Theater, and the Ethnographic Truth" in *Race Music*, 77; and Kracauer, "Cult of Distraction: On Berlin's Picture Palaces" in *The Mass Ornament*, 323.

⁵⁶ "One of the methodological principles that I constantly follow in my investigations is to identify in the texts and contexts on which I work what Feuerbach used to call the philosophical element, that is to say, the point of their *Entwicklungsfähigkeit* (literally, capacity to be developed), the locus and the moment wherein they are susceptible to a development"; see Giorgio Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?: And Other Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 12-13.

⁵⁷ Writing in 1936, Walter Benjamin anticipated the now defunct art of storytelling. In this context, if Farrakhan represents something of the Benjaminian storyteller, is his demagoguery an anachronism?; see Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov" in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 88-89, 83.

⁵⁸ The New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Lithonia, Georgia, and St. Agnes Baptist Church in Houston, Texas, played host to the 2005 and 2006 SOBU addresses, respectively; "One economic consequence of the movement's success was the creation of an expanded black middle class that now supports large, financially prosperous

to say that his hypermasculinist rhetoric is couched in homiletics, which shows little in the way of alternatives to reigning narratives about the politics of black religion.⁵⁹

Indeed, modern black demagoguery is a deeply gendered phenomenon. And not just because all of its major exponents are heterosexual men, but also, perhaps more significantly, when ethical questions arise (as they had more often at the State of the Black Union than in any other televised “community theater” of that magnitude) the “black agenda” seems to mean the political and moral concerns of black men. That his black female audience, for example, applauds Farrakhan’s clarion calls to restore “testicular fortitude”—one of his favorite masculinist gestures—speaks to Chris Rock’s well-known skit on black women fetishizing hip-hop that objectifies them.^{60,61} In 2010,

megachurches in major urban and metropolitan centers. As varied as African American religion itself, many of these churches have harnessed resources sufficient to enact effective political and community interventions”; see Barbara Dianne Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 273-274.

⁵⁹ “In the post-emancipation period, Frazier argued, an organized religious life was the key to the formation of a structured social life among the masses of black people. Although he relied on Woodson’s account of a heroic post-Reconstruction black church, Frazier emphasized that the churches offered a political arena to black men ‘who had never been able to assert themselves and assume the dominant role, even in family relations, as defined by American culture.’ This exercise of black masculinity was at the center of the churches’ function”; see Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us*, 111.

⁶⁰ Here Farrakhan is apt to ventriloquize Frederick Douglass’ “West India Emancipation,” a speech that Douglass first delivered at Canandaigua, New York, on August 3, 1857: “Frederick Douglass said, ‘Power concedes nothing without a demand.’ But power won’t even concede to a demand if the demand is coming from a weak constituency that looks like they’ve lost their *testicular fortitude* [emphasis mine]”; see Louis Farrakhan, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2006); “. . . because he had the ‘chutzpah,’ I guess you could say. That’s a Jewish term that meant ‘testicular fortitude’ . . .”; see Farrakhan, *We Count! The Black Agenda is the American Agenda*, which was broadcast via C-SPAN 2, March 20, 2010. <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/292635-7>.

“The link between self-help rhetoric and racial custodianship is as old as Booker T. Washington, the model of the organic racial leadership that Farrakhan articulates”; see

however, Julianne Malveaux “interpellated” Farrakhan for his inappropriate use of “testicular fortitude” and masculinist bent, which had hitherto remained unchecked by his interlocutors.⁶² This most uncommon interaction between Farrakhan and Malveaux will be fleshed out in the following chapter, but for now it was Malveaux’s ultimate inability to thwart Farrakhan that is crucial. It is surprising that Malveaux (and others!) downplayed the seriousness of her own clarion call to “not genderize [*sic*] the conversation.”⁶³ Indeed, Malveaux herself proceeded to laugh it off, sublimating her frustration into humor. “Well,” explained Farrakhan smirking, “I didn’t mean it that way, but thank you.” Breaking the awkward silence, then, was Michael Eric Dyson, whose penchant for the Dozens found him euphemizing Farrakhan’s masculinist language. “Ovarian audacity,” Dyson explained. Needless to say, the audience roared with laughter. Unfortunately, the utility of the joke here foreclosed the necessary problematization of the demagogue’s gender performativity. Farrakhan is, in this regard, omnipotent, currying favor with the public intellectuals only to pull epistemological rank over the feminists.

Adolph Reed, Jr., “The Rise of Louis Farrakhan” in *Class Notes: Posing As Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 59.

⁶¹ Adolph Reed’s close readings of Farrakhan’s heteronormative rhetoric and ideology, however, are in stark contrast: “‘What are you going to teach them, *foul, frivolous* woman who will lie down with a teacher to get a passing grade?’ (Note that the woman, not the teacher, is his target.)”; “women of any stratum are not likely to respond enthusiastically to his philosophy, which assigns them subordinate status in a patriarchal family, stresses childbearing and child raising as their main functions, and ties them to the domestic realm in a state of modified purdah”; see Adolph Reed, Jr., “The Rise of Louis Farrakhan,” 39; 50.

⁶² For the meaning of “interpellated”[*sic*] see Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: New Left Books, 1971).

⁶³ Julianne Malveaux, *We Count! The Black Agenda is the American Agenda*, which was broadcast via C-SPAN 2, March 20, 2010. <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/292635-7>.

Even though Malveaux was unsuccessful, it is precisely these kinds of intervention that are missing at the State of the Black Union. The affect of the demagogue, however, is so powerful as to render his audience powerless to do otherwise than to accept blindly the veracity of his stories. The demagogue, then, appears at first sight an omniscient narrator, whose prophetic voice is Holy Writ for the masses of African-Americans over whom he seeks authority. This cult of personality surrounding Louis Farrakhan, for example, has thwarted if not foreclosed any possibility of real-time critical reception and peer review.

The purpose of this first chapter has been at least twofold. Firstly, I have attempted for the very first time to bring together three disparate writings on demagoguery: (i) W. E. B. Du Bois' "The Demagog [*sic*]"(1922); (ii) "On Violence" and "Grandeur and Weakness of Spontaneity" in Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961); and (iii) *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965). To be sure, pursuing the history of demagoguery in more specifically synchronic or diachronic directions might have yielded a different but not necessarily a better etymology. In making this connection across the *longue durée*, however, demagoguery seems to have been a concern of paramount importance rather than thematic coincidence. From their writings on demagoguery it is clear that each wrestled in his own way with the unintended consequences of its practice and consumption.

The narrative that Du Bois spins is, again, overly cynical. "The Demagog [*sic*]" and the curmudgeonly prose in which it is conveyed is an indictment of Marcus Garvey, who Du Bois describes as a "false prophet."⁶⁴ But in doing so Du Bois creates something

⁶⁴ Du Bois, "The Demagog [*sic*]," 252.

of a false dichotomy that needs to be deconstructed. “Nevertheless,” writes Du Bois, “the ties between our privileged and exploited, our educated and ignorant, our rich and poor, our light and dark, are not what they should be and what we can and must make them.”⁶⁵ It is not only to debunk his myth about “our light and dark” (by which he presumably means “light-skinned” and/or “dark-skinned” Negroes [*sic*]) that I raise Du Bois’ false dichotomy, where phenotype is indicative of intelligence (?), but because “low intelligence and poverty,” according to Du Bois, increases susceptibility to demagoguery. Finally, Du Bois argues that the demagogue is a vested interest “as he dexterously fills his own pockets and wastes the pennies of the poor.”⁶⁶ Of course this harks back to Cooper’s third rule about the self-seeking nature of the demagogue.

In similar fashion, Fanon’s demagogue is likened to a “vulgar opportunist.”⁶⁷ On the other hand, Fanon’s critique of demagoguery offers an analysis of susceptibility different than Du Bois’:

Traditions in an underdeveloped country undergoing armed struggle are fundamentally unstable and crisscrossed by centrifugal forces. This is why the intellectual often risks being out of step. The peoples who have waged the struggle are increasingly impermeable to demagoguery, and by seeking to follow

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 13.

them too closely, the intellectual turns out to be nothing better than a vulgar opportunist, even behind the times.⁶⁸

For Fanon, it is as if the practice of violence somehow gives way to a kind of altered consciousness among the colonized, which desensitizes them to the cult of demagoguery surrounding the so-called intellectuals. In a sense, Fanon's philosophy of violence and praxis theory are truly Hegelian: "And it is only through staking one's life that freedom is won. . . . The individual who has not risked his life may well be recognized as a *person*, but he has not attained to the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness."⁶⁹

Malcolm X's autobiography is perhaps the most radical departure on demagoguery from its predecessors—more radical literally and ideologically, in spite of what Malcolm himself may have realized, than either Du Bois or Fanon. Etymology occupies several pages in his narrative and has Malcolm "doing" etymology in his chapter on black Muslims and up until the antepenultimate line of the Autobiography. Unlike Du Bois or Fanon, though, Malcolm rehabilitates the demagogue, praising, as it were, the courage of his convictions.

Altogether, then, my discussion of Du Bois, Fanon, and Malcolm is meant to propose alternatives (or counter-narratives!) to the Eurocentric approach that Signer's

⁶⁸ Ibid., 160-161.

⁶⁹ G. W. F. Hegel, "Independence and Dependence of Self-consciousness: Lordship and Bondage" in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 114.

Demagogue embodies, and the material and ideological foundations on which it rests. In doing so, therefore, I have sought to fill a lacuna in the discourse on demagoguery by connecting etymologically the phenomenon of modern black demagoguery to its classical antecedents. Indeed, the emergence of an African-American demagogic tradition *c.* 1900 was not unconnected to the decline of American gentility in general.⁷⁰

Here I have sought also to lay the theoretical foundations for an aesthetics of demagoguery to be taken up in the following chapters. Needless to say, the relationship between mass media and politics is paramount and constitutive of what I will continue to refer to as the demagogue's "tragic dilemma." Reconceiving the demagogue in this regard means departing from Aristotelian and Du Boisian critiques alike. Finally, Louis Farrakhan will be broached not just as an alternative to Signer's unventuresome choice of demagogues to represent the genre, but for exemplary purposes.

The chapter on demagoguery that follows is a performance history of Louis Farrakhan at the State of the Black Union, while the third and fourth chapters consider the curious role of the black public intellectual in that same space. Altogether they are an important pairing and meant to recapture something of the post-civil rights episteme in all of its performativity. The conclusion to be drawn for these and later chapters is that the unintended consequences of demagoguery are such that its practice and consumption threaten to undermine the efficacy of wider political campaigns for justice, and leave open to question the suitability of demagogues—political, religious, academic, musical or

⁷⁰ Stow Persons, *The Decline of American Gentility* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973).

otherwise—as the flag-bearers of revolution. At issue, it turns out, is the aestheticization of black politics and commodification of black demagoguery.

Chapter Two

**THE CULT OF DEMAGOGUERY:
LOUIS FARRAKHAN'S "TRAGIC DILEMMA"**

“Minister Farrakhan is a man for whom I have much respect . . . We have differences . . . we challenge each other. His eloquence of the scripture is not possessed by me; but I’m the possessor of my soul, and I know what I need to say. He is a part of us. He is not away from us. He is in our circle, and he should be heard. . . . Farrakhan is my brother, and I embrace him. He brings me wisdom, and passion, and insight—he makes me think!; and I like the relationship and I’ll continue to nurture it. And we will find each other somewhere on this journey in a way that is truly godlike.”

—Harry Belafonte, *The State of the Black Union*, 2006

On Saturday, February 26, 2005, Louis Farrakhan debuted at the State of the Black Union. The melodramatic performance he achieved there was attributable as much to the cult of personality surrounding the “Honorable Minister,” and his prophetic authority, as it was to his demagoguery. So compelling was Farrakhan’s performance there, then, that the other protagonists were surprisingly overshadowed, including Reverend Al Sharpton, Professor Cornel West, and Bishop Eddie Long to name a few. Indeed, 2005 marked not just Farrakhan’s debut as an interlocutor at the State of the Black Union, but also, more significantly, a watershed in the history of Tavis Smiley’s annual event. To be sure, the public-intellectual razzle-dazzle of Michael Eric Dyson and Cornel West, for examples, provided much entertainment in the past. But it was Farrakhan’s demagoguery that became the opiate of the black masses. The performance history of Louis Farrakhan at the State of the Black Union that follows aims to aestheticize Farrakhan’s demagoguery only to problematize its reception. Doing so, therefore, will allow us to shed light on the

demagogue's "tragic dilemma," which is bound up with the changing relations of demagoguery and technology, including televangelism, and the ubiquitous connections of demagoguery and metaphysics, including black spirituality and religiosity.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the State of the Black Union was an important "community theater" for African-Americans. Indeed, the yearly address was broadcast live and provided several prominent African-American men *and* women opportunities to wax political about the federal government's laissez-faire approach to the so-called "Negro Problem".⁷¹ Time and again, however, Smiley's political program had a tremendous evangelical effect. Not merely because most of the events took place at megachurches, but also because of Smiley's orthodox adherence to Christian liturgy. Indeed, the history of the State of the Black Union is riddled with invocations and benedictions of every conceivable kind. In a sense, the State of the Black Union became something of a site for black public worship, i.e., a simulacrum of the "black church." Indeed, Smiley's ritualization (or evangelization?) of black politics in this regard was strengthened immensely by the fact that most of his panelists were black preachers. That said, the State of the Black Union lent itself to the divine right of demagogues, who politicked with the force of Holy Writ. As "prophets," then, these demagogues ventriloquized the Word of God to curry favor with Smiley's audience.

⁷¹ Guthrie Ramsey, Jr., "It Just Stays with Me All of the Time: Collective Memory, Community Theater, and the Ethnographic Truth" in *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 77; and Siegfried Kracauer, "Cult of Distraction: On Berlin's Picture Palaces" in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed., trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 323.

Adding to the feeling that the State of the Black Union was a simulacrum of the “black church” was the fact that Tavis Smiley codified (commodified?) the salient points of his panelists. In 2006, The Smiley Group, Inc. published two missal-like texts: *The Covenant*, which became a New York Times bestseller; and *The Covenant In Action*. Both of them included an introduction by Smiley himself and an afterthought of Cornel West. In fact, Cornel West’s clarion call (cf., “A Call to Action”) in *The Covenant* prefigured the publication of the latter. While Smiley’s Introduction to *The Covenant* pays tribute to Cornel West, it does not acknowledge its debt to Louis Farrakhan or Harry Belafonte, whose words at the 2005 and 2006 State of the Black Unions, respectively, form the bulk of that Introduction. Indeed, even *The Covenant*’s title is a throwback to the very notion of “covenant” Farrakhan invoked in 2005. In similar fashion, there are at least three features of *The Covenant In Action* that have a similar evangelical effect. The first of these features is the table of contents, which enumerates Smiley’s ten covenants (commandments?). Secondly, Smiley’s penchant for edification is manifested in the first, catechismal appendix titled “*The Covenant Curriculum*,” which includes the warhorses (e.g., W. E. B. Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk*, Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*, and PBS’ *Eyes on the Prize*) and at the same time decontextualizes chapters (e.g., “Bling Bling . . . and Going Pop: Consumerism and Co-optation in Hip Hop” in Imani Perry’s *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*) from books which might unsettle Smiley’s readership if they were read as a whole. Finally, should his syllabus not suffice, the 74 pages accorded to the second appendix constitute Smiley’s “African-American History Timeline,” which

spans several centuries (c.476-2006) and culminates with the publication of Smiley's own bestseller.

Of course it is the televangelization of black politics, not the politics of black religion (cf., Barbara Savage's *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us*), or the ethics and aesthetics of black televangelism (cf., Jonathan Walton's *Watch This!*), that I am attempting to read closely here. Indeed, the dichotomy between black religion and politics has already been deconstructed. "It remains to be seen, then," writes Fredrick Harris, "if religion will maintain its strong influence on black political activism in years to come."⁷² To be sure, the grip of religion can still be felt (or seen!). In a sense, the State of the Black Union was the apotheosis of black religion posing as politics (and black politics posing as religion!).⁷³ What I am calling the televangelization of black politics is a new phenomenon, in the sense that it most probably bears very little resemblance to the "Age of Transformation" that Harris describes. Clearly, much has changed since the original publication of *Something Within*. The televangelization of politics, then, raises deeper questions about the use of new media and social networks for politicking and proselytizing alike. These questions, moreover, threaten to undermine the traditional ways in which activism has been discerned and defined. Not only activism but politics

⁷² Fredrick C. Harris, *Something Within: Religion in African-American Political Activism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 183.

⁷³ "A particularly insidious element of the reactionary momentum is the projection of the 'black church' or religiosity as the locus of black political authenticity and efficacy. This construction legitimizes privatism—as opposed to action directed toward public institutions—as a political strategy and to that extent urges quietism"; see Adolph Reed, Jr., "Notes to Chapter 5" (fn. 53) in *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 281.

itself has been transformed. Televangelizing, then, more than broadcasting per se, is a vehicle for indoctrinating the black masses already primed to “bear witness.”

There is much more at stake here than the airing of black America’s dirty laundry in public. Essentially, the State of the Black Union conflated a number of useful dichotomies, particularly the one between constituency and congregation.⁷⁴ The chief ideology separating a congregation (or fan base) from a constituency is that of fetishism. Clearly, the “wild orgy of religious frenzy” which came to a head during Reconstruction is rearing its head again, this time under the guise of politics.⁷⁵ The religious bent of the State of the Black Union, then, inevitably foreclosed the possibility of any meaningful political inquiry. Essentially, the effortful, evangelically informed environments that Smiley constructed were very much conducive to demagoguery. From their pulpits, then,

⁷⁴ “The discrepancy between spiritual authority and political respect was evident in 2005 when radio and television personality Tavis Smiley chose to hold his annual ‘State of the Black Union’ symposium at New Birth Missionary Baptist Church. When Tavis Smiley introduced Bishop Long as the Senior Pastor of New Birth, the crowd gave him a roaring ovation. . . . Further, Cornel West and Louis Farrakhan received standing ovations when West publicly challenged the bishop’s moral and political courage, or lack thereof, and Farrakhan likened Bishop Long to a mannequin in a shopping mall window who looks good but is unable to speak. . . . As stated from the outset of this book, we must never conflate what people do ecclesiastically with the choices they make politically. . . . Moreover, pejorative descriptions such as *otherworldly* and *apolitical* [emphasis his] obscure the complicated nature of African American religiosity and experience”; see Jonathan L. Walton, “Lift Every Voice: Authority, Ideology, and the Implications of Religious Broadcasting for the Black Church” in *Watch This!: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 214-215.

⁷⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Coming of the Lord” in *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1935), 124.

demagogues literally preached to the choir. This is the backdrop against which Louis Farrakhan's "tragic dilemma" needs to be understood.⁷⁶

Surprisingly, there is a dearth of critical scholarship on Louis Farrakhan. Even *The Farrakhan Factor* (1998), a compendium whose contributors include Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Michael Eric Dyson, and Stanley Crouch to name a few, falls short as an alternative to reigning narratives about the "religious demagogue."⁷⁷ Not that the cliché goes unmentioned; the contributors repeatedly allude to their case study as a "demagogue." But they do so opportunistically and uncritically. By default, then, Robert Singh's *The Farrakhan Phenomenon* (1997) is the most comprehensive examination of Farrakhan to date—even though the text itself is preposterously undercited. Of greater importance to a project like this, excepting Julia Gaber, is Adolph Reed, Jr., whose insight into "The Rise of Louis Farrakhan" is most instructive.^{78,79} But the appeal of

⁷⁶ "The whole spectacle is quite like the other mass-mediated melodrama . . . His main claim to fame is that he commands the attention of a willing news industry that accords him visibility and the mercurial celebrity of an entertainer"; see Adolph Reed, Jr., "Behind the Farrakhan Show," *Progressive* 58:4 (1994): 16-17. ". . . Farrakhan and Farrakhanism as a presence once threatening and exhilarating, dismaying and cathartic. Though blackness isn't exactly a religion, it has become invested with a quasi-religious structure"; see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Charmer," *New Yorker*, April 29, 1996, 131.

⁷⁷ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Charmer," *New Yorker*, April 29, 1996, 128.

⁷⁸ "[Farrakhan] relied on bastardized versions of religious thought to convey his messages, and . . . merits the label 'demagogue'"; see Julia Ellen Gaber, "Lamb of God or Demagogue? A Burkean Cluster Analysis of the Selected Speeches of Minister Louis Farrakhan" (PhD Diss., Bowling Green State University, 1986).

⁷⁹ "For well over thirty years he has propagated a vision of political separatism and a program of moral rearmament, 'self-help' business development, and an idiosyncratic brand of Islamic religion. . . . Farrakhan's wager is that he can build a personal following by asserting his apparent victimization as de facto evidence of political legitimacy. . . . How far that kind of ephemeral constituency can go is an open question. . . . For many the act of consuming the event is the principal gratification. In that sense going to a Farrakhan speech is identical to going to a hip-hop concert; it is the happening place to be at the moment. Farrakhan is a masterful performer and spellbinding orator. He offers his

Farrakhan's "masterful" and "spellbinding" declamatory style is reduced to triviality by Reed's likening it to hip-hop. "As a talented demagogue," writes Reed, "Farrakhan mingles banalities, half-truths, distortions, and falsehoods to buttress simplistic and wacky theories."⁸⁰ But even this does not suffice either to explain or to demystify the cult of demagoguery surrounding the minister—that is to say, in spite of all of his cheap conspiracy-theorizing, Louis Farrakhan has an extraordinary, indoctrinating effect. Granted that the effect might be ephemeral, the hermeneutic theories of Louis Farrakhan (or the manner of their delivery!) are fascinating.

Louis Farrakhan's demagoguery is a pastiche of sacred and profane styles; it uses humor, pathos, and Holy Writ in order to produce catharsis and *jouissance* in the multitude; and it achieves its aim not just through laughter, but also, more significantly, through those vernacular tropes connected to the ring shout.⁸¹ Since demagoguery

audience a safely contained catharsis; visceral rebellion without dangerous consequences, an instant, painless inversion of power and status relations. As a talented *demagogue* [emphasis mine], Farrakhan mingles banalities, half-truths, distortions, and falsehoods to buttress simplistic and wacky theories. The result is a narrative in which he takes on the role of racial conscience and, in Malcolm's old phrase, 'tells it like it is.' He cajoles, berates, exhorts, instructs, and consoles—all reassuringly, without upsetting the framework of conservative petit-bourgeois convention. . . . In sum, Farrakhan has become prominent in the public eye because he appeals symbolically both to black frustration and alienation in this retrograde era and to white racism, disingenuousness, and naïveté. . . . His racial essentialism has an appeal for many blacks in a purely *demagogic* [emphasis mine] way"; see Adolph Reed, Jr., "The Rise of Louis Farrakhan" in *Class Notes: Posing As Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 37, 49, 50-51, 58.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ "[Sterling] Stuckey regards the Negro spiritual as central to the ring and foundational to all subsequent Afro-American music-making. He noticed in descriptions of the shout that, in the ring, musical practices from throughout black culture converged in the spiritual. These included elements of the calls, cries, and hollers; call-and-response devices; additive rhythms and polyrhythms [*sic*]; heterophony, pendular thirds, blue notes, bent notes, and elisions; hums, moans, grunts, vocables, and other rhythmic-oral

achieves its aim through laughter, “shout” (broadly defined), and ovation, then, we need to think more carefully about how these bodily gesticulations arise from speech acts. From speech, they arise in many ways: repetition (especially signifyin’ and one-upmanship), satire, metaphor (particularly biblical and Koranic), allegory, diction (bombastic and vernacular), syntax, double entendre, and the manner of delivery (e.g., rhythm, tempo, timbre, pitch, dynamics, elocution, homiletics, etc.), to name a few.⁸² Needless to say, these qualities of demagoguery, not least the manner of delivery, belong to the province of music (and religion!) and not necessarily to speech proper. But the ability to curry favor musically with his audience is of great benefit to the demagogue. Perhaps his propensity for calypso has helped Farrakhan in this regard. All of these speech acts, at last, inform the style of narration, which brings us to the most important feature of demagoguery: the narrative. Despite his tendency to romanticize ad nauseam the Word of God (or Allah?), Elijah Muhammad, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Frederick Douglass, most of Farrakhan’s narratives are filtered through the “tragic mode of

declamations, interjections, and punctuations; off-beat melodic phrasings and parallel intervals and chords; constant repetition of rhythmic and melodic figures and phrases (from which riffs and vamps would be derived); timbral distortions of various kinds; musical individuality within collectivity; game-rivalry; hand-clapping, foot-patting, and approximations thereof; and the metronomic foundational pulse that underlies all Afro-American music. Consequently, since all of the defining elements of black music are present in the ring, Stuckey's formulation can be seen as a frame in which all black-music analysis and interpretation can take place—a formulation that can confirm the importance of the performance practices crucial to black musical expression. . . . Because the ring shout was a dance in which the sacred and the secular were conflated, I must note here the similar conflation—indeed, near-inseparability—of Afro-American music and dance in black culture, both in the ring and outside it”; see Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., “Ring Shout! Literary Studies, Historical Studies, And Black Music Inquiry,” *Black Music Research Journal* 11:2 (1991): 267-268.

⁸² Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

emplotment.”⁸³ Indeed, his narratives seem to revolve around at least three issues that continue to preoccupy him: (i) political solidarity (by which he presumably means identity politics); (ii) economic empowerment (or self-help); and (iii) mortification of the flesh (moral uplift and edification). Needless to say, Farrakhan’s narrative strategies often seem to be divided between the tragic and what I am tempted to describe as the allegorical (or didactic) mode of emplotment. Indeed, there is so much at the State of the Black Union that is paradigmatic of Farrakhan’s demagoguery, so much, finally, that displays his political and religious maneuvering and emplotting, that we need to look closely into his three cameo appearances at Smiley’s event.

The first of them, which raised the bar for Michael Eric Dyson and Cornel West, took place in 2005 at Eddie Long’s New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Lithonia, Georgia. The topic of conversation: “Defining the African American Agenda.” Farrakhan’s religious bent is realized at the onset: “A contract or a covenant,” says Farrakhan, “is between parties who intend to make their word their bond.”⁸⁴ Clearly, the operative words here are “covenant,” and the coupling of “word” and “bond.” Farrakhan begins, therefore, with an invocation of the first and fourth books of the Bible: Genesis

⁸³ “For better or worse, we no longer inhabit the present, and consequently Romance no longer answers a critical demand. I want to suggest that the mode of emplotment of tragedy comports better with a time of postcolonial crisis in which old horizons have collapsed or evaporated and new ones have not yet taken shape”; see David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 168.

⁸⁴ Louis Farrakhan, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 12 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2006). N.B., I have sought in my own transcriptions of the State of the Black Union to reproduce Louis Farrakhan’s words with as much fidelity to the original DVD as possible.

and Numbers, respectively. Compare Farrakhan's words above with the following two passages of the King James Version:

But with thee will I establish my *covenant* [emphasis mine]; and thou shalt come into the ark, thou, and thy sons, and thy wife, and thy sons' wives with thee.

(Genesis 6:18)

If a man vow a vow unto the Lord, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a *bond* [emphasis mine]; he shall not break his *word* [emphasis mine], he shall do according to all that proceedeth [*sic*] out of his mouth. (Numbers 30:2)

Indeed, this opening gesture receives a thundering ovation, including "shouting" of every conceivable kind. "Yes," shouts Cornel West, "yes!"⁸⁵ Even this seems not to affect Farrakhan, whose poker face is a part of his flawless public façade. Next, Farrakhan extrapolates to the prophecies of Ezekiel and to the fourth Gospel:

I think that it is proper and right that we make a *covenant* [emphasis mine] with our people, for the scripture says, 'Woe to the shepherd who feeds himself and not the flock. Should not the shepherd feed the flock?' The problem a lot of times is a

⁸⁵ Cornel West, *Ibid.*

disconnect between leaders and the people. Because most of the leaders, the scripture says, have been hirelings that flee when the wolf comes. But the Good Shepherd will lay down his life for the sheep.⁸⁶

The covenant between God and his people (i.e., Israel in the Old Testament; or, the followers of Jesus Christ in the New Testament), then, functions allegorically for Farrakhan, whose hermeneutic account of the Good Shepherd allows Farrakhan himself to play the martyr. Indeed, the above excerpt exemplifies a gesture made frequently in his demagoguery, where delusions of grandeur are common—his own, self-aggrandizing idea of biblical exegesis. Needless to say, Farrakhan’s critique here of black leadership predates the formal accusations of corruption (and pederasty!) leveled against Bishop Eddie Long. Farrakhan’s ability to recite passages of scripture from memory—his “eloquence of scripture”—let it be said clearly, is impressive and important.⁸⁷ Compare the excerpt above with the following two passages:

Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy, and say unto them, Thus saith [*sic*] the Lord God unto the shepherds; *Woe be to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! should not the shepherds feed the flocks* [emphasis mine]? (Ezekiel 34:2)

⁸⁶ Louis Farrakhan, *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ These words form Harry Belafonte form part of the epigraph to this chapter; *Ibid.*

I am the good shepherd: *the good shepherd giveth [sic] his life for the sheep* [emphasis mine]. But he that is an *hireling* [emphasis mine], and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth [sic] *the wolf coming, and leaveth [sic] the sheep, and fleeth [sic; emphasis mine]*: and the wolf catcheth [sic] them, and scattereth [sic] the sheep. (John 10:11-12)

Farrakhan's faithfulness to the original syntax of the Scriptures (as seen above) authorizes his shtick and gives him absolute authority over his audience. His ambition to politicize the sacred (or consecrate the political) has him modulating from the allegorical to the tragic mode of emplotment in the next breath. In the very next segment, Farrakhan produces his own, eschatological version of the master narrative, problematizing what Nathan Huggins has called the "dogma of automatic progress."⁸⁸ Here Farrakhan runs the gamut from tribal sovereignty, reparations (i.e., forty acres and a mule), and Jim Crow, to *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Farrakhan closes his first act with an invocation of the books of Chronicles:

⁸⁸ "The American dogma of automatic progress fails those who have been marginalized. Blacks, the poor, and others whom the myth ignores are conspicuously in the center of our present, and they call for a national history that incorporates their experience. Whatever shape that new national history will take, it will have to have racial slavery as a structural part of the founding edifice. . . . In writing our national history, we do so with a master narrative in our heads that sustains our collective sense of national purpose and identity, and resonates with our most compelling myths. That master narrative—with its dogma of automatic progress—cannot explain racial slavery and caste except as eddies of a grand, progressive, and ultimately engulfing current"; see Nathan I. Huggins, "The Deforming Mirror of Truth: Slavery and the Master Narrative of American History," *Radical History Review* 49 (1991): 26-27.

Let us make the right kind of covenant; and it is a hypothesis that was put before us by God himself in these words: ‘If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, forgive their sins, and heal their land’—that’s the covenant!⁸⁹

Here as elsewhere, when his demagoguery operates within the allegorical mode of emplotment, Farrakhan recalls the Scriptures verbatim. Compare the excerpt above with the following passage:

If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land. (2 Chronicles 7:14)

Coming in short order after so imposing a finale, then, is the crowd’s standing ovation. Perhaps what is most striking about this final crowd-pleaser, however, is the fact that it culminates in heterophony—that is, Farrakhan needs only speak the first three words—“If my people . . .”—in order to trigger the audience’s rehearsal of the verse in unison. It

⁸⁹ Louis Farrakhan, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 12.

is as if Farrakhan were here lining out a hymn for his congregation. In fact, the ovation that follows is so overwhelming that Tavis Smiley twice tells the crowd to “behave”.⁹⁰

One hour later, Farrakhan re-enters the fray. This time with an invocation of Frederick Douglass’ “West India Emancipation”⁹¹:

Frederick Douglass said, ‘Power concedes nothing without a demand.’ But power won’t even concede to a demand if the demand is coming from a weak constituency that looks like they’ve lost their *testicular fortitude* [emphasis his].⁹²

It is important to note that Farrakhan’s seamless integration of historical and biblical invocations sometimes makes it difficult to discern the narrative mode of his demagoguery (see, for example, the excerpt above). Indeed, his shift from the first- to the third-person narrative mode is less *audible* than it seems at first *sight*. In fact, upon hearing this excerpt for the very first time, one might be inclined to transcribe it thusly:

⁹⁰ Tavis Smiley, *Ibid*.

⁹¹ “This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. *Power concedes nothing without a demand* [emphasis mine]. It never did and it never will”; see Frederick Douglass, “West India Emancipation”(1857), Frederick Douglass Project, Frederick Douglass Institute for African and African-American Studies, University of Rochester, December 14, 2012. <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/index.cfm?PAGE=4398>. “. . . Farrakhan would at different points in his career make reference to his West Indian background [e.g., calypso]”; see Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 219.

⁹² Louis Farrakhan, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 12.

Frederick Douglass said, ‘Power concedes nothing without a demand. But power won’t even concede to a demand if the demand is coming from a weak constituency that looks like they’ve lost their *testicular fortitude* [emphasis his].’⁹³

In the first transcription, the right single quotation mark (’) before the word “But” signals the end of the quotation of Douglass and the beginning of Farrakhan’s own narrative voice. In the second, Douglass receives credit for everything up to and including “testicular fortitude.”⁹⁴ The “testicular fortitude” trope, it turns out, is a recurring motif in Farrakhan’s demagoguery. It is necessary here and elsewhere, that the heuristic demands of the reader rise against the demagogue, at times counterintuitively, in order to maintain the “critical distance” required for hermeneutics.^{95,96} Needless to say, Farrakhan’s

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ “Although Douglass was by no means entirely free of the influence of male-supremacist ideology and while the polemical formulations of his arguments often leave something to be desired, the essence of his theory that Black suffrage was a strategic priority was not in the least anti-woman. . . . Even Frederick Douglass was sometimes uncritical of the prevalent stereotypes and clichés associated with women. But his occasionally sexist remarks were never so oppressive as to depreciate the value of his contributions to the battle for women’s rights in general”; see Angela Y. Davis, “Racism in the Woman Suffrage Movement” in *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 77-78, 85.

⁹⁵ “. . . we seek to stress the importance of critical distance. Of a refusal, that is, to be seduced into treating the ideological tropes and surface forms of the culture of neoliberalism—its self-representations and subjective practices, identities and utilities—as analytic constructs. Life, under millennial capitalism, is neither a game nor a repertoire of rational choices. It is irreducible to the utilitarian pragmatics of law and economy or to methodological individualisms of one kind or another. Indeed, these and other theoretical

staccato pronunciation of “testicular fortitude” receives another, thundering ovation. Even Patricia A. Ford, who is seated immediately to Farrakhan’s right, applauds with laughter. “Careful now,” says Farrakhan, “I’m a Baptist preacher too!”⁹⁷ Indeed, Farrakhan pushes hard at the boundaries between Islam and Christianity, becoming, in the words of Paul the Apostle, “all things to all people.”⁹⁸

Turning to his trusty allegorical mode of emplotment, Farrakhan elaborates with confidence Douglass’ law of power and demand:

The generational gap is serious, but it’s written of in scripture. When Moses gathered the people in the wilderness, he spied the Promised Land. But there were

discourses are part of the problem. Critical disbelief, in pursuit of a reinvigorated praxis, is the beginning of a solution”; see Jean and John L. Comaroff “Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming” in *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*, ed. Jean and John L. Comaroff (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 45-46.

⁹⁶ I remember the first time I watched Louis Farrakhan at the State of the Black Union. Granted that I was channel-surfing YouTube when I first discovered his 2005 performance there, his demagoguery moved me in ways which rendered helpless my own critical faculty for judgment. In fact, I found myself taking him at his word, as it were, in spite of myself, or perhaps simply believing for the sake of entertainment.

⁹⁷ Louis Farrakhan, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 12.

⁹⁸ Compare with the following passage: “Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings”(1 Corinthians 9:19-23). “Louis Farrakhan, for his part, remains firmly tethered to the tradition of Christian homiletics”; see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “The Charmer,” *New Yorker*, April 29, 1996, 119.

some giants in the Promised Land. And the people were asked, 'Go in! We're with you.' And they said, 'Wait a minute, God. We would go, but the giants are there.' They had no faith that they could take the land from the giants. So, what did God say: 'Okay, you wander in the wilderness 'til you die out. And I will take your children, and they will inhabit the Promised Land.'⁹⁹

Here is described the frustrations of Farrakhan's futile attempt to mobilize the black masses, whose children are the only promise of futurity he can imagine. This excerpt is especially telling; it betrays Farrakhan's ability to improvise, if only colloquially. In fact, compared with the previous excerpts, this one takes all sorts of liberties with the scriptures below:

There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown. (Genesis 6:4)

And the Lord's anger was kindled against Israel, and he made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until all the generation, that had done evil in the sight of the Lord, was consumed. (Numbers 32:13)

⁹⁹ Farrakhan, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 12.

Farrakhan's invocation of the Promised Land (in the Bible) allows his narrative to segue into Martin Luther King, Jr.'s last speech: "Martin Luther King said, 'I been to the mountain top. I have seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but we as a people will get there.'"¹⁰⁰ Of course this is an abridged version of King's original speech.¹⁰¹ Needless to say, Farrakhan here piggybacks King, who is already operating within the allegorical mode of emplotment. In a sense, the "Promised Land" functions as a hyperlink to the always-already hypertextual Word of God. To be sure, there is only one degree (and never more than a few degrees) of separation between Farrakhan's demagoguery and the Bible. Indeed, it was this same kind of rhetorical ventriloquism that made it difficult to discern between Douglass and Farrakhan. Clearly, the grip of Farrakhan here is heightened, then, by the invocation of another (?) Baptist minister, not least by his invocation of King. Altogether, Douglass and King are important race cards for Farrakhan, who never misses an opportunity to stack the deck.

¹⁰⁰ Louis Farrakhan, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 12.

¹⁰¹ "Well, I don't know what will happen now; we've got some difficult days ahead. (Amen) But it really doesn't matter to with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. (Yeah) [Applause] And I don't mind. [Applause continues] Like anybody, I would like to live a long life—longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. (Yeah) And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. (Go ahead) And I've looked over (Yes sir), and I've seen the Promised Land. (Go ahead) I may not get there with you. (Go ahead) But I want you to know tonight (Yes), that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. [Applause] (Go ahead, Go ahead) And so I'm happy tonight; I'm not worried about anything; I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. [Applause]"; see "I've Been to the Mountaintop" (1968), Documents, The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, December 15, 2012. http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/ive_been_to_the_mountaintop/.

Farrakhan's exodus from King, however, takes an unexpected, Cartesian turn back toward the second book of the Bible. In the following excerpt Farrakhan issues a clarion call for epistemological freedom: "When we separate from a pharaohic [*sic*; by which he presumably means "pharaonic"] idea of mental slavery . . ." ¹⁰² Of course this subordinate clause harks back to the Exodus (i.e., the departure of the Israelites from pharaonic slavery in Egypt). From here, Farrakhan modulates to the tragic mode of emplotment by way of analogy:

Most of us who have access, who have wealth, who have quote—unquote, 'positions,' we are like mannequins in the shopping mall of democracy. When you go to the shopping mall, you see the mannequin. The mannequin is dressed in what you would like to buy. The mannequin can't talk; the mannequin can't walk. We got black people in 'power,' but they don't have power. . . . We have black people with money that we think are giants. But in the company of their white counterparts they are midgets [*sic*]. ¹⁰³

Before we make claims about white supremacy—say, its ability to overshadow black "mannequins"—we need to think more carefully about the punch line. What begins as a critique of superficial black leadership—an excellent start—is here undone by Farrakhan's ulterior motive to drive a wedge between the races. In context, however, this

¹⁰² Louis Farrakhan, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 12.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

divisive posturing makes sense. From all this, Farrakhan moves to a broader discussion about the politics of racial solidarity: “My teacher, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, said, ‘Our unity is more powerful than an atomic or hydrogen bomb.’”¹⁰⁴ From a different vantage point, Farrakhan’s invocation of Elijah Muhammad seems digressive, even opportunistic; or perhaps simply a way for him to boast his own intellectual genealogy. Nevertheless, Farrakhan uses Elijah Muhammad (as he does both King and Douglass above) to valorize himself. His next point returns us to the issue of black leadership. “We in leadership,” Farrakhan commands, “make a covenant with your people that you will never sell them out.”¹⁰⁵ A few moments later, in between laughter and applause, he takes to confirming his faith: “Oh, yes,” says Farrakhan, “I’m a Baptist preacher now.”¹⁰⁶ And like most Baptist preachers, he brings the house down:

In the thirty-seventh chapter of Ezekiel, there was some dry bones that were in a valley. And the bones were talking to one another; they were having a conversation about a contract. And, as they were having this contract, some of the bones said, ‘Our hope is lost, our bones are dried, we are cut off from our part. . . . Go back and read your scripture. Because when the Son of Man was set down in the valley that was full of bones he spoke to those bones and the bones and the bones rattled, but they never stood up. So, he went back to his sender as he said, ‘Lord, I have spoken to the bones.’ (And nobody has spoken to the bones like

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

black leaders and black preachers. Nobody speaks to the bones like a Reverend Jackson . . . T. D. Jakes . . . Bishop Long . . . Cornel West . . . Reverend Sharpton . . . The bones always listen . . . but they never get up, and they never do what they're supposed to do . . .) So, the Son of Man went back to his sender and said, ' . . . The bones been shakin' but there's still no life in them.' He said, 'Well, don't talk to the bones no more—prophesy to the winds!' . . . *All of this is a farce* [emphasis mine]! If we don't make up our minds today to make this contract, this covenant today, not with us and the Democratic party—to hell with the Democrats!; and to hell with the Republicans.¹⁰⁷

The standing ovation that followed his performance of this excerpt is a testament to the popularity of Farrakhan's demagoguery. Indeed, his pessimism and preoccupation with the ostensible apoliticity of the black masses come full circle. But, once again, Farrakhan's demagoguery is here undone by the punch line. This time his own

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.; compare with the following passage: "The hand of the Lord was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones, And caused me to pass by them round about: and, behold, there were very many in the open valley; and, lo, they were very dry. And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, thou knowest [*sic*]. Again he said unto me, Prophesy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus saith [*sic*] the Lord God unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live: And I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and ye shall live; and ye shall know that I am the Lord. So I prophesied as I was commanded: and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone. And when I beheld, lo, the sinews and the flesh came up upon them, and the skin covered them above: but there was no breath in them. Then said he unto me, Prophesy unto the wind, prophesy, son of man, and say to the wind, Thus saith [*sic*] the Lord God; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live"(Ezekiel 37: 1-9).

ideological overdetermination has him calling on African-Americans to oppose party politics in favor of racial solidarity (by which he presumably means identity politics):

If they want our vote, let's gather together as a unified body. . . . Bishop Long is not the pastor of this church alone. T. D. Jakes is not the pastor of his church alone. Reverend Jackson, and Reverend Sharpton, and Reverend Lowery are not the *pastors of their constituencies* [emphasis mine] alone. These are the shepherds of an entire people. . . . What we shepherds have got to do is come in a room. To hell with the camera! Turn the camera off. Put the Bible on the table! . . . That book will transform human life if you teach it right. *Stop entertaining your people with religion* [emphasis mine]!¹⁰⁸

Of course the irony here abounds. For starters, it is precisely as he modulates to what I have been calling the tragic mode of emplotment that Farrakhan literally explains, "All of this is a farce!" And I would here be remiss not to connect this tragicomic moment back to Karl Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* (1852):

And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of

¹⁰⁸ Louis Farrakhan, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 12.

revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to serve their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured [*sic*] disguise and this borrowed language.¹⁰⁹

And, as if that should not suffice, through a Freudian slip of the tongue, Farrakhan invokes the term “constituencies” as a euphemism for congregations. What is more, pace Farrakhan, is that he cautions against the use of religion for entertainment. Irony aside, however, Farrakhan’s heightened emotionalism here spills over into a couple of diatribes. The first encore is an indictment of the epistemological constraints of public education. “Dewey and Kant,” says Farrakhan, “who are the philosophers of Western education, were racist at the core. They deny you equal education because if you ever get equal education they can’t rule you anymore.”¹¹⁰ The second, an outgrowth of the first, is against healthcare: “Are you going to depend on the undependable to educate us about health issues, when keeping us and the American people sick benefits the pharmaceutical industry?,” he asks rhetorically, his voice cracking. Finally, by way of Solomon, Farrakhan brings down the curtain on a twenty-minute sermon: “Jesus said, ‘As a man thinketh [*sic*] so is he.’”¹¹¹ After yet another ovation, Tavis Smiley rounds out the second installment of his self-help teleseminar, announcing the rest of his lineup: “. . . as

¹⁰⁹ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 2008), 15.

¹¹⁰ Louis Farrakhan, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 12.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*; compare with the following passage: “For as he thinketh [*sic*] in his heart, so is he: Eat and drink, saith [*sic*] he to thee; but his heart is not with thee”(Proverbs 23:7).

empowered as I know you are already, Mike Dyson, Jesse Jackson, and the rest of 'em ain't [sic] even taken the stage yet. So, you know there's more to come."¹¹²

Altogether, the twenty-five minutes accorded Farrakhan in 2005 may seem overindulgent—that is, unless we compare it with his twenty-six minute excursus in 2006. I call Farrakhan's demagoguery here an "excursus" because he literally wields Smiley's bestselling text throughout. In fact, Farrakhan's 2005 performance laid the demagogic-theoretical foundations on which *The Covenant* is predicated—in spite of those whom Smiley himself may accredit. The 2006 State of the Black Union was held at St. Agnes Missionary Baptist Church in Houston, Texas. The ostensible topic of conversation: "Economic Empowerment: Building Wealth in Black America." Farrakhan's discussion begins philosophically, with a thin critique of temporality. The notion of "time" (by which he presumably means "biblical time" both teleological and eschatological) is a provocation for Farrakahn that raises the subtext of his "spiritual analysis": the questions "Where are we, not in this time, but in God's time?" and "What time is it?"¹¹³ Indeed, these questions inform his contextual approach and help guide his answers.

Farrakhan's cherry-picking of a conversation that fellow panelist Harry Belafonte had with Martin Luther King, Jr., hardly one that Farrakhan could tell well (or so one would think), gives way to the first answer:

¹¹² Tavis Smiley, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 12.

¹¹³ Louis Farrakhan, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 15.

. . . and Dr. King said, ‘I fear that I am integrating my people into a burning House.’ . . . We don’t see the fire, but the House is burning. He said to my dear brother, Harry Belafonte, ‘We have to be firemen, to put the fire out.’ I said, ‘No, we must let the fire burn.’ Because the scripture says, ‘They will see the smoke of her burning from a far-off.’ How could you say you believe in Jesus, listen to me good now, who said, ‘I am the light of the world, and the light that illuminates the world is a ball of fire.’ When John baptized Jesus he said, ‘I baptize you with water, but there is one coming after me that will baptize you with fire.’ Why fire? Because nothing remains in its present form when fire touches it. America must be burned!¹¹⁴

Neither is there anything that crosses Farrakhan’s path that remains in its natural state, not least the Bible. Indeed, Farrakhan exploits the malleability and universality of the Good Book, which he sometimes uses also to pull rank over those with whom he curries favor. But his caprices do not suffice either to justify here his decontextualization of King or invocation of the passages of scripture below:

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

Then spake [*sic*] Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth [*sic*] me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life. (John 8:12)

I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance. but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire. (Matthew 3:11)

John answered, saying unto them all, I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire. (Luke 3:16)

Farrakhan's allegory of the burning House, then, is perhaps meant here to provide an answer to his first, defamiliarizing question (cf., "Where are we?"). Indeed, his damnation here of America invites compassion to Jeremiah Wright's now infamous, "inflammatory rhetoric":

. . . and then wants us to sing 'God Bless America.' Nah, no, no, not God '*Bless* [emphasis his]' America. God '*Damn* [emphasis his]' America!—that's in the

Bible. . . . God *damn* [emphasis his] America for treating her citizens as less than human. . . .¹¹⁵

Farrakhan, then, like Wright, is unabashed by his own obdurate confidence and disavowal of America. “Listen to me,” commands Farrakhan, “because I really don’t care *no more* [emphasis his] about what anybody thinks!”¹¹⁶ Indeed, his polemic against America escalates into something of a ring shout, at least in call and response:

Well, America is no good at all. If you have made a promise that you don’t keep, what are you? You are a liar, a deceiver. All right, now, did they promise the Native Americans? (*Yes*) Did they write it in treaties? (*Yes*) Did they fulfill it? (*No*) Did they promise us forty acres and a mule? (*Yes*) Did they fulfill it? (*No*) [*Applause*] Oh, brother. I could run the list down of promises made and promises broken. Brown versus the Board of Education—fifty years later, where’s the promise? Is it fulfilled? (*No*); or, are we still in segregated schools? The right to vote—you got it, but the minute they gave it you they were finding ways to take it

¹¹⁵ Brian Ross and Rehab El-Buri, “Obama’s Pastor: God Damn America, U.S. to Blame for 9/11,” ABC News, March 13, 2008. Accessed December 17, 2012, <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/story?id=4443788#.UM65FqVemfQ>.

¹¹⁶ Louis Farrakhan, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 15.

back from you. [*Applause*] Can't you open your eyes and see: the House is burning! [*Applause*]¹¹⁷

Some particulars of his “burning House” metonym (for example, the “achievement gap”) are easy enough for Farrakhan to reify. But he does so, once again, nomadically, only when the Scriptures are exhausted. At this moment of *jouissance*, then, when the coordinates of his audience’s reality are already transposed, Farrakhan cooks up another cheap, fast-food religious connection:

This educational system isn't worth a damn. . . . It was not designed to help you become what God created you to be. The House must burn. The educational system is on fire. We don't need that. We need something new; and that's why Christ said, 'Behold, I make all things new.' We don't need to integrate into the old that God himself has judged as unfit. We need to be a part of what God makes new.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.; compare with the following passage: “And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful”(Revelation 21:5).

Needless to say, Farrakhan shifts here (in the excerpts above and below) into the allegorical mode at full throttle, citing the prophecies of Isaiah in between his invocations of Revelation:

The twenty-eighth chapter of Isaiah talks about God, and the people of God had made an agreement with hell and a covenant with death. Go pick up the book of Revelation: ‘. . . and I saw a pale horse, and its rider was death, and hell followed closely behind.’¹¹⁹

The last third of Farrakhan’s performance to be taken up here is perhaps the most distinctive departure of his demagoguery from its hermeneutic mode so far. It is scriptural, to be sure, but it syncretizes the Bible and the Koran. His invocation of the seventeenth sura, finally, provides the backdrop against which the Declaration of Independence, after the American dream, is debunked:

¹¹⁹ Ibid.; compare with the following passages: “Because ye have said, We have made a covenant with death, and with hell are we at agreement; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come unto us: for we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood have we hid ourselves: Therefore thus saith [*sic*] the Lord God, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste. Judgment also will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet: and the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding place. And your covenant with death shall be disannulled, and your agreement with hell shall not stand; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, then ye shall be trodden down by it”(Isaiah 28: 15-18); “And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth”(Revelation 6:8).

Don't you ever believe that they intend to fulfill their promise. The Koran says, 'The devil promises only to deceive.' How long are you going to hope in their promise rather than hope in yourself and God's ability to help you to help yourself? But to hope in the government is hopeless. This is a government that the Founding Fathers said, 'Whenever a government fails to guarantee life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, that government either needs to be reformed or abolished.' Now when are you going to stand up? . . . It has to be abolished, and something new and better set in its place that poor, and the weak, and the hungry, and the lame, and the homeless will find refuge in a government that really is a government of the people, by the people and for the people. . . . But if you don't have the *testicular fortitude* [emphasis his] to say what needs to be said then sit down and stop trying to say you speak for our people and the hurt of the poor.¹²⁰

But Farrakhan's paraphrase here of the Declaration of Independence is disingenuous, since his own politics are neither reformist nor abolitionist. Instead his identity politics are couched in salvationist, self-help rhetoric, the demobilizing effects of which have already been theorized.¹²¹ "Independence," which Farrakhan takes very literally, seems to

¹²⁰ Ibid.; compare with the following verse: ". . . But Satan does not promise them except delusion"(Koran 17:64).

¹²¹ "Self-help ideology is a form of privatization and therefore implies cession of the principle that government is responsible for improving the lives of citizenry and advancing egalitarian interests; it also rests on a premise that black Americans cannot effectively make demands on the state directly as citizens but must go through

mean racial interdependence. In the following excerpt, then, he cites the thirteenth sura for illustrative purposes: “God says in the Koran, ‘God will never change the condition of a people until they change themselves.’”¹²²

On the surface, it seems that the “testicular fortitude” gesture is, again, nothing other than a bastion of black hypermasculinity. Elsewhere, however, there is an audible ambiguousness—almost an androgynousness—that mutes the timbre of his voice, especially at the onset of his performances. In a sense, Farrakhan’s “testicular fortitude” gesture seems to be a projection (defense mechanism?) of the inward-turned gaze of his own masculinity; or, at any rate, an example of the transgender role-playing that occasionally takes place.

intermediaries constituted as guardians of collective racial self-interest. Ironically, ‘self-help’ requires dissolution of the autonomous civic selves of Afro-Americans”; see Adolph Reed, Jr., “The Rise of Louis Farrakhan” in *Class Notes: Posing As Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 59; “In addition, it is particularly ironic that the self-help rhetoric has been endorsed by public officials. That endorsement amounts to an admission of failure, an acknowledgment that the problems afflicting their constituents are indeed beyond the scope of the institutional apparatus under their control, that black officials are in fact powerless to provide services to inner-city citizens effectively through those institutions. That admission should begin with a discussion of what steps officials and constituents can take to exert pressure aimed at prying loose resources that would enable the proper functioning of public institutions; instead, recursion to self-help sidesteps that discussion, allowing public officials to pass the buck to their constituents by proclaiming the inadequacy or irrelevance of public institutions (while not plowing under the claims to status, prestige, and income commanded by virtue of institutional position). This is yet another way that self-help ideology feeds political demobilization”; see Adolph Reed, Jr., “Sources of Demobilization in the New Black Political Regime: Incorporation, Ideological Capitulation, and Radical Failure in the Post-Segregation Era” in *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 128.

¹²² Louis Farrakhan, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 15; “. . . Indeed, Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves”(Koran 13:11).

Farrakhan's growing disillusionment with black "leadership" gives him pause before the finale. "Can the leaders wake up?," shouts Farrakahn, "'cause the leaders are blind! And if the blind lead the blind everybody falls in the ditch."¹²³ Indeed, his allusion here to the first Gospel quickly gives way to gestures that turn in more specifically syncretic directions:

The war of Armageddon has begun and it will not end until an old world goes out and a new world comes in. . . . The Book says, 'Your agreement with hell will not stand and your covenant with death will be disannulled.' . . . the Bible tells you (and the Koran!), 'the Word of God is true.' He doesn't make promises that He does not keep. In the holy Koran . . . it says, 'Allah promised you a promise of truth; and the devil promised you then failed you.' And he had no authority over you except that he called you and you obeyed him. So, the Book said, 'Blame me not'—this is the devil talking: 'Don't' blame me! I just called you, Negro; and you answered.'¹²⁴

¹²³ Ibid.; "Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch"(Matthew 15:14).

¹²⁴ Ibid.; "For they are the spirits of devils, working miracles, which go forth unto the kings of the earth and of the whole world, to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty. Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth [*sic*], and keepeth [*sic*] his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame. And he gathered them together into a place called in the Hebrew tongue Armageddon"(Revelation 16:14-16); "And your covenant with death shall be disannulled, and your agreement with hell shall not stand; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, then ye shall be trodden down by it"(Isaiah 28:18); "The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear

This attempt to read the Bible and Koran alongside one another culminates in parody (and laughter!) when Farrakhan interpolates the word “Negro” at the end of the fourteenth sura. After another round of applause, his—dare I say?—“testicular” preoccupation rears its head again: “I applaud this *Covenant*,” says Farrakhan, raising Smiley’s text, “but it demonstrates our *impotence* [emphasis mine].”¹²⁵

In the final cadences of his performance, Farrakhan invokes the books of Chronicles after the fashion of his 2005 debut:

And that’s why God said, ‘If my people, which are called by my name, will humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, forgive your sins, and heal your land.’ So, don’t look to them. Look to God, look to yourself, break your covenant with hell and death, then make a covenant with black America and let’s help implement a roadmap that will free us . . . But those at the top—they on they way to hell; and if I got any power, I want to push them into hell as fast as I can. Peace!¹²⁶

of the Lord is clean, enduring for ever: the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether”(Psalms 19: 7-9); “. . . And who is more truthful than Allah in statement”(Koran 4:87); “. . . It is the promise of Allah, which is truth, and who is more truthful than Allah in statement”(Koran 4:122); “And Satan will say when the matter has been concluded, ‘Indeed, Allah had promised you the promise of truth. And I promised you, but I betrayed you. But I had no authority over you except that I invited you, and you responded to me. So do not blame me; but blame yourselves. . . .’”(Koran 14:22).

¹²⁵ Louis Farrakhan, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 15.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*; see 2 Chronicles 7:14.

But this time its evangelizing effect lacks only for witness. The invocation wins general applause, to be sure, but there is nothing miraculous about it. Farrakhan is here left, then, to improvise another, “alternate” ending. In a sense, Farrakhan here transforms himself into a gatekeeper to the firmament, or perhaps an arbiter of the underworld. Unlike the previous teleological gesture (cf., 2 Chronicles 7:14), the crowd here falls hook, line, and sinker for Farrakhan’s eschatological posturing. Before a fashionable exit, finally, Farrakhan is accorded a brief encore, which he uses to satirize his audience:

. . . we gotta [sic] stop thinking like Negroes, and colored people, and shines, and hambones, and start thinking like free men and women who don’t want to live on a plantation no more!¹²⁷

Satirical, indeed; but this plagal cadence has an evangelizing effect on the crowd. “Lord,” shouts Cornel West, “lord, lord, lord . . .”¹²⁸ In the heat of the moment, then, Tavis Smiley increases the shelf life of Farrakhan’s always-already perishable, drugstore demagoguery: “There’s a lot in there,” explains Smiley, “that’s food for thought. . . . You didn’t get all that, even if you thought you did.”¹²⁹

Louis Farrakhan’s final performance at the State of the Black Union took place in 2010 at the Emil and Patricia A. Jones Convocation Center in Chicago, Illinois. Of course

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Cornel West, Ibid.

¹²⁹ Tavis Smiley, Ibid.

the Center houses Chicago State University's Athletic Department, including its men's and women's basketball teams.¹³⁰ But what kind of "critical distance" is achieved when political dialogues are spatialized in this regard, especially for those predisposed to spectator sports?¹³¹ Too often has the actual theater of demagoguery collapsed important distinctions between politics and entertainment for the sake of the spectacle. Doubtless the multitude is attuned to consumerism. Whether their own commodity fetish for the State of the Black Union, or for that matter any other aestheticization of black politics, is a part of this attuning remains a matter of debate.¹³² More complex than the demagogue's tragic mode of emplotment, then, is the tragic mode of the spectacle per se. In this way, demagoguery is not unlike most sports, not least in its relation to wrestling:

¹³⁰ "Jones Convocation Center Brochure," accessed December 20, 2012, <http://www.csu.edu/convocationcenter/documents/JCCBrochure.pdf>.

¹³¹ "Performatist works are set up in such a way that the reader or viewer at first has no choice but to opt for a single, compulsory solution to the problems raised within the work at hand. The author, in other words, imposes a certain solution on us using dogmatic, ritual, or some other coercive means. This has two immediate effects. The coercive frame cuts us off, at least temporarily, from the context around it and forces us back into the work. Once we are inside, we are made to identify with some person, act or situation in a way that is plausible only within the confines of the work as a whole. In this way performatism gets to have its postmetaphysical cake and eat it too. On the one hand, you're practically forced to identify with something implausible or unbelievable within the frame – to *believe* in spite of yourself – but on the other, you still *feel* the coercive force causing this identification to take place, and intellectually you remain aware of the particularity of the argument at hand. Metaphysical skepticism and irony aren't eliminated, but are held in check by the frame. At the same time, the reader must always negotiate some kind of trade-off between the positive aesthetic identification and the dogmatic, coercive means used to achieve it"; see Raoul Eshelman, *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism* (Aurora: Davies Group, 2008), 2-3.

¹³² "A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer [*sic*] thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties"; quoted in Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (New York: Verso, 2011), 190.

The virtue of all-in wrestling is that it is the spectacle of excess. . . . Wrestling is not a sport, it is a spectacle . . . Of course, there exists a false wrestling, in which participants unnecessarily go to great lengths to make a show of a fair fight; this is of no interest. . . .The public is completely uninterested in knowing whether the contest is rigged or not, and rightly so; it abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, which is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees.¹³³

In 2010, Farrakhan was still the favorite after a three-year hiatus. Indeed, his heavyweight demagoguery lasted for some forty-seven minutes in a three-and-a-half-hour-long bout. In his corner: Michael Eric Dyson, Cornel West, Jesse Jackson, Dorothy Tillman, Julianne Malveaux, and Smiley himself, to name a few. Moreover, the ringside and stadium seating arrangements of the audience here added a specifically spectacular, panoptic dimension to the experience, different than in previous years, when floor and theater seating arrangements allowed only for frontal and peripheral views of the panelists. Indeed, the spatiality of the 2010 State of the Black Union recaptured something of Michel Foucault's contingent, "panoptic modality of power":

An inspector arriving unexpectedly at the centre [*sic*] of the Panopticon will be able to judge at a glance, without anything being concealed from him, how the

¹³³ Roland Barthes, "The World of Wrestling" in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 16.

entire establishment is functioning. And, in any case, enclosed as he is in the middle of this architectural mechanism, *is not the director's own fate entirely bound up with it* [emphasis mine]? The incompetent physician who has allowed contagion to spread, the incompetent prison governor or workshop manager will be the first victims of an epidemic or a revolt.¹³⁴

Perhaps it is not so much that the audience is at the mercy of the demagogue as that the demagogue himself is at the mercy of his audience, since it is the audience that decides his fate *pollice verso*.¹³⁵ It is surprising, for example, that Michael Eric Dyson is booed for his pharaonic characterization of President Barack Obama.¹³⁶ After a brief lapse of concentration, then, Dyson romanticizes the failures of Obama's policies in order to (re)curry favor with the mob. This moment of slippage is striking; it is as if Dyson were oblivious as to his lay audience, as if his demagoguery, ostensibly aimed at the crowd, felt the pull a different, more "disciplined" center of gravity. In contrast, Farrakhan is more attuned to the wider audience's fetish for identity politics. Because his demagoguery is more in tune with what they want to hear (i.e., "the spectacle of excess" rather than substance), Farrakhan is given *carte blanche* to wax lyrical. But having to

¹³⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1977), 204, 221.

¹³⁵ This amphitheatrical gesture from classical antiquity, literally "thumb turned," was used by the mob to pass final judgment upon gladiators.

¹³⁶ "You think Obama is Moses. He is *not* [emphasis his] Moses! He is Pharaoh"; see Michael Eric Dyson, "Tavis Smiley Black Agenda Forum," C-SPAN Video Library, accessed December 20, 2012, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/292635-7>.

pander like this to an audience's baser instincts for pure spectacle is a part of what I have been calling the demagogue's "tragic dilemma."

Not that Obama goes unmentioned; Farrakhan wrestles with Obama at length. But he does so apologetically, passing the buck to his white counterparts. Indeed, this is the most racially divisive of Farrakhan's three performances at the State of the Black Union. The discussion of Obama begins after an intimidating aside about David Dinkins' mayoral ascension: ". . . I could have gone into New York, literally, and destroyed the bother. Excuse me for being very frank."¹³⁷ Needless to say, he uses Dinkins to situate tokenism within a wider politico-historical context—an excellent start, to be sure, but he fails to problematize fully this Obama *ex machina*. Instead Farrakhan plays the race card to divert attention from Obama to his white counterparts for their machinations. But tokenism does not suffice to justify Farrakhan's exonerating of Obama from his duty as the president qua president. As Adolph Reed explains, "symbols don't make for coherent policies."¹³⁸ The narrative of Obama that Farrakhan manufactures is, again, an apologetic, even hagiographical one. Compare the following three excerpts:

¹³⁷ Louis Farrakhan, *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ "But this 'first black' rhetoric tends to interpret African-American political success—including that of President Obama—as part of a morality play that dramatizes 'how far we have come.' It obscures the fact that modern black Republicans have been more tokens than signs of progress. . . . Clichés about fallen barriers are increasingly meaningless; symbols don't make for coherent policies"; see Adolph L. Reed, Jr., "The Puzzle of Black Republicans," *New York Times*, December 18, 2012, accessed December 21, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/19/opinion/the-puzzle-of-black-republicans.html>.

President Obama does not run this country! President Obama has been chosen to govern white affairs! And if in that process we get something, it won't be because the governing powers want it; it will be because we organized and forced a government to speak to our needs.¹³⁹

. . . I love my brother. I voted for him. At five o'clock in the morning, I was out there with my wife, voting for our brother. I, like you, am very proud that a black man sits in the *White* House [emphasis his]. But I also understand very clearly, and we should understand, that it is the *White* House [emphasis his].¹⁴⁰

Do you think that having a black face in the White House means that we don't have to make him do it? Who surrounds him? Let me even go a bit further . . . Look, our brother is brilliant—he got a good heart. I think he really loves America and wants to make America better. . . . But he is like that camel in the Koran that God warned the people . . . They didn't care what God wanted—they hamstringed the camel.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Louis Farrakhan, "Tavis Smiley Black Agenda Forum," C-SPAN Video Library, accessed December 20, 2012, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/292635-7>.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

Clearly, this first excerpt is a distinctive departure from his self-help platitudes, especially in its advance of the notion that government must be accountable to its citizens. But Farrakhan's blame game here exonerates Obama on account of his blackness alone. The opening gesture in the third excerpt, however, cuts against the grain of the previous ones. In the very next line, then, Farrakhan turns back to conspiracy-theorizing so as to distract from this aporia. Finally, Farrakhan's ambition to vindicate Obama has him allegorizing the ninety-first sura.¹⁴²

From all this Farrakhan here wins only very general applause and laughter. The turning point in his performance occurs naturally after a passionate call and response with the audience:

A. Philip Randolph . . . Man, that was a long time ago. And the cry was 'jobs and justice.' And the march on Washington in 1963, the cry was (*jobs and justice*). In the twenty year anniversary of the march on Washington the cry was (*jobs and justice*). We are now in 2010, and what is the cry? (*jobs and justice*) Well, wait a minute! How long are you going to sit around, begging *white people* [emphasis his] to do for us what we have the power to do for ourselves? [*Applause*]

¹⁴² "And the messenger of Allah said to them, 'Do not harm the she-camel of Allah or prevent her from her drink.' But they denied him and hamstrung her. So their Lord brought down upon them destruction for their sin and made it equal upon all of them"(Koran 91:13-14).

It is as if Farrakhan's previous clarion call for accountability were here undone by the passion of the ring shout, as if his relapse here into self-help ideology was triggered somehow under the influence of the audience. "You all set me off," explains Farrakhan, "you know that. And I love it."¹⁴³ Next, after an ill-conceived analysis of the fourth Gospel, Farrakhan uses the slavery trope to explain his own theoretical version of "white privilege" and to justify reparations to African Americans:

White folk are rich and powerful—the rich and powerful—because black folk worked for three hundred and ten years as chattel slaves and got not one day's pay. I could call out the rich and the powerful whose riches have been gotten on our backs, but I'll save that for another time. The point is: the present generation of whites did not do this; but the present generation of whites are in their privileged position because of what a former generation of whites have done. Now, the question is: a black agenda should be put before them because if they don't accept the responsibility to clean up this problem, you don't have a lot of time to wait forty more years for a benevolent white president or a benevolent black president. That day is over. America is facing the Judgment of God as we sit around this table. . . . Our people need repair. We need repair from three hundred and ten years of chattel slavery . . .

¹⁴³ Louis Farrakhan, "Tavis Smiley Black Agenda Forum," C-SPAN Video Library, accessed December 20, 2012, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/292635-7>.

Needless to say, Farrakhan here invokes the Last Judgment. But God knows into whom he puts the fear of God, since it is precisely those “privileged” whites that are missing from his audience. Of course this particular State of the Black Union was broadcast live on C-SPAN, which means that it did reach at least those who tuned in to watch the match. It is hard to imagine, for example, that many viewers outside of the black evangelical tradition, especially non-black viewers, would find entertaining Farrakhan’s racial divisiveness:

Farrakhan outrages whites in part because he breaks flamboyantly with the rhetoric of interracialism, adherence to which is a sine qua non for blacks’ participation in respectable public discourse. But the concern with interracial harmony that has long been a shibboleth of American discussion of the ‘race problem’ is an empty abstraction. It doesn’t tell us anything about concrete social relations.¹⁴⁴

Farrakhan’s second routine at the 2010 State of the Black Union provides yet another instance where the “testicular fortitude” trope appears: “. . . because [Obama] had the ‘chutzpah,’ I guess you could say. That’s a Jewish term that meant ‘testicular fortitude’ . . .”¹⁴⁵ It is fair to say, after three iterations, that this gesture is a part of Farrakhan’s demagogic repertory. Indeed, it was celebrated in the past (as I have shown

¹⁴⁴ Adolph Reed, Jr., “Behind the Farrakhan Show,” *Progressive* 58:4 (1994): 16-17.

¹⁴⁵ Louis Farrakhan, “Tavis Smiley Black Agenda Forum,” C-SPAN Video Library, accessed December 20, 2012, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/292635-7>.

above), but here Julianne Malveaux balks at Farrakhan's flippant and presumptuous remark (cf., Chapter 1; see pp. 23-24). Elsewhere, however, Farrakhan is hesitant to extend the illusion of Obama's audacity. Farrakhan's paraphrase of King's "Drum Major Instinct" sermon, for example, is meant to urge the president to advance black interests:

. . . think about us. Speak and use your bully pulpit to encourage people to give justice. Because Martin Luther King said, 'It is not your power that makes you great; it is a nation's righteousness that makes them great.' . . . how would you like to be remembered? He said, 'I want to be remembered as a drum major for justice.'¹⁴⁶

Unfortunately, C-SPAN's digital archive seems to have had some "technical difficulties" uploading some of Farrakhan's performance. "Portions of Minister Louis Farrakhan's remarks," we are told, "were lost due to technical difficulties."¹⁴⁷ We need pause only briefly here to broach the missing "portions" (by which C-SPAN presumably means ten, continuous minutes of film footage) of Farrakhan's performance. Fortunately,

¹⁴⁶ "And we are drifting there because nations are caught up with the drum major instinct. 'I must be first.' 'I must be supreme.' 'Our nation must rule the world.' (*Preach it*) And I am sad to say that the nation in which we live is the supreme culprit. And I'm going to continue to say it to America, because I love this country too much to see the drift that it has taken. . . . Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. (*Amen*) Say that I was a drum major for peace. (*Yes*) I was a drum major for righteousness"; see "The Drum Major Instinct"(1968), Documents, The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, December 22, 2012. http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_the_drum_major_instinct/

¹⁴⁷ Sidebar, *Ibid.*

an anonymous user has taken to trolling, on his YouTube “channel,” a great deal of film footage of the minister.¹⁴⁸ Indeed, this alternative, digital archive, to which there are over twelve thousand subscribers, includes the rest of Farrakhan’s “lost” performance. There was probably good reason for C-SPAN to censor Farrakhan in this regard, since the “lost” footage includes, but is not limited to, a prophecy of assassination, the politics of biracialism, the pathology of whiteness, a conspiracy theory of the 2008 Iowa Democratic caucuses, the decline of the American Empire and exceptionalism, an economic theory of inflation, and an ostensibly dangerous ultimatum. Farrakhan here is worth quoting at length:

. . . We can bear to lose an election, but we cannot bear to make Michelle and her children fatherless and husbandless as we saw with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And I’m warning you, America . . . See, this is real in America, when you disturb the powers that run things. I’ll close with this: our brother was selected before he was elected. . . . Now all of you know something about kingmakers. When people in back rooms come to somebody who’s popular, somebody who’s intelligent, that don’t speak with a ‘Negro dialect’ . . . a light-skinned Negro that is nonthreatening to white people because they can see themselves in him, because he’s part them and part us. This is political scheming . . . the white mentality. So, now, when you select a man, the man may never know what your purpose was. Because I understand that his initial victory in Iowa was financed largely by

¹⁴⁸ “Minister Louis Farrakhan,” Ahmad770, accessed December 22, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/user/Ahmad770?feature=watch>.

Goldman Sachs. I don't know the truth. That's what I've read. . . . Who selected a junior senator that hadn't even got his foot wet in the senate, and made him believe that he, from that position, could become president of the United States. I suggest to you that the people that looked at him and saw his brilliance—saw that that brilliance could be used for a purpose that was not our agenda. . . . we are living at the end of America's rule as a great power in the world. Now you have to face it—she's bankrupt! What are you gonna do when the dollar is worth nothing? They are printing money out of thin air . . . We need to pray for our brother, and his family, and warn America: leave that brother alone.¹⁴⁹

Farrakhan's scare tactics here spill over into "sincere exhortation," as he puts it. Indeed, his previous allusion to the Last Judgment is trifling in comparison to his invocation of the book of Revelation:

The bible says, 'The fearful and the unbelieving will have their part in a lake that burns with fire.' Any of us in this audience that are afraid, the fear that you have has already limited your ability to participate in a black agenda. So, fear is what the enemy ruled us with. . . . So, I'm not trying to inspire anyone to be afraid. I'm inspiring you to be critical in that principle of love. But, as I said that, I'm warning our enemies and his enemy: [C-SPAN stream resumes] don't play with

¹⁴⁹ Louis Farrakhan, "Tavis Smiley Questions Minister Louis Farrakhan On President Barack Obama (Part 4 of 5)," Ahmad770, accessed December 22, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUuY4VtBDaA>.

what we did here today and make mockery of sincere exhortation of our president.
... And I'm also warning to keep your hands off of him.¹⁵⁰

Clearly, Farrakhan is notorious for his past imprecations, the most infamous of which is bound up with the assassination of Malcolm X.¹⁵¹ But it is hard to imagine that Farrakhan could be so naïve as to think that his words alone should suffice to protect the president. When was the last time anyone reading *The Final Call* on an iPhone felt awed by the sublimity of Farrakhan's omnipotence? In retrospect, Farrakhan's allusion to David Dinkins, invocations of the Last Judgment and Revelation, and imprecations at anyone whose television might have been tuned to C-SPAN, all reveal a final point about the State of the Black Union well beyond the ken of the individual demagogues immersed in it: that its aesthetic trend toward evangelism—toward transcendent, strategic-narrative performance (i.e., the allegorical mode of emplotment)—has not only reframed the terms of political debate, but also reoriented both the spatial and temporal coordinates of our political center of gravity. “Performatist works of art,” writes Raoul Eshelman, “attempt to make viewers or readers *believe* [emphasis his] rather than convince them with

¹⁵⁰ Louis Farrakhan, “Tavis Smiley Questions Minister Louis Farrakhan On President Barack Obama (Part 5 of 5),” Ahmad770, accessed December 22, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sdx76kiU2wg>. Compare with the following passage:

“But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth [*sic*] with fire and brimstone: which is the second death”(Revelation 21:8).

¹⁵¹ “Probably the single most influential attack appeared in *Muhammad Speaks* under the name Louis X on December 4. ‘The die is set, and Malcolm shall not escape, especially after such evil, foolish talk,’ Farrakhan declared. ‘Such a man as Malcolm is worthy of death.’ This code phrase was a call to arms within the sect”; see Manning Marable, “Such a Man Is Worthy of Death” in *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (New York: Viking, 2011), 398.

cognitive arguments.”¹⁵² “If the performance is successful,” Eshelman explains, “then the reader too will identify with it more or less involuntarily – even if he or she still remains incredulous about its basic premises. The reader is ‘framed’ in such a way that belief trumps cognition.”¹⁵³

Narrative performatism, as I have made clear, has been the *métier* of black preachers and demagogues alike. Because they impose on their audiences the artificial conditions of transcendence, demagogues are able to affect the faculties of aesthetic judgment and pure reason. Indeed, these aesthetically-mediated, televangelized experiences of transcendence find one believing the demagogue *in spite of oneself*, or, at the very least, make-believing *for the sake of* entertainment (catharsis and *jouissance*). To understand Louis Farrakhan’s tragic dilemma would not only be to take account of the complex organization of his narrative performatism, but to comprehend the complex reality in which the aestheticization of his politics is inevitable. It would also be to understand the complex network of institutions and media for the creation and dissemination of black politics. The choice between the State of the Black Union and some kind of “authentic” political matrix is not really a choice between demagoguery and policy (or a general strike). Of course that kind of matrix, we already know, is a machine from which the black demagogue has emerged and alongside or against which he continues to make his passionate appeal. Indeed, these demagogues have always-already shaped our notion of politics. However symbolic, we need “The Charmer.” Not because he is entertaining, but because without him, politics as we know it would not exist. “He is

¹⁵² Eshelman, *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism*, 37.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

a part of us. He is not away from us. He is in our circle, and he should be heard.” Indeed, these words from Harry Belafonte form part of the epigraph I chose for this chapter.

Needless to say, we have not come close to demystifying all aspects of the demagogue’s narrative performatism, particularly the epideictic mode of emplotment.

Chapter Three

**THE SOUNDTRACK TO DEMAGOGUERY:
MICHAEL ERIC DYSON, *EPIDEIXIS*,
AND THE UTILITY OF THE LYRIC**

“Hip-hop becomes this cultural voice to say, look, we have stories to tell that don’t speak to the images and reflections of who we are—we have a vibrant set of cultural voices, and ideas; and it began as a wide range of expressions: with visual arts . . . with dance, with music, with storytelling, taking the incredible, rich, oral tradition, which everyone here shares, especially my esteemed colleague, Professor Dyson; on the ability to speak and tell stories in ways that are profoundly compelling, that are emotionally intelligent and intellectually intelligent at the same time.”

—Tricia Rose, *The State of the Black Union*, 2009

In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle distinguishes between deliberation, litigation, and epideixis (or “display oratory”).¹⁵⁴ Altogether these three genres constitute the classical notion of “rhetoric” that Aristotle himself helped codify. The first and second of these genres are characterized by “*exhortation* and *deterrence* [emphasis his]” and “*prosecution* and *defense* [emphasis his],” respectively. The third genre, which receives far less attention in the *Rhetoric* than do the deliberative or forensic typologies, is characterized by “*praise* and *denigration* [emphasis his].” Doubtless the *Rhetoric* was conceived as an revisionist alternative to the Sophists. But the invention of rhetoric itself, again, is attributed specifically to the Sophists, whose own narrative performatism was contingent upon the

¹⁵⁴ Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, trans. H. C. Lawson-Tancred (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 80.

epideictic mode of emplotment.¹⁵⁵ Indeed, even as their epideictic performatism was anathema to him, Aristotle was still attuned to the appeal of epideixis itself:

Amplification comes naturally under praise, since it lies in the excess, and excess is among the noble things. . . . In general, in common forms of speech augment is most expedient in epideictic speaking (for the audience take the actions as agreed, so that it only remains to add greatness and nobility to them) . . .¹⁵⁶

Different than the allegorical mode of emplotment, which, as we have seen, achieves exhortation and deterrence largely through biblical exegesis, the epideictic mode of emplotment achieves praise and denigration through rhythm (as Aristotle knows):

. . . the rhythmic flow of the chosen words also has a notable effect on the persuasiveness and charm of what is being said. Here again, a device that began in poetry has migrated to prose and prose rhythm has now, like prose style

¹⁵⁵ “Traditionally, the ‘invention of rhetoric’ is credited to the sophists . . . For the type of sophist linked to the rise of ‘rhetoric’ we can be somewhat more specific. There is a mainstream notion of ‘sophist’ and ‘sophistic’ that is more or less linked to both rhetorical and philosophico-literary culture and that survives from the fourth century B.C. to the so-called Second Sophistic of the later Roman period. This notion is centered on ‘sophistic’ as what we might call wisdomology, an art or science of ‘making wise’ in the sense of cultivating one’s intellect or *phronêsis*, and on the ‘sophist’ as—at a minimum, and whatever else he may be—a maker and usually performer of epideictic discourse”; see Jeffrey Walker, *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 26-27.

¹⁵⁶ Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, 110.

*generally, achieved an autonomy in its own canons. The primary function of prose rhythm is to be neither wholly unrhythmical nor of full poetical metre [sic; emphasis his]. . . . So the speech must have rhythm, but not metre [sic]; otherwise it will be a poem.*¹⁵⁷

What Aristotle here calls “prose rhythm,” then, bears a very close resemblance to *stile recitativo*, or perhaps even “spoken word.” Rhythm, as I have already noted, is a constitutive element of the manner of delivery, again, which belongs to the province of music. At the State of the Black Union, for example, rhythmic-epideictic performances abound (most strikingly those of Michael Eric Dyson). In fact, Dyson’s own narrative performatism is couched specifically in and shaped by a particular musical discourse. Indeed, his constant invocation of hip-hop lyrics, for example, seems to have had a demagogic effect very similar to Farrakhan’s.

In his nine appearances at the State of the Black Union, Dyson literally waxed lyrical on five separate occasions. Unlike Farrakhan, whose demagogic center of gravity there was allegorical (biblical and Koranic), Dyson’s real *métier* was hip-hop. As we have seen with Farrakhan, however, the aestheticization of politics is fraught with the tragic mode of the spectacle. Clearly, the lyrical mode of emplotment, more so than the allegorical mode, lends itself to such “spectacularity,” especially since hip-hop is a *popular* music whose *raison d’être* is entertainment, whereas the literal *telos* of religion is salvation. As we have seen with the demagogue, however, he pushes up against the

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 230.

boundary between the sacred and the profane, so much so that the allegorical mode entertains congregants (religion qua entertainment), while fans find an epiphany in the lyrical mode (entertainment qua religion).

From this vantage point, then, the distinction between the fetish for religion and the fetish for entertainment is not so clear (the former is a vehicle for indoctrinating the masses; the latter a vehicle for pacifying them; both examples of commodity fetishism). In a sense, the State of the Black Union is ideally suited for Dyson's lyrical mode of emplotment, since popular music is indeed meant for performance. He deploys his repertoire of politically charged lyrics for two reasons. The first, typical reason is to vindicate his favorite rappers. Needless to say, this is a sentimental gesture made frequently by fans and aficionados alike. The second, more demagogic reason is because it gives his "performance" the verisimilitude necessary for Dyson to situate himself as a pop-cultural insider (i.e., *of* the people rather than *above* the people).

In this context, Dyson's affinity for hip-hop is quite strategic—that is, he employs the lyrical mode of emplotment in order to curry favor with his audience. But then, as I have made clear, it is precisely the aestheticization of politics that I find problematic. However subversive the hip-hop lyrics invoked, the tragic mode of the spectacle, as we have seen, forecloses the very possibility of listening *drastically* to the politicization of art.¹⁵⁸ Clearly, Dyson is a "deep listener."¹⁵⁹ But "deep" (or "gnostic") listening is in

¹⁵⁸ "Listening as a phenomenon takes place under music's thumb, and acoustic presence may transfix or bewilder; it frees the listener from the sanctioned neatness of the hermeneutic. In more practical terms, the experience of listening to a live performance solicits attention more for the performers and the event and far less for the work than is perhaps generally admitted. Even recordings as technologically constructed

stark contrast to its “drastic” counterpart (the former is hermeneutical; the latter is corporeal). At their best, deep listeners, for example, assign themselves the task of decoding otherwise inscrutable lyrics.¹⁶⁰ Needless to say, the task of decoding is a superficial, phonocentric exercise, since it privileges speech over the experience of sound per se. Indeed, pop-cultural critics’ inattention to the music in itself poses a tragic dilemma for any hip-hop artist, whose social contract is contingent upon extralinguistic factors. In fact, pop-cultural critics often call our attention to the nature of the lyrics at the expense of other, more important determinants of commercial success.¹⁶¹ At their worst, “deep listeners” find themselves entrained to the “beat,” if indeed they are dancing or listening at all. Theodor Adorno’s important insight into “regressive-” or “*atomized* listening [emphasis mine]” is here worth quoting at length:

hyperperformances, which we can arrest and control, are not quite safe as long as they are raining sound down on our heads. The gnostic moment, in the presence of a performance, can become both absurd and instantaneous, going by in a flash . . .”; see Carolyn Abbate, “Music—Drastic or Gnostic?,” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 30, no. 3 (2004): 512.

¹⁵⁹ “. . . deep listeners is a descriptive term for persons who are profoundly moved, perhaps even to tears, by simply listening to a piece of music. . . . Deep listeners are very emotional and often have near religious transcendental experiences. . . . Deep listening is a kind of secular trancing, divorced from religious practice but often carrying religious sentiments such as feelings of transcendence or a sense of communion with a power beyond oneself. . . . Music, trance, and, emotion are, I believe, imbricated in both trancers and in deep listeners”; see Judith Becker, *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 2.

¹⁶⁰ Jay-Z, *Decoded* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2010).

¹⁶¹ A close reading of Soulja Boy’s debut single “Crank That,” for example, which topped the charts for seven weeks in 2007, reveals not just an inscrutable lyrical surface, but also, more significantly, a rhythmic effect (hemiola?) in the steel pan part that is arguably its most successful feature. Accompanying his simple, sing-along lyrics, however, was a complex dance, which seemed to surpass the song in popular estimation. But an analysis of the ostensibly objectifying lyrics to “Crank That” would hardly suffice either to qualify or to justify Soulja Boy’s unprecedented commercial success. Indeed, rhythm is more crucial to his social contract than any other musical parameter.

The counterpart to the fetishism of music is a regression of listening. . . . Not only do the listening subjects lose, along with the freedom of choice and responsibility, the capacity for conscious perception of music . . . but they stubbornly reject the possibility of such perception. They fluctuate between comprehensive forgetting and sudden dives into recognition. They listen *atomistically* [emphasis mine] and dissociate what they hear . . . they are childish; their primitivism is not that of the undeveloped, but that of the forcibly retarded. . . . Together with sport and film, mass music and the new listening help to make escape from the whole infantile milieu impossible.¹⁶²

We need pause only briefly here to mention that the history of listening is riddled with similar anxieties about aurality. Outside of the Third Reich, for example, Alain Locke's preoccupations with "super-jazz" were contemporary with Adorno's.¹⁶³ And thinking back across the *longue durée*, even Plato's caveats of cultural deterioration were Adornian in this regard.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Theodor W. Adorno, "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening" in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays On Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (New York: Routledge, 2008), 46-47.

¹⁶³ "One of the handicaps of Negro music today is that it is too popular. It is tarnished with commercialism and the dust of the marketplace"; see Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music*; quoted in Paul Gilroy, *Darker than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 120.

¹⁶⁴ ". . . our once silent audiences have found a voice in the persuasion that they understand what is good and bad in art; the old 'sovereignty of the best' in that sphere has given way to an evil 'sovereignty of the audience'"; see Plato's *Laws*; quoted in Susan McClary, "Same As It Every Was: Youth Culture and Music" in *Microphone Fiends*:

The degree to which popular music (or its invocation) is countercultural is beside the point. Indeed, we need to take account of music's popular reception. This means coming to grips with the tragic mode of the spectacle. However innovative, new technologies of sound reproducibility (and purchasability) simply reinvent inappropriate contexts for listening *atomistically*. The politicization of art is at stake so long as we continue to listen to music in this way. Here, though, we have moved well beyond the Benjaminian chiasmus: the question whether hip-hop is the aestheticization of politics or the politicization of art.¹⁶⁵ Complicating Walter Benjamin's dichotomy between Fascism and Communism, then, is Dyson's neoliberal, lyrical mode of emplotment. The politicization of hip-hop (commonly qualified as "conscious") is obscured by its own capitulation to the music-industrial revolution. Hip-hop, let it be said clearly, *is* popular music; even its most "conscious" practitioners are inextricably commercial. Dyson's musicological canon is no exception. Alongside Tupac Shakur and The Notorious B.I.G., Snoop Doog, Nas, Mos Def, and Lauryn Hill all make frequent, *ventriloquized* appearances at the State of the Black Union; Master P, Chuck D, Wu-Tang Clan, OutKast, LL Cool J, Jay-Z, Talib Kweli, Bone Thugs-n-Harmony, 50 Cent, Juvenile, and Kanye West, to name a few, all make brief cameos.

Youth Music and Youth Culture, ed. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (New York: Routledge, 1994), 29.

¹⁶⁵ "'*Fiat ars—pereat mundus*,' says Fascism, and, as Marinetti admits, expects war to supply the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology. This is evidently the consummation of '*l'art pour l'art*'. . . . self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art"; see Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 242.

Doubtless there are hip-hop artists whose “conscious” lyrics are attentive to the politically marginalized status of the underclass, including some of those mentioned above, particularly Mos Def and Talib Kweli. Of course there are many other “conscious” artists whose political pretensions have made for pretty lucrative careers: KRS-One, Lupe Fiasco, The Roots, J. Cole, and Common all come to mind. Likewise, these artists have found their niche in the marketplace, to be sure. Indeed, the “politicization of art” and the “aestheticization of politics,” pace Benjamin, are not necessarily mutually exclusive alternatives, but rather two sides of the same coin (or perhaps this was his point all along!). Today, the music industry circumvents the “politicization of art” simply by commodifying (or aestheticizing) it. This is true even of those “conscious,” underground subgenres of music that posture noncommercialism, only to succumb to kitsch. Needless to say, we cannot expect Dyson’s lyrical mode, at the State of the Black Union already spectacular, to transcend neither the fetishism of music nor the regression of listening. In fact, his only option is to re-aestheticize that which has already been depoliticized, if indeed it was ever political at all. This here is Michael Eric Dyson’s tragic dilemma.

In a sense, music is the ideal medium for epideixis and demagoguery alike—and popular music at that—since its lyrics are rhythmic and melodically affective. As soon as we consider that Dyson was typecast as the epideictic “public intellectual,” or that the State of the Black Union was scored for him, then his lyrical mode comes to be heard at the diegetic level. And like most post-Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Tavis Smiley’s *Complete Collection* is soundtracked. Indeed, Dyson’s lyrical mode seems to fulfill the need for diegesis. And to Claudia Gorbman here we would do well to pay heed:

The resistance of both filmgoers and critics to acknowledge the powerful role of music in feature film leads us to associate music with the film's unconscious. . . . Film music is also the hypnotist that lulls us into a hyperreceptive state, in order that we receive and identify with the movie's fantasy. . . . Film music is like the medium of a dream, forgotten in the waking state . . .¹⁶⁶

Nevertheless, before we make any further claims about this diegetic mode—say, its hypnotic effect—we need to look closely at the mechanics of Dyson's lyrical mode of emplotment. Interestingly, a close reading of Dyson's performance history at the State of the Black Union reveals a steady decrease in the frequency with which the lyrical mode is deployed. While his first (2000), third (2002), and fifth (2004) performances there are overdetermined by the lyrical mode, his second (2001) and sixth (2005) performances barely mention hip-hop. Needless to say, Dyson's lyrical mode is inoperative in the fourth (2003). Finally, from his antepenultimate performance on (2008-2010), it is surprising to find no mention of hip-hop at all, especially since his lyrical mode was as prominent a feature of Dyson's demagoguery as his epideictic mode. Indeed, following a brief hiatus (2006-2007), the erasure of hip-hop from his repertoire (and also his taking a back seat to Tricia Rose in 2009) must have been a strange, even defamiliarizing alternative for most listeners.

¹⁶⁶ Claudia Gorbman, "Scoring the Indian: Music in the Liberal Western" (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 234.

In 2000, Dyson debuted at the inaugural State of the Black Union, where his lyrical mode of emplotment was used to its best advantage. The popular musicians that Dyson cites are legitimated by his intertextual approach. Master P, Snoop Dogg, Luther Vandross, Biggie Smalls, Chuck D, Mos Def, Lauryn Hill and Nas, for examples, are romanticized alongside W. E. B. Du Bois, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Jesse Jackson, Fanie Lou Hamer, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Bayard Rustin, and Audre Lorde. Needless to say, Dyson invokes habitually black writers and civil rights activists alike for illustrative purposes only. For Dyson, their names alone suffice to justify his invocation of them. What is more, they are usually enumerated in the same breath, whereas rappers themselves, whose lyrics are recalled verbatim, receive hermeneutic attention to detail. This unevenness is especially telling when the demagogue under consideration ought to be ruminating on the state of the nation and future legislation.

Dyson begins his narrative with kudos to Master P for the entrepreneur's placement on *Fortune's* "400 Under 40" (by which Dyson presumably means "40 Under 40").¹⁶⁷ In fact, Master P's ostensible leadership provides a precedent for Dyson, who issues a clarion call for new, younger torchbearers:

. . . Master P, one of the brothers with Michael Jordan on *Fortune's* '400 Under 40' [*sic*], right? [*Applause*] So, instead of dogging the brother, these hip-hop

¹⁶⁷ "[Master P] makes FORTUNE's debut 40 Richest Under 40 list with his net worth of \$361 million"; see Roy S. Johnson, "Diamond in the Rough," *Fortune*, September 27, 1999. Accessed December 26, 2012, http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/1999/09/27/266176/index.htm

generation—whatever you think about the lyrical intensity of their misogyny, their sexism, their homophobia—and we know it didn’t start with ‘Snoop Doggy Dogg and Dr. Dre is at the door’—we know it didn’t start there, right? [Applause]

What I’m arguing, then, is that we can learn some lessons . . . about passing the torch on. We may not look at the specific spots where leadership is growing up. I’m not trying to argue that Tupac Shakur, or Biggie Smalls, is either Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Jesse Jackson, or Fannie Lou Hamer, or Maxine Waters. But they have legitimate viewpoints to be articulated in America.

[Applause]¹⁶⁸

Dyson’s invocation here of Snoop Dogg—“‘Snoop Doggy Dogg and Dr. Dre is at the door’”—is the first instantiation of the lyrical mode of emplotment. Of course this lyric is culled from Dr. Dre’s hit song titled “Nothin’ but a ‘G’ Thang” from his debut album, *The Chronic* (1992). Next, Dyson moves almost indiscriminately to Anita Baker and Luther Vandross, who suffice to demonstrate a double standard:

. . . Well, here’s the point . . . I love R & B music; I love a lot of what goes on there; but ain’t nobody ask Anita Baker why ain’t she making a statement about the deconstruction of misery in American society. Nobody’s asking Luther (and I love Luther—put him on every night: ‘Don’t you remember . . .’ I love Luther,

¹⁶⁸ Michael Eric Dyson, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 1 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2006).

right?) . . . But nobody's demanding that he be morally responsible. This is all I'm saying: as many problems as these young people have, when you talk about racial profiling . . . now there's a problem in the suburbs of Black America, where we can't drive out late-model cars, all of a sudden it's a problem. But when Tupac said, 'Just the other day, I got lynched by some crooked cops. And to this day, them same cops on the beat getting major pay. But when I get my check they taking tax out. So, we paying the pigs to knock the blacks out. [*Applause*]¹⁶⁹

Dyson's lyrical mode here has him singing the chorus to Luther Vandross' version of Bonnie Bramlett's and Leon Russell's "Superstar": "'Don't you remember . . .'" It seems that the point of this crossover gesture is liminal—that is, it allows Dyson to ensconce himself in two different fan bases: hip-hop and R & B (the latter presumably anathema to the former). Finally, Dyson extends his policing of double standards to the police itself. This time he invokes Tupac Shakur's "Point the Finga" to make his point. Needless to say, Dyson recalls Tupac's original lyrics verbatim, censoring only the profanity (e.g., Tupac's use of the word "motherfucker"). Altogether his invocations here of Snoop Dogg and Tupac Shakur exemplify a nostalgic gesture made frequently at the State of the Black Union, where throwbacks to the golden age of hip-hop are common. Likewise, in his very next invocation, Dyson quotes at length Biggie Smalls' "Things Done Changed" from his debut album *Ready to Die* (1994):

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

All I'm arguing for is at least if we listen to the misery, the hurt, the pain, the suffering, what we will see reflected into them—and I'll end here . . . Biggie Smalls said, 'Back in the days our parents used to take care of us. Look at them now, they're even blanking [*sic*] scared of us. Calling the city for help because they can't maintain, darn things done change. If I wasn't in the rap game, I probably have a key knee-deep in the crack game 'cause the streets is a shortstop. Either you slinging crack rock, or you got a wicked jump shot. Damn, it's hard being young from the slums, even five-cent gums, not knowing where your meal's coming from. What happened to the summertime cookout? Every time I turn around, a niggas [*sic*] being took out.' That a whole lot of analysis being packed into a lyric that can give us some insight. [*Applause*]¹⁷⁰

Another important aspect of Dyson's rhetorical mode is his use of tautology (as he does above, e.g., "the misery, the hurt, the pain, the suffering"), which he uses to great effect. But too often, again, he enumerates important historical actors for the sake of tautology (e.g., "Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Jesse Jackson, or Fannie Lou Hamer . . ."), ignoring, as it were, the fault lines of black politics.

It is no wonder, then, that Tavis Smiley also chose Stanley Crouch as a panelist. In many ways, Crouch is a perfect foil for Dyson's lyrical mode. Indeed, they here (and in 2004) debate ad nauseam about hip-hop. In fact, Crouch, who polemicizes against hip-hop's materialism, holds his ground throughout. Dyson, however, cuts against the grain

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

of Crouch's "straw [man] arguments," as he puts it, by contextualizing the "origins" of materialism outside of the genre:

Obviously, misogyny, sexism, homophobia . . . we acting like that started with some hip-hop . . . If you want to find the origin of misogyny, sexism, homophobia, you gotta go to church, you gotta go to the synagogue, you gotta go to the temple, right? [*Applause*] . . . If you want to start with materialism—materialism!—turn on the TV of a televangelist in a black face and talk about the extraordinary exploitation of black America. Because you know what? Half . . . Three fourths of us can't understand the lyrics from no rap music. We don't understand Snoop: 'Falling back on that ass with a hellified [*sic*] gangsta lean. Getting Funky on the mic' like an old batch of collard greens. Capital S, oh yes, I'm fresh, N, double O, P. D, O, double G, Y, D, O double G, ya see. Showing much flex when it's time to wreck a mic'. Pimping hos and clocking a grip like your name was Dolomite.' You don't understand that! But what you do understand is this: God told you to go to church. You are to be subject to a man. You are to obey that man. You are to be moral. . . . You may not call a woman a bitch or a ho, but if you tell her to be subordinate to a man, you treat her like a bitch or a ho, then you might as well be calling her that. [*Applause*]¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

As we have seen him do with both R & B and the police, Dyson here overturns hip-hop's convictions on a technicality—that is, his own rule of double standards. In doing so, thankfully, he speaks to a point already made in the previous chapter (cf., the relationship between televangelism and demagoguery). To be sure, Dyson is right to posit hip-hop as an epiphenomenon—that is to say, as a microcosm of neoliberalism rather than its *raison d'être*. In a sense, hip-hop functions as a kind of scapegoat for American society, since its lyrics are explicit both literally and figuratively. But then, as I have made clear, this sort of logocentric critique betrays an ignorance of musical semiosis outside the *logos*. Indeed, to most listeners, hip-hop is “absolute” music, since most of its lyrics are unintelligible. Still, when they are intelligible, hip-hop lyrics are almost always politically incorrect, and blatantly so. Perhaps it is not so much that hip-hop alone is running amok as that political correctness itself has become something of a strategy.¹⁷² Needless to say, hip-hop shows little in the way of alternatives to “underclass” mythologies and racial pathologies alike. To make his point, finally, Dyson returns to “Nothin’ but a ‘G’ Thang,” this time invoking Snoop Dogg’s second verse.

In the end, Dyson’s lyrical mode is, again, overcome with nostalgia for the golden age of hip-hop, this time for Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power”:

¹⁷² “Recent declines in blatant acts of racism might actually promote, ironically enough, more fear and distrust between racial groups, not less. . . . Using the logic of racial paranoia, repressing discussions about race, or framing them in sanitized and acceptable ways could just be another strategy to avoid sanctions against hidden racist feelings. Public *tolerance* [emphasis mine] doesn’t necessarily mean the absence of racism, and liberalism might just as likely be a cover for continued racial malice, racism with a poker face instead of a Klansman’s mask”; see John L. Jackson, Jr., *Racial Paranoia: The Unintended Consequences of Political Correctness* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2008), 200.

. . . back in 1988 and '89, when Chuck D was representing, 'Elvis was a hero to most, but he never meant to be [. . .] straight up racist that sucker was simple and plain. [Flavor Flav:] Mother blank him and John Wayne.' Nobody was going, 'Yes, that's the prophetic articulation of young black people. Let's support him.'
[Applause]¹⁷³

For Dyson, this warhorse is a reminder of the days when hip-hop was “prophetic,” though even here we need to remember that “Fight the Power” is attributable as much to the musings of Chuck D and Flavor Flav as it is to Spike Lee’s filmic imagination. Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power,” it turns out, was originally scored as a leitmotif for Spike Lee’s film *Do The Right Thing* (1989).¹⁷⁴ Indeed, the lyrics that Dyson recites above first came to prominence only through Radio Raheem’s diegetic boom box, not through some “authentic” hip-hop underground. Interestingly enough, the beginning of Chuck D’s third verse—“Elvis was a hero to most . . .”—enters into the soundtrack to *Do the Right Thing* at a critical moment in Lee’s film. Indeed, Lee cues up Chuck D’s lyrical dis of Elvis Presley precisely as Radio Raheem, his boom box, and Buggin’ Out advance on Sal’s

¹⁷³ Michael Eric Dyson, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 1 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2006).

¹⁷⁴ “The group Public Enemy’s rap anthem ‘Fight the Power’ (1989) is heard diegetically at various points in the film as it pours out of the character Radio Raheem’s boom box. . . . As the film progresses . . . the audience experiences a level of familiarity with ‘Fight the Power’ because of its persistent use. Lee is able to re-encode rap music’s signifying affect during the film’s narrative”; see Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., “Muzing [*sic*] New Hoods, Making New Identities: Film, Hip-Hop Culture, and Jazz Music,” *Callaloo*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2002): 315-316.

pizzeria. “We want some black people on that motherfucking [*sic*] ‘Wall of Fame’ now,” exclaims Buggin’ Out. But here as elsewhere when empirical questions of blackness arise (as they do more often in Spike Lee’s films than in Tyler Perry’s), “black people” seems to mean “great” black *men*, or perhaps simply Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. Nevertheless, Sal’s aversion to hip-hop, or “jungle music,” as he puts it, comes to a head when Sal takes a bat to Radio Raheem’s boom box. “I just killed your fucking [*sic*] radio,” explains, Sal, foreshadowing the tragic demise of Radio Raheem himself. In short, their heated argument escalates into a full-scale riot involving the police, who kill Radio Raheem.

Reading Lee’s film as it is, then, requires of his audience very little suspension of disbelief. Indeed, his plotting here will seem so familiar to most readers: race riot, arson, riot police, police brutality, megaphones, water hoses, paddy wagons, et cetera. This is the backdrop, finally, against which Lee resurrects his “Fight the Power” leitmotif, only this time Public Enemy comes to be heard at the extra-diegetic level. If, however, his narrative were still up for grabs, I might suggest an “alternate ending” that would erase everything after and including Sal’s stupid remark “I just killed your fucking [*sic*] radio”—everything after that moment of silence (or truth?) in memoriam hip-hop. Indeed, I might be so tempted as to simply roll the closing credits after so imposing a *Generalpause*. Altogether, those twenty-something seconds of silence form the most powerful gesture in Lee’s original film, since Radio Raheem, who can no longer live vicariously through Public Enemy, must *literally* “fight the power” himself for the very first time.

Of course Dyson's lyrical mode, in spite of what he himself may realize or claim, is contingent upon commercialized music. Indeed, Dyson's own search for some sort of "black authentic" has him performing black popular music, for example, in a manner itself conducive to commercialism. Unfortunately, this kind of narrative performatism shows little in the way of an alternative to historical uses of "blackness" for entertainment.¹⁷⁵

Needless to say, Dyson's lyrical mode here receives a thundering ovation. Having won the crowd over, then, it is easy for him now to overindulge in musical examples of "authenticity":

But if you listen to the best of these rappers, not the worst, not the stupid, not the ridiculous, not the lame, not the homophobic, not the sexist and so on . . . Mos Def said this: 'Speech is my hammer, bang the world into shape. Now let it fall. . . . You can laugh and criticize Michael Jackson if you want to. Woody Allen molested and married his stepdaughter. Same press kicking dirt on Michael's name shows Woody and Soon-Yi at the playoff game. Is it fair? Is it equal? Is it just? Is it right? Do we do the same thing if the defendant's face is white? White

¹⁷⁵ "The discovery or recognition and subsequent appropriation of black American musical expression for white consumption would run along similar, although more complex routes. . . . the encounter with black expressive culture, especially black music, also fed into another trajectory of the white American's search for the authentic. . . . By seeking the essence of black music, American whites could confess to its emotional appeal and profess to their feelings of affinity. Beyond the spiritual linkage, they could also undertake to appropriate those aspects of black culture embodying such felt authenticity"; see Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 81, 90-91.

boys doing it, well, it's success. I start doing it, well, it's suspect. They say they want you successful, but then they make it stressful. You start keeping pace, they start changing up the tempo.' There's a lot more of that out there. [Applause]¹⁷⁶

Dyson's invocation above splices two tracks from Mos Def's 1999 album *Black on Both Sides*: "Hip Hop" and "Mr. Nigga [*sic*]," respectively. After another ovation, Raymond M. Brown attempts to moderate Dyson's overtime. "I'm a Baptist preacher," explains Dyson, cutting Brown off, "I gotta end three times."¹⁷⁷ "Why don't you get a contract," shouts Stanley Crouch.¹⁷⁸ But Dyson is determined to have the last word: "Lauryn Hill said this: 'And, even after all my logic and my theory, I add a 'MF' so you ignorant niggas [*sic*] hear me.' Think about that. [Applause]"¹⁷⁹ Needless to say, his invocation of Lauryn Hill's verse on "Zealots" above works the crowd into a frenzy of applause. Of course the Fugees' Grammy award-winning album *The Score* (1996)—the album from which the song "Zealots" emerged—has risen in popular estimation.¹⁸⁰ Stanley Crouch, however, is unamused. "I can't believe this," explains Crouch. "That was an audition."¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁶ Michael Eric Dyson, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 1 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2006).

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Stanley Crouch, Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Dyson, Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ In 1996, *The Score* topped the charts, and was certified six times platinum in 1997. In addition, popular magazines such as *Rolling Stone*, *Vibe*, and *The Source* all have bid for its canonicity.

¹⁸¹ Crouch, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 1 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2006).

The last instantiation of Dyson's lyrical mode begins anecdotally, with a self-reflexive aside about his own initiation into the genre:

To me, one of the reasons I speak to young people and about them so often, and I don't uncritically celebrate or valorize them. When I step up into a place I go in to where these rappers, they look at me, they think 'well, you a, you know, light-skinned, curly-haired, suit-and-tie kind of Negro. What you know about hip-hop?,' right? And I break 'em off something proper, dust 'em off, and let 'em know what time it is. [*Applause*] . . . Then I say this: I know your stuff, but what do you know about what I teach? [*Applause*]¹⁸²

Indeed, Professors Dyson and Cornel West, for examples, have actually taken to tutoring the very rappers whose music they teach. Lupe Fiasco, for example, has sat in on their undergraduate courses at Georgetown and Princeton Universities, respectively.¹⁸³¹⁸⁴ The "Intro" and "Outro" to Dyson's *Know What I Mean?: Reflections on Hip-Hop* (2007), moreover, were written by Jay-Z and Nas, respectively. Too often have African-

¹⁸² Dyson, *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ "Dyson is known for his friends in high places . . . recording artist Lupe Fiasco, who he brought to one of his lectures last fall"; see Margaret Viator, "In the Limelight: Professing Jay-Z," *The Hoya*, December 5, 2011. Accessed January 11, 2013, <http://www.thehoya.com/in-the-limelight-professing-jay-z-1.2726219#.UPCVaaVemfR>.

¹⁸⁴ "Dr. Cornel West, in typical baller [*sic*] fashion, invited rapper Lupe Fiasco to his AAS 201 lecture today"; see Giri Nathan, "Lupe Fiasco Hits Princeton, Waxes Philosophical, Doesn't Rap," (Princeton) *University Press Club*, October 20, 2010. Accessed January 11, 2013, <http://www.universitypressclub.com/archive/2010/10/lupe-fiasco-hits-princeton/>.

Americanists and rappers tried their hand at the other (or another!) profession. A few examples are noteworthy: West's own checkered career as an actor and musician (particularly his 2001 CD *Sketches of My Culture*, and of course the institutional vicissitudes that followed), Kanye West's flippant remarks about George Bush in 2005, West alongside Mos Def on *Real Time with Bill Maher* in 2007, Dyson's defense of hip-hop at a congressional hearing convened by Representative Bobby Rush in 2007, Lupe Fiasco's debate with Bill O'Reilly on *The Factor* in 2011, Paul Holdenraber's "conversation" with West and Jay-Z at the New York Public Library in 2010, Jay-Z's appearance on *The Michael Eric Dyson Show* in 2010, and Dyson's "exclusive interview" with Nas on *The Ed Show* in 2012. Nevertheless, by the time we reach Nas' interview mentioned above, the discursive foundation for rappers themselves to "talk politics" has already been laid. Indeed, it is as if their poetic license were not enough, as if their delusions of demagoguery have them searching for a more "*sophisticated*" discourse.

Dyson's affinity for the heart of hip-hop's canon, returns us to the lyrical mode of emplotment. His invocation here of Nas' "N.Y. State of Mind," for example, has Dyson reading *Illmatic* long before the publication of the compendium *Born to Use Mics* (2010) he co-edited. Nas enters into Dyson's narrative through a vindication comparing "N.Y. State of Mind" to *Hamlet* (or was it *Macbeth*):

It takes high intelligence to create lyrics of the extraordinary poetic intensity that many of these young people do. Now take that same intellectual capacity, when Nas said, 'It's only right that I was born to use mics, and the stuff that I write is

even tougher than dice.’ So, if you have that kind of lyrical creativity, then he said, ‘I never sleep, ‘cause sleep’s the cousin of death.’ I had a cabana with Nas one time, and I said, ‘Do you realize that’s Shakespeare?’ He said, ‘Wow, Shakespeare?’ I said, ‘That’s Shakespearean, brother.’¹⁸⁵

In the end, there was not another panelist at this inaugural State of the Black Union who entertained the crowd so thoroughly. Clearly, Dyson found his niche, to be sure, but the epideictic manner in which his lyrical mode was conveyed gave his performance an *ethos* not entirely attributable to hip-hop per se. Indeed, what a sui generis “public intellectual” is Dyson, and what a persuasive mode popular music, that more and more we come to expect and fetishize their coupling. In fact, Dyson issues a clarion call to rappers to “tap into” the “*rhetoric* [emphasis mine] and insight” of literary genres whose canons include writers like Shakespeare and Du Bois.¹⁸⁶ What they are to “do” with this “rhetoric,” musically or otherwise, however, remains unclear. It seems that the significance of black intellectual history, for Dyson (as for Henry Louis Gates, Jr.), is not only literary—clearly, he wants to sophisticate rappers, even those with whom he has already made common cause—but also as a way for hip-hop to assimilate to a politics of respectability.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Dyson, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 1 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2006).

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ “To this point I have described Gates’s interpretive stance as revolving in part around a call to transcend politics in or to purge political considerations from black textual interpretations. . . . to *redefine* [emphasis his] political significance to give priority to

There are at least two nonmusical examples of which we need take account. The first of these is a trope, which rears its head again, for examples, in 2001, 2003, and 2004. Indeed, Dyson often turns to Robert McAfee Brown's *The Significance of the Church* (1956) in order to satirize the so-called "black Church." "I believe that Robert McAfee Brown was right," explains Dyson, "when he said about the church like this: 'The church is like Noah's ark; if it wasn't for the storm on the outside, you couldn't stand the stink on the inside.'"^{188,189} Of course this satirizing gesture provides comic relief from an otherwise serious indictment of religious patriarchy. Needless to say, this trope of Brown can be found also in Dyson's *Reflecting Black: African-American Cultural Criticism* (1993) and *Open Mike: Reflections on Philosophy, Race, Sex, Culture and Religion* (2003).

The second example relates to the last instantiation of Dyson's lyrical mode mentioned above. Oddly enough, he goes out of his way, again, to authenticate his "blackness," which, for Dyson, means explaining his privileged position and ascendancy: "I know I get into some places 'cause I got that look: I'm a light-skinned, glasses-wearing, curly-haired, suit-and-tie kind of Negro. But, when I get up in there, I let all

literary expression and criticism as strategic action. . . . a coup for the depoliticization of Afro-Americanist intellectual activity. . . . Du Bois's career realizes as few others have the deepest *epistemological* [emphasis his] significance of Marx's Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach: 'The philosophers have only *interpreted* [emphasis Marx] the world, in various ways; the point is to change it'; see "'Tradition' and Ideology in Black Intellectual Life" in Adolph L. Reed, Jr.'s *W. E. B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 150, 186.

¹⁸⁸ Dyson, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 1 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2006).

¹⁸⁹ "The Church is something like Noah's ark. If it weren't for the storm outside, you couldn't stand the smell inside"; see Robert McAfee Brown, *The Significance of the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 17.

them other niggas [*sic*] inside of me out!”¹⁹⁰ Dyson’s tacit notion of “blackness”—a heuristic notion it would seem that can be appropriated by nearly anyone—here is limited for the most part to phenotypical characteristics, specifically skin color and hair texture. However strategic his essentialism, Dyson’s racial imagination here simply reifies dominant notions and reigning narratives about “blackness” as white social scientists have discerned and defined it. By including his sartorial elegance, moreover, he collapses an important difference between race and class. The problem here with his wearing reading glasses, finally, concerns the intelligence quotient (IQ) that it presumes (and, perhaps more significantly, the anti-intellectual pushback it often begets). In a sense, Dyson is an example of Hazel Carby’s “race man,” or at least he looks the part.¹⁹¹

In a 2010 interview with *Prepidemic Magazine*, Cornel West, for example, invokes St. Paul’s epistle to the Church at Ephesus (Ephesians 6:11) to explain his own sartorial elegance—his neatly creased, cuffed, and elbow-patched Andover Shop suit and tassel loafers—as nothing less than the “armor of God.”¹⁹² To be sure, nowhere in his performance here does Dyson imagine his own two-piece suit and tie as part of some special, higher calling. But his (and West’s) professorial-sartorial imagination affords him opportunity to display more than just his lyrical mode. In fact, it is almost as if

¹⁹⁰ Dyson, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 1 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2006).

¹⁹¹ “[Cornel] West’s claim is that moral and ethical values of intellectual practice are inscribed in the clothed body, and these clothes secure the status of the intellectual within. . . . But to define this appearance as the *only* [emphasis hers] confirmation of intellectual vocation, critical intelligence, and moral action is also to secure these qualities as irrevocably and conservatively masculine”; see “The Souls of Black Men” in Hazel Carby’s *Race Men* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 21.

¹⁹² “Cornel West - On His Uniform,” *Prepidemic Magazine*, accessed January 13, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oPOIVmLz88I>.

Dyson's ambition to fail the "paper bag test," as he puts it, has him performing his black masculinity here only because, for most black audiences, the other panelists, for examples, Earvin "Magic" Johnson and Danny Glover, are "black enough."¹⁹³ But the idealized conception of "blackness" that Johnson and Glover seemingly represent is itself ideologically overdetermined by their also ideologically overdetermined—but differently so—masculinity. Too often is black masculinity circumscribed by pathologies of athleticism and violence, or, in their case, a hook shot and "lethal weapon," respectively.¹⁹⁴ Nevertheless, the notion of "blackness" itself has come to be connected to somatic performances of masculinity—"all them other niggas [*sic*]" hiding in Dyson. Apart from its uncanny resemblance to "double-consciousness," the problem with Dyson's strategic essentialism here is its pretensions to noblesse oblige. Indeed, the petit bourgeois respectability here to which he assimilates is celebrated for its ostensibly post-racial, politically subversive powers.

In 2001, Dyson barely broaches the subject of hip-hop, which he seems to have exhausted above. Again, he gets satirical mileage out of the codex that Brown cites in

¹⁹³ "Not long after I arrived at Yale, some of the brothers who came from private schools in New Orleans held a 'bag party.' As a classmate explained to me, a bag party was a New Orleans custom wherein a brown paper bag was stuck on the door and anyone darker than it was denied entrance. . . . it was replaced by an opposite test whereby those who were deemed 'not black enough,' ideologically, were to be shunned"; see Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Cornel West, *The Future of the Race* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 18.

¹⁹⁴ "What Danny Glover can bring directors . . . is his close association with a filmic performance of black manhood which has money, is the law, and which embodies all the ethical codes of middle-class white America. . . . the *Lethal Weapon* series is the national embodiment of the perfect black male, a sensitive black father and relentless seeker of justice. Danny Glover's persona is the lethal weapon that is used to eliminate representations of other black men that Hollywood creates as dangerous"; see Hazel V. Carby, *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America* (New York: Verso, 1999), 111.

The Significance of the Church (cf., “The Church is like Noah’s Ark . . .”). Indeed, the lyrical mode to which he modulated so frequently in 2000 is here accorded but a brief appearance:

Finally, I embrace, with criticism, hip-hop culture. . . . and we’ll give the last words of my speech to Mos Def, who said, ‘Speech is my hammer, bang the world into shape. Now let it fall. You can laugh and criticize Michael Jackson if you want to. Woody Allen molested and married his stepdaughter. Same press kicking dirt on Michael’s name show Woody and Soon-Yi at the playoff game. They say they want you successful, but then they make it stressful. You start keeping pace, they start changing up the tempo.’¹⁹⁵

Once again, his invocation of Mos Def here splices together two tracks—“Hip Hop” and “Mr. Nigga [*sic*]”—from the album *Black on Both Sides*. To be sure, Dyson’s first invocation of Mos Def in 2000 was abridged from the original recording; but this one even more so. Of course this familiar kind of repetition and difference has already been theorized: Gates’ theory of Signifyin(g) often echoed in the humanities.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ Dyson, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 3 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2006).

¹⁹⁶ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

In 2002, Tavis Smiley stacked the deck in demagoguery's favor, since Dyson here is first teamed up with his erstwhile mentor, Cornel West.¹⁹⁷ Indeed, their tag team lends itself, as we have seen with Farrakhan, to "the spectacle of excess."¹⁹⁸ Interestingly, Dyson's use of black intellectual history above invites comparison here to West's "nostalgic" mode of emplotment, not only because both invoke the same historical actors, but because they do so illustratively. West's canon here includes, for examples, W. E. B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and James Baldwin, all of whom he mentions only in passing. In fact, their mention is a suspenseful lead-up to the "tag." "I'm going on too long," says West, "I don't want to be unfair with you all though. But Dyson, you want to take this over, brother?"¹⁹⁹ West's maneuvering to tag his teammate finds both of them "stepping off," or perhaps simply steppin(g), much to the crowd's entertainment. Indeed, the show culminates with the two literally locked in fraternal embrace. Of course West is himself a member of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, which might explain why his cane functions as a prop rather than a walking

¹⁹⁷ "I am grateful beyond words to Cornel West, who has been for nearly a decade a mentor, big brother and precious friend. His deep intellectual passions, spiritual energies and brilliant scholarship have not only aided me, but they have helped redefine the character of American and African-American intellectual work for our time. More than that, he has stood by me during the hardest of times, a debt I can never repay"; see "Acknowledgments" in Michael Eric Dyson, "Uses of heroes: Celebration and criticism in the interpretation of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr." (PhD Diss., Princeton University, 1993), vi.

¹⁹⁸ Roland Barthes, "The World of Wrestling" in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 16.

¹⁹⁹ West, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 3 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2006).

stick. But it is hardly surprising that they incorporate the rhetoric of steppin(g) into their narrative performatism, since dance is integral to the ring shout.²⁰⁰

Hip-hop first enters into Dyson's 2002 performance in juxtaposition with public education. In his *Washingtonian* critique, Dyson posits educators' expectations of their students (commonly called "tracking") as a self-fulfilling prophecy:

One of the real tragedies of our young people in terms of our educational system is that we don't expect them to learn in the same way—we don't challenge them in the same way. So, we go to schools increasingly populated by black people, but we don't expect those young people to be able to learn. I go to these institutions all the time, and people say, 'Why is it that a young person can learn rap music—they can learn a lyric—but they can't learn mathematics?' You know why? Because Biggie and Nas assume they can understand what they were talking about; and they presuppose they can be as intelligent as they wanted to be, complex as they wanted to be, highly articulate as they wanted to be, and the young people would have enough desire to follow them. We don't presuppose that the people who want to study quantum mechanics and Einsteinian,

²⁰⁰ "Because the ring shout was a dance in which the sacred and the secular were conflated, I must note here the similar conflation—indeed, near-inseparability—of Afro-American music and dance in black culture, both in the ring and outside it"; see Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., "Ring Shout! Literary Studies, Historical Studies, And Black Music Inquiry," *Black Music Research Journal* 11:2 (1991): 267-268.

Newtonian physics can learn that. So, if you don't go in expecting your child to be able to learn, your child is not going to be able to learn, right? [*Applause*]²⁰¹

I call Dyson's critique of public education here "Washingtonian" because of its close resemblance to an oft-quoted passage in Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* (1901).²⁰² The true problem with Dyson's critique above, however, is that its bid for Biggie Smalls and Nas depends on the intentional fallacy (i.e., authorial intention rather than readerly response). Besides, he gives Biggie Smalls and Nas (and other profits prophets of the hood?) too much credit, since—unless we are talking about the vicariousness of diehard fans and groupies alike—most consumers of their music have no penchant for the kind of "deep" hermeneutic listening that is Dyson's forte. Not only does his critique fail to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate situations for listening to "conscious" hip-hop, but it also fails to take account of the degree to which inappropriate situations for listening have affected the faculty of listening in general, or perhaps even the "desire," as he puts it, that arises from the circumstances of such listening. What might have been taken account of instead of "Biggie and Nas" (or at any rate, the memorability of their lyrics) is the overstretching and underresourcing of public

²⁰¹ Dyson, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 5 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2006).

²⁰² "The world should not pass judgment upon the Negro, and especially the Negro youth, too quickly or too harshly. The Negro boy has obstacles, discouragements, and temptations to battle with that are little known to those not situated as he is. When a white boy undertakes a task, it is taken for granted that he will succeed. On the other hand, people are usually surprised if the Negro boy does not fail. In a word, the Negro youth starts out with the presumption against him"; see "Boyhood Days" in Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1995), 17.

institutions, or at least the impact of this underfunding on the “achievement gap.” Finally, as we have seen him do in 2000, Dyson here uses the tautological mode (cf., “. . . as intelligent as they wanted to be, complex as they wanted to be, highly articulate as they wanted to be . . .) to his rhetorical advantage.

Dyson’s critique of “tracking” mentioned above segues into an analysis of “bad” parenting very similar to Farrakhan’s self-help ideology. Essentially, for Dyson (as for Farrakhan), the apparatus of government is not a substitute for what the “underclass” itself can do with encouragement and self-help. To make his point, Dyson invokes the lyrics to Nas’ “N.Y. State of Mind” (as he did in 2000):

That’s why Nas said, ‘It’s only right that I was born to use mics, and the stuff that I write is even tougher than dice. I’m taking rapping to a new plateau—through rap slow. My rhyming is a vitamin—hell without a capsule. Smooth criminal on beat breaks. Never put me in your box if your stuff eats tapes.’²⁰³

In so far as he attends to mainstream hip-hop’s bent for materialism, it is Wu-Tang Clan’s “C.R.E.A.M.,” a song from their 1993 album *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*, that is Dyson’s springboard for analysis:

²⁰³ Dyson, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 5 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2006).

It was Wu-Tang Clan that said, ‘C.R.E.A.M. (Cash Rules Everything Around Me). Got to get the money, dollar, dollar bill y’all.’ . . . In terms of organizing capital and cash, we blame young people for being so adoring of money, but when you’ve been historically denied, you end up valorizing the very thing that you were denied.

The problem with Dyson’s behaviorist rhetoric here, however, other than its own mythologizing and pathologizing effects, is that it draws the line at the “underclass.” Indeed, the idea that poor black people are somehow predisposed to commodity fetishism is an irresponsible notion, since capitalism is a global phenomenon.²⁰⁴ After Biggie, Nas, and the Wu-Tang Clan, finally, it is surprising to find a crossover invocation here of Barbra Streisand’s Academy Award-winning title track, “The Way We Were” (1973). “We live in the United States (of amnesia),” explains Dyson. “Our national theme is provided by Barbra Streisand: ‘What’s too painful to remember, we simply choose to forget.’”²⁰⁵ Needless to say, this same crossover gesture is elsewhere deployed verbatim (see, for example, his 2003 debate with Professor Carl Cohen).²⁰⁶²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ “The ‘American century’ is over and we are entering a period characterized by the formation of multiple centers of global capitalism: the US, Europe, China, possibly Latin America, each of them representing capitalism with a specific local twist: the US for neoliberalism; Europe for what remains of the Welfare State; China for ‘Eastern Values’ and authoritarian capitalism; Latin America for populist capitalism”; see Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (New York: Verso, 2011), 166.

²⁰⁵ Dyson, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 5 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2006).

²⁰⁶ “We live in the United States of Amnesia. The theme song is provided by Barbra Streisand: ‘What’s too painful to remember/ we simply choose to forget’”; see “Debating

In 2003, James Cone and Jeremiah Wright stole the show. Not that Dyson went unnoticed; Smiley's first panel, titled "The Black Church: Relevant, Repressive, or Reborn?," leads with Dyson. But the disproportionate space given over to Cone and Wright reflects the degree to which their narrative performances came to overshadow their protégé's. Perhaps the absence of Dyson's lyrical mode here is telling in this regard. He does, however, manage to give a shout-out to Cornel West, who was sitting in the first row, and also plug his own *Holler If You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur* (2001) through an anecdote about airport security. But, again, there is no lyrical mode of emplotment here to be found. Of course the codex that Brown cites in *The Significance of the Church* makes another obligatory appearance. Dyson's singing of the hymn "My Hope Is Built On Nothing Less," finally, is the closest thing that his narrative performatism here offers to the lyrical mode: "So, *my hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood in [sic] righteousness. I dare not trust the slightest [sic] frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name [emphasis his].*"²⁰⁸

In 2004, however, Dyson relies heavily upon his lyrical mode. As we have seen him do in 2000, Dyson here exhausts his favorite repertoire (of Snoop Dogg, OutKast, LL Cool J, Jay-Z, Talib Kweli, Mos Def, Lauryn Hill, and so forth). Early on he calls our attention to the "incredible chasm," as he puts it, between the listening habits of baby

Affirmative Action" in *The Michael Eric Dyson Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004), 83.

²⁰⁷ "Affirmative Action," Justice Talking (NPR), February 11, 2003. Accessed January 16, 2013, <http://www.justicetalking.org/ShowPage.aspx?ShowID=398>.

²⁰⁸ Dyson, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 7 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2006).

boomers like himself and posterity.²⁰⁹ Dyson opens his performance with an invocation of Snoop Dogg’s remix of “P.I.M.P.,” a song from 50 Cent’s album *Get Rich or Die Tryin’* (2003). But he does so opportunistically, since the song’s chorus is a springboard for Dyson to demo his own lyrics:

. . . and then we got songs, ‘I don’t know what you heard about me ‘cause I’m a blank, blank, P, I, M, P.’ Like we are: Public Intellectuals with Moral Principles. [Applause] . . . And we tell young cats, ‘I pimp pages, turn metaphors to better whores to serve sages, like Socrates and Plato, while you dealing with tiddlywinks and Play-Doh. You think that’ll play though? I write books like niggas [sic] write hooks—is what I do.’²¹⁰

But here the crowd does not respond to this original lyric with the same satisfaction with which Dyson himself seems to regard it. Not that it totally flops; the crowd oohs and aahs his prolific literary pretensions (cf., “I write books like niggas [sic] write hooks”). But his radical redefinition of “P.I.M.P.” above is more affective in this regard. Indeed, Dyson’s lyrical mode is often playful, to be sure, but at the same time it aims to undermine what he himself refers to as “black bourgeois capitulation to materialism and commercialism.”²¹¹ His answer, embedded in the lyrics he invokes, is “consciousness.”

²⁰⁹ Dyson, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 10 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2006).

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid.

But then again, as I have made clear, in spite of what Dyson himself may think, the “conscious” *material* he cites is also constituted by the commercial world he attempts to undermine. Again, this is hip-hop’s tragic dilemma.

Nevertheless, Dyson pursues his preoccupation with “conscious” hip-hop in more specifically controversial directions. OutKast’s song “Rosa Parks” (1998), for example, offers Dyson a good point of entry:

What happens, finally, when we get a group like OutKast, who understands who Rosa Parks is? We sue ‘em. They take Rosa Parks, not literally, ‘Uh-huh, hush that fuss. Everybody move to the back of the bus. Do you want to bump or slump with us? We the type of people make the party get crunk.’ Wait a minute, you can’t sue on that ‘cause you don’t know what it means, right? [*Laughter*] . . . Then you listen to the first verse: ‘I met a gypsy and she hipped me to some life game, to stimulate then activate the left and right brain.’ Oh, Rosa Parks is a metaphor for engaging enlightened elders who can drop some science. Now, I’m going to segregate the bus of life between the talented and non-talented: All you whack rappers, get to the back of the bus; it’s a metaphor.²¹²

For Dyson, OutKast’s seemingly altered “consciousness” suffices to explain their song’s titular heroine. But over against Dyson’s hermeneutic guide to their lyrics, we need to

²¹² Ibid.

remember that Parks actually sued OutKast for their misappropriation of her name. However frivolous, this lawsuit, which escalated to the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit, shows the complex reality in which musical hermeneutics is more and more at the crossroads of the academy and the everyday, political world—an extra-semiotic world in which an individual’s right to “freedom of expression” (or at any rate, OutKast’s right to commodify that “freedom of expression”) may be at odds with another individual’s conflicting “right of publicity” (i.e., Parks’ own rights to the commodification of herself). We need pause, then, only briefly here to note that Parks herself (or was it Johnnie Cochran?) sought some five billion dollars in damages.²¹³ Indeed, *Rosa Parks v. LaFace Records, et al.* set a legal precedent not just for musical hermeneutics to hold sway, but also, more significantly, for hip-hop’s *metaphorical* mode itself.

When it comes to the commercial exploitation of black women, however, Dyson draws the line at the body. In his analysis of Super Bowl XXXVIII, for example, Dyson ruminates on the halftime show for which Janet Jackson will forever live in infamy. But instead of defending her “freedom of expression” (as he does for OutKast above), Dyson focuses his hermeneutics here on Justin Timberlake and the exonerative powers of “white privilege”:

²¹³ Julie Bosman and Jeremy W. Peters, “Rosa Parks Won a Fight, but Left a Licensing Rift,” *New York Times*, October 8, 2006. Accessed January 19, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/08/business/yourmoney/08rosa.html?pagewanted=all>.

What happened to Justin Timber(fake), right? [*Laughter*] . . . Oh, you wanna be black 'til it costs you something? 'Cry Me A River.' 'Rock Your Body.' You can appropriate black style, but to live in the full dimension of this black masculinity has no retreating place back into white-skin privilege. Janet Jackson got stuck out there by herself. But that white hand reaching across the chasm of history, to grab that black breast and reveal it, is part of the pathology of white, masculine supremacy against our women. [*Applause*] . . . But here's the deeper pathology: Here we are in a masculine, testosterone contest called a football field, institutionalized hoochies [*sic*] on the sideline [*Applause*] . . . the cameras scoot up on them as they're 'jiggling baby, jiggling baby,' the commercial's about beer and Viagra. When that black female breast was used to suck a white civilization, you didn't complain. [*Applause*] . . . When that black female breast fed—mammies—those white children who suckled at your breast, you didn't complain. And when white men raped black women without compunction or moral resistance, you didn't complain. So, I'm not gonna damn my hip-hop generation brother. Educate him, inspire him, instigate him, remove the blindness from his eyes, but never leave him, always embrace him, and make him understand his true greatness, so he'll stop saying 'bitch,' 'ho' . . . and 'slut.' 'Queen,' 'momma,' 'lover,' and 'wife'.²¹⁴

²¹⁴ Dyson, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 10 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2006).

The irony here, however, is that Dyson is also the epitome of the very thing for which he criticizes Timberlake: strategic essentialism.²¹⁵ Indeed, Dyson’s own strategic use of “blackness” (or “code-switching,” as he refers to it at the 2010 State of the Black Union) has afforded him opportunity both institutionally and community-theatrically.²¹⁶ Even though he has an ax to grind with Timberlake, Dyson’s contextual analysis (demythology?) of the spectacle of football is still well-taken. To make his point, Dyson alludes to LL Cool J’s “Jingling Baby” (1990). His conclusion, however, is inconsistent with the reasoning behind it. It is as if the much longer and wider history of the commercial exploitation of black female bodies—say, from the seventeenth century on—suffices to exonerate hip-hop from its own complicity in the (re)production of that history. Indeed, we might have expected almost the opposite. As Stanley Crouch explains, “I don’t see it like that at all. [*Applause*]” “I’m fifty-eight years old,” says Crouch. “When I was eighteen, a woman like Vivica Fox would’ve had two words to say

²¹⁵ “The strategic use of essentialism,” according to Gayatri Spivak (the literary theorist to whom the notion is attributed), “can turn into an alibi for proselytizing academic essentialisms. . . . essentialism is a loose-tongued phrase, not a philosophical school. It is used by nonphilosophers simply to mean all kinds of things when they don’t know what other word to use. . . . I mean one might just as well speak about an essential non-essence. It’s possible to speak of everything. But an essence, if it’s minimalizable, is also cross-hatched”; see “In a Word” in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 4, 8, 23.

²¹⁶ “I’m the very person who said, ‘He gotta holler at white folk and wink at us.’ So, don’t tell me that I didn’t understand that [President Obama] had to engage in ‘code-switching,’ which is the predicate for acceptance into the larger circle of white-supremacist logic, so that [he] could then get in with a black voice”; see Michael Eric Dyson, “Tavis Smiley Black Agenda Forum,” C-SPAN Video Library, accessed January 21, 2012, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/292635-7>.

to a Negro [*sic*] like 50 Cent: ‘Go away! [*Laughter*]’ . . . We’re in a corrupt popular culture.”²¹⁷

In his rebuttal, Dyson problematizes Crouch’s monolithic idea of hip-hop and cites five artists whom he thinks will suffice to qualify a distinction between “conscious rap” and “rap that is subject to vicious forms of mythology and pathology,” as he puts it.²¹⁸ Dyson’s lyrical mode of emplotment here is worth quoting at length:

If you listen to Jay-Z, who says, ‘I dumb down my lyrics to double my dollars. They criticize me, but they all say “holler.” If skills sold, truth be told, lyrically I be Talib Kweli. I’d like to rap like 50 Cents [*sic*], but I’ve sold five million. So, I ain’t rapped like 50 Cents [*sic*].’ Now, his point was . . . crass commercialism has infiltrated the hip-hop game at such a deep and profound level that the moral and lyrical decadence is what rises to the top; and the serious, informed, critical, sustained, spiritual rappers get marginalized. That’s why, listen, Talib Kweli said this: ‘You cats drink champagne, toast death and pain, like slaves on a ship, talking about who got the flyest chain.’ Or, like Mos Def, ‘You can laugh and criticize Michael Jackson if you want to. Woody Allen molested and married his stepdaughter. Same press kicking dirt on Michael’s name show Woody and Soon-Yi at the playoff game.’ Nas said, ‘It’s only right that I was born to use mics, and

²¹⁷ Stanley Crouch, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 10 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2006).

²¹⁸ Dyson, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 10 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2006).

the stuff that I write is even tougher than dice. I'm taking rapping to a new plateau—through rap slow. My rhyming is a vitamin—hell without a capsule.' Lauryn Hill said, 'And, even after all my logic and my theory, I add a 'MF' so you ignorant niggas [*sic*] hear me.'²¹⁹

The error in Dyson's invocation of Jay-Z's "Moment of Clarity" (2003) above represents a rare occurrence of his lyrical mode. Indeed, Dyson here mistakes Jay-Z's lyrical nod to "Common (Sense)" (the rapper to whom Jay-Z ostensibly aspires) for "50 Cent" (the rapper against whom he has waxed lyrical diss). Compare Dyson's words above with the following transcription of Jay-Z's original lyrics below:

I dumb down for my audience and double my dollars. They criticize me for it, yet they all yell 'Holler.' If skills sold, truth be told, I'd probably be lyrically Talib Kweli. Truthfully, I wanna rhyme like *Common Sense* [emphasis mine] (but I did five mill'). I ain't been rhyming like *Common since* [emphasis mine].²²⁰

Perhaps Dyson's mishearing (or misreading), then, has something to do with the fact that "sense" and "cents" are heterographic homophones. Needless to say, the lyrics to Talib Kweli's "Africa Dream" (2000), Mos Def's "Mr. Nigga [*sic*]" (1999), Nas' "N.Y. State

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ "Moment of Clarity" in Jay-Z, *The Black Album*, prod. Eminem and Luis Resto, CD (Roc-A-Fella Records/Def Jam Recordings, 2003).

of Mind” (1994), and Lauryn Hill’s “Zealots” (1996), are invoked here with the strictest fidelity to the original recordings themselves. By 2004, however, Dyson’s familiar troping of Mos Def, Nas, and Hill, for examples, come to seem cliché (and, of course, he eventually squeezes Robert McAfee Brown into his performance here as well).

As we have seen him do above, Dyson continues to sidestep the problematics of hip-hop so long as he can posit the genre as a microcosm of American society at large:

I’m just saying this: it didn’t start with hip-hop. We acting like drug crime started with hip-hop. We acting like murder started with hip-hop. We acting like black pathology started with hip-hop. Hip-Hop can reify it, glorify it, glamorize it, and rearticulate it—it didn’t begin it. Anti-intellectualism is something we got to fight from long time ago, when it wasn’t cool to be smart. We have to deglamorize ignorance and elevate black articulation, which is what I try to do, West tries to do—we want to make the life of the mind sexy for people, so when they check us, they say ‘*God damn!* [emphasis his] Them brothers representing.’ That’s what I’m trying to do.²²¹

But it is precisely these kinds of affective (sexy?) performance of intellect that I find problematic, for they are coming more and more to displace critical inquiry, stretching

²²¹ Dyson, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 10 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2006).

our expectations, as it were, even as to what scholarship (or perhaps simply a lecture) might actually entail.

In his discussion of hip-hop qua dance music, finally, Dyson raises the paradox of women grinding to a genre whose lyrics objectify them. As Dyson explains, “. . . a more difficult choice for young ladies on the dance floor, when that 50 song comes on, or when that Juvenile comes on, and you go, ‘Well, dang, it’s messed up, but the beat is slamming.’ [Laughter]”²²² Indeed, this paradox is common practice for consumers, whose aesthetic valuations of music are quite situational, if not entirely arbitrary. In fact, inappropriate situations for listening often give rise to inappropriate listening (and irresponsible hermeneutic theory). But it is hardly surprising that inappropriate situations of listening should arise from inappropriate music; or perhaps simply that we should dance to “dance music” as such. Morality aside, there is nothing shameful about dancing to dance music. The true problem here, however, is that these music-makers and dancers are often anthropologized as agents of “meaningful” (i.e., politically subversive) discourse. Honestly, when was the last time anyone went to a nightclub in Meatpacking, for example, to *listen* to music?

In 2005, Dyson slips into his lyrical mode only briefly to discuss “Jesus Walks,” the Grammy award-winning song from Kanye West’s debut album *The College Dropout* (2004). Indeed, his discovery of West provides Dyson a substitute for Robert McAfee Brown:

²²² Ibid.

I hear the Gospel being preached better by Kanye West . . . ‘I’m saying, like Kathy Lee needed Regis, that’s how much I need Jesus . . . God walks with the pimps, the pushers, the hos, the macs, and the hustlers too.’²²³

Indeed, Dyson calls our attention to West’s ostensible religious solidarity with those whom society has rendered personae non gratae. As West explains, “To the hustlers, killers, murderers, drug dealers, even the strippers (Jesus walks with them). To the victims of welfare . . . (Jesus walks with them).”²²⁴ Unfortunately, Dyson does not so much as raise the actual subtext of West’s lyrics:

. . . the way Kathie Lee needed Regis—that’s the way I need Jesus. So, here go my single dog—radio needs this. They say you can rap about anything except for Jesus. That means guns, sex, lies, video tape. But if I talk about God, my record won’t get played, huh? . . . Next time I’m in the club, everybody screaming out, ‘Jesus walks.’

To be sure, “Jesus Walks” aims to undermine the sacred/secular dichotomy of black religion and popular music. Needless to say, hip-hop’s fetish for the bling has created a

²²³ Dyson, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 13 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2006).

²²⁴ “Jesus Walks” in Kanye West, *The College Dropout*, prod. Kanye West, CD (Roc-A-Fella Records/Def Jam Recordings, 2004).

niche market for the accouterments of religious ritual, namely for flashy rosaries (commonly called “Jesus pieces”). Hip-hop artists, however, seem to have been a bit more reticent about the use of God as a leitmotif. West, on the other hand, has made a pretty lucrative career as a self-proclaimed prophet. In his second verse on “Otis” (2011), for example, he explains, “I made Jesus walk. So, I’m never going to hell.”²²⁵ But here, “made Jesus walk” seems to mean West’s own commercial aestheticization of God. Needless to say, “Otis” won a Grammy in 2012 for “Best Rap Performance.” In his mixtape *Fahrenheit 1/15 Part I: The Truth is Among Us* (2006), Lupe Fiasco’s cover (“Ahk-A-Fella”) version of “Jesus Walks” begins provocatively, with a provocation to West: “I ain’t tryin’ to profit off the Prophets. So, this one here is for free.”²²⁶

Before making his grand exit, finally, Dyson’s autobiographical mode has him rewriting himself into the myth of the underclass. Indeed, the self-made public intellectual’s high pretensions to noblesse oblige here hark back to his 2000 performance at the State of the Black Union. He defends his own use of the words “nigga” [*sic*] and “niggadom” [*sic*] here in a passage worth quoting at length:

. . . I struggle on behalf of black people who don’t know that I’m like them. They see me in a suit—they see I’m a yellow nigga [*sic*] with a suit and a tie, and some curly hair, and they think I had it one way. And I let them know, I’m a guy who

²²⁵ “Otis” in Kanye West and Jay-Z, *Watch the Throne*, prod. Kanye West, CD, (Roc-A-Fella Records/Roc Nation/Def Jam Recordings, 2011).

²²⁶ “Jesus Walks (Ahk-A-Fella Version)” in Lupe Fiasco, *Fahrenheit 1/15 Part I: The Truth is Among Us*, prod. Lupe Fiasco, mixtape (1st & 15th Entertainment, 2006).

was living on welfare, hustling on the streets, didn't go to college 'til I was twenty-one. Somebody looked at me and called me a nigga [*sic*] one day. . . . I'm carrying a whole bunch of niggas [*sic*] inside of me [*Applause*]: folk who believed in me when I wasn't nothing; folk who believed in me when I had no money; folk who believed in me when I didn't have no education. And now that I got it, I ain't gon' forget them. That's what I mean by 'niggadom [*sic*].' I'm a nigga [*sic*]. I accept my niggadom [*sic*]. And all you niggas [*sic*] get down with me. Peace! [*Applause*]²²⁷

Of course this story about his American dream is a “walk-off” home run, so to speak. Indeed, Dyson flips the crowd the peace sign with his left hand before making a fashionable exit. His invocation of Kanye West further above, however, was the last time the State of the Black Union heard his lyrical mode.

After a brief, two-year hiatus, Dyson returned to the State of the Black Union in 2008. Again, it is surprising to find no mention here of hip-hop; instead Dyson satirizes African-Americans' ambivalence toward the then senator Barack Obama's run for President: “. . . and don't act like you Negroes were always for Barack. You were saying, ‘*The white folk might not vote for him* [emphasis his].’ [*Laughter*]²²⁸ Interestingly, Dyson here caricatures the timbre of his voice in order to recapture something of the so-

²²⁷ Dyson, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 13 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2006).

²²⁸ Dyson, *State of the Black Union, 2008: Reclaiming Our Democracy, Recasting Our Future*, DVD 1 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2008).

called “Negro dialect,” the sound of which seems to have been informed by Dyson’s close reading of the miniseries *Roots*.

Likewise, Dyson’s 2009 performance is devoid of his lyrical mode. Instead, his three-minute time slot is mainly devoted to undermining the notion of a “post-racial” epoch. “I don’t want to stop being black,” says Dyson, “I’m too old to major in anything else. [Laughter]”²²⁹ Hip-hop enters into the conversation only through Tricia Rose’s neo-Marxist critique of black cultural malaise. But her anxieties about the moral decline of hip-hop—the “gangsta-pimp-ho trinity,” as she puts it—come to seem useful only as a stand-in for Dyson’s old nemesis, Stanley Crouch.²³⁰ But then again, Dyson here is nothing more than Rose’s silent partner. Indeed, she establishes herself here as a public intellectual in her own right. Interestingly, Dyson praises Rose’s analysis of commercial hip-hop, which was one of the main areas of contention between himself and Crouch. “Tricia Rose,” shouts Dyson at the end of her performance, “Tricia Rose! Tricia Rose! Tricia Rose! Yeah! Tricia Rose! What?! Yeah! Yeah, that’s serious right there. Yeah!”²³¹ It is almost as if Dyson were here celebrating Rose’s rite of passage to public intellectualism. In fact, Rose is among those pledges who have crossed over to Smiley’s “High Quality Speakers Bureau.”²³²

²²⁹ Dyson, “How We Go Forward” in *State of the Black Union, 2009: Making America As Good As Its Promise (10th Anniversary of Conversations)*, DVD (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2009).

²³⁰ Rose, “How We Go Forward” in *State of the Black Union, 2009*.

²³¹ Dyson, “How We Go Forward” in *State of the Black Union, 2009*.

²³² Accessed January, 23, 2013, <http://www.tavistalks.com/speakersbureau/speakers/tricia-rose>.

In 2010, Dyson returns to hip-hop only because Smiley asks him to field a related question from the audience: “What can we do about the rap music that’s messing our kids’ minds up?”²³³ But this kind of nagging is all too familiar to Dyson, who does not seriously take up the question:

Look, there’s no one-to-one correlation between consuming rap music and consequent behavior. I know we want to think that, I ain’t got time to break that down . . . it has destructive elements . . . it can glorify, but it doesn’t create. . . . rap music is . . . the result of the pathology, not the cause.²³⁴

At the same time as he cautions against hip-hop’s “destructive elements,” Dyson pardons them. For him hip-hop here is simply the aestheticization of existing pathologies. Elsewhere, however, hip-hop is accorded a unique political agency. Essentially, Dyson reduces hip-hop to aesthetic representation (*Vorstellung*) only when it is under attack, otherwise it is presumed to be an agent of meaningful, political discourse (i.e., *the politicization of art*). We need pause only briefly here to complicate Dyson’s chicken-and-egg theory. Perhaps it is not so much that hip-hop reifies (or is “the result of”) “black underclass” pathology as that hip-hop itself *is* the pathology. Indeed, most reductionist critiques of hip-hop have aimed to undermine the genres pretensions to “art music” by

²³³ “Tavis Smiley Black Agenda Forum,” C-SPAN Video Library, accessed January 21, 2012, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/292635-7> (03:15:16 - 03:15:23).

²³⁴ Dyson, “Tavis Smiley Black Agenda Forum,” C-SPAN Video Library, accessed January 21, 2012, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/292635-7> (03:16:13 - 03:16:59).

passing moral judgment on its lyrics. But then, as I have made clear, very few scholars have taken as their aim the understanding of hip-hop as art music, different than poetry. In fact, most of these reductionist critiques both in favor and against hip-hop have aimed to generalize out from its lyrics in order to form broader conclusions about its significance as music. Indeed, what new discourse might open out if we included in the study of hip-hop, say, other aspects of music-making (*technē*) other than lyricism?²³⁵

The time is ripe for musicology—especially music theory and cognition. Indeed, it is high time that we take seriously the changing relations of popular music and technology, even beyond Tricia Rose’s notion of “techno-black cultural syncretism” and Joseph Schloss’ *Making Beats* (2009), for examples, since neither are concerned with the experience of sound (e.g., musical semiosis and cognition).²³⁶ Unfortunately, this is true even of Schloss, whose disciplinary center of gravity is presumably ethnomusicological; but it is hard to think of a single ethnomusicologist who has contributed anything of substance in this regard, let alone anything at all on hip-hop in the twenty-first century. In *Making Beats*, for example, Schloss reduces Junior M.A.F.I.A.’s “Player’s Anthem”

²³⁵ “Once there was a time when the bringing-forth of the true into the beautiful was called *technē*. And the *poiēsis* of the fine arts also was called *technē*. . . . The arts were not derived from the artistic. Art works were not enjoyed aesthetically. Art was not a sector of cultural activity”; see Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper, 1977), 34.

²³⁶ “Rap technicians employ digital technology as instruments, revising black musical styles and priorities through the manipulation of technology. In this process of techno-black cultural syncretism, technological instruments *and* [emphasis hers] black cultural priorities are revised and expanded. In simultaneous exchange, rap music has made its mark on advanced technology, and technology has profoundly changed the sound of black music”; see Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 96.

(1995) to an unintelligible bar graph.²³⁷ In *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (2000), moreover, Adam Krims reduces KRS-One's "MC's Act Like They Don't Know" (1995), Ice Cube's "The Nigga Ya Love to Hate" (1990), and Goodie Mob's "Soul Food" (1995), for examples, to unintelligible "layering" graphs.^{238,239} And here we need pause only briefly to recall Kofi Agawu's apposite question concerning such "newly devised notation": "Is there not," writes Agawu, "in any case, something suspicious about Westerners telling Africans [or, in this case, African-Americans!] to use new notations for their music? Beware when the Greeks bring you gifts. . . . for much depends on an individual scholar's agenda."²⁴⁰ In contrast, Kyra Gaunt's transcriptions in *The Games Black Girls Play* (2006) show much in the way of viable alternatives to the bar and layering graphs of Schloss and Krims, respectively.²⁴¹ Notwithstanding all of the

²³⁷ See Figures 1 and 2 in Joseph Schloss, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop* (Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 108.

²³⁸ Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 59-60, 104-110, 132, 135-136, 138, 192, 194.

²³⁹ "The use of layering graphs, rather than staff notation, is preferable here for several reasons. First, in textures such as those examined here, it can become difficult to project the separate activity of more than three or four sound sources at once, without an unwieldy number of staves; and the activity of separated layers will turn out to be crucial. Second, layering graphs allow easier and quicker reference to the exact metrical position of each event than traditional staff notation. Third, layering graphs arguably allow simpler projection of musical events and easier visual accessibility, without sacrificing information. Fourth, most of the events discussed here are either non-pitched (by traditional Western calibrations of pitch) or ambiguously pitched; thus, placement on staff lines designed primarily to represent pitch would be superfluous and potentially distracting, if not misleading. And finally, layering graphs do not rely to any substantial extent on musical 'literacy'; thus, they remain accessible to some scholars who may otherwise be excluded from my discussion"; see Krims, 97-98 (fn. 5).

²⁴⁰ "The Invention of 'African Rhythm'" in Kofi Agawu, *Representing African Music: Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 66.

²⁴¹ Kyra D. Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 33, 65, 79, 153, 188-196 (Appendix).

transcriptions that we do encounter in the body of and appendix to her text, however, it is precisely musical transcription that is missing from Gaunt's stand-alone chapter on hip-hop (cf., "Who's Got Next Game?: Women, Hip-Hop, and the Power of Language"). To be sure, Dyson's own monographs on Tupac Shakur and Nas, Imani Perry's *Prophets of the Hood* (2004), and Adam Bradley's *Book of Rhymes* (2009) and *Anthology of Rap* (2010), for examples, all attend thoughtfully to the language (commonly called "poetics") of the golden age of hip-hop.²⁴² In this context, Dyson's lyrical mode of emplotment is a kind of discursive strategy, or perhaps simply the performance of discourse. Indeed, it is as prominent a feature of his demagoguery as anything else, if not the most affective of his rhetorical devices.

²⁴² See Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); and Adam Bradley, *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2009).

Chapter Four

CORNEL WEST, *POLYTROPOS*, AND THE POLITICS OF KINGMAKING: THE RISE (AND FALL?) OF TAVIS SMILEY

“Cornel West’s work has the greatest depth and versatility, a rare combination, indeed, in any field. He preserves a truly organic link to the African American community without succumbing to vulgar nationalism or *demagoguery* [emphasis mine], and without ignoring complexity. More than anyone I can think of, he has restored the full presence of the spoken human voice to the discourse of contemporary philosophy, the rhythmic structure of the performed word, the *philosophically* [emphasis his] performed word.”

—Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Foreword” to Cornel West’s *Restoring Hope*, 1997

“West, Dyson, et al., use the public intellectual pose to claim authority both as certified, world-class elite academics and as links to an extra-academic blackness, thus splitting the difference between being insiders and outsiders. In the process, they are able to skirt the practical requirements of either role—to avoid both rigorous, careful intellectual work *and* [emphasis his] protracted, committed political action. . . . ‘Public intellectual’ is by and large an excuse, the marker of a sterile, hybrid variant of ‘bearing witness’ that, when all is said and done, is a justification for an aversion to intellectual or political heavy lifting . . .”

—Adolph Reed, Jr., *Class Notes*, 2000

Cornel West is perhaps the most complicated member of The Smiley Group, Inc. Indeed his narrative performatism—“the *philosophically* [emphasis his] performed word,” as Gates puts it, or *demagoguery*—is less stupefying and much less obvious than his protégé’s lyrical mode. To be sure, West’s is a more subtle approach to the genre. Here also, because his approach overlaps more or less neatly with previous demagogic modes both lyrical and allegorical, the demands on the reader rise to pinpoint the real locus of his narrative performatism. Indeed, there are at least two features other than the lyrical

and allegorical modes that characterize West's narratives. These are a penchant for the themes amassed in his book *Hope on a Tightrope* (2008), and his romantic treatment of the book's publisher, Tavis Smiley.

Unfortunately, West's perfect attendance at the State of the Black Union (2000-2010) will not allow the kind of hermeneutic specificity we provided for Louis Farrakhan and Michael Eric Dyson. Not merely because of its exhaustiveness, but also because of the polytropic nature of West's narrative performatism itself. It is not that Farrakhan and Dyson here are simply one-trick ponies as that they tend to individually rely upon a specific mode, rather than *modes*. I call West's narrative performatism "polytropic" because his performances abound with rhetorical devices of every conceivable kind. Nevertheless, some rhetorical gestures are made more frequently than others.

Indeed, West's *Hope on a Tightrope* is nothing more than the codification of the very philosophy he performs, while his performances often seem to mimic his own discursive strategies (i.e., *the performance of discourse*). West's *Hope on a Tightrope*, it turns out, is the "brainchild" of Tavis Smiley.²⁴³ It is surprising, then, to find no mention here of West's previous performances on which his book is ostensibly predicated, a predication more than borne out by the premises he italicizes in the main body of his text. However abstract, the following premises come up time and again in the pages of *Hope on a Tightrope*: freedom, courage, truth, love, race, empire, tradition, music, service, humanity, sacrifice, catastrophe, and God to name a few. Of course these kinds of abstract premises, which are mooted often inside the academy, are beyond the ken of

²⁴³ Cornel West, *Hope On A Tightrope* (New York: SmileyBooks, 2008), 234.

most individuals grappling with the material world. To understand fully West's polytropic mode, however, we need only look closely at his and Smiley's brainchild, so to speak.

Hope on a Tightrope is a concatenation of familiar tropes—tropes that will seem so familiar not just to close readers of the State of the Black Union, but to consumers of self-help literatures as well. But for what readership, exactly, is this kind of prose empowering? The appendix, titled “The Books and Music that Made Me,” is especially telling, since “self-made,” for West, seems to mean reading Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, while listening to Beethoven's late string quartets.²⁴⁴ “The dialectics of authentication,” writes Adolph Reed, “trades on elaborate displays of what sociolinguists call code switching—in this case, going back and forth from rarefied theoreticism to slivers of one or another version of black vernacular expression.”²⁴⁵

West's polytropic mode can be subdivided into at least five tropes (or sometimes the coupling of tropes): (i) courage; (ii) the Cross *against* Empire; (iii) music; (iv) freedom *from* catastrophe; and (v) Obama *after* King. Altogether they are meant to empower his audience as much as they are to entertain the crowd.

For West, “courage” is a trope bound up with a number of other catch-all terms, including, but not limited to, “truth,” “love,” and “sacrifice,” all of which are preconditions for “justice”; or perhaps simply, justice itself is contingent upon these acts

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 225, 231.

²⁴⁵“What Are the Drums Saying, Booker?": The Curious Role of the Black Public Intellectual” in Adolph Reed, Jr., *Class Notes: Posing As Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 87.

of “courage”. But these concepts themselves raise all sorts of epistemological questions—even though it is hard to imagine West’s audience working through them as a more “disciplined” reader might well do. Compare the following excerpts:

It takes courage to ask—*how did I become so well-adjusted to injustice* [emphasis his]?²⁴⁶

It’s no longer enough to be willing to die. *You have to be willing to live the truth* [emphasis his].²⁴⁷

Truth is all about allowing suffering to speak [emphasis his].²⁴⁸

What kind of courage have you demonstrated in the stances that you’ve taken [emphasis his]?²⁴⁹

What is the quality of your service, the depth of your love [emphasis his]?²⁵⁰

²⁴⁶ West, *Hope On A Tightrope*, 9.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 151.

We must have an unconditional commitment to try to keep track of the humanity of each and every person to give us the courage to love, serve, and sacrifice [emphasis his].²⁵¹

To be human you must bear witness to justice. Justice is what love look's like in public—to be human is to love and be loved. . . . If justice is what love looks like in public, then deep democracy is what justice looks like in practice [emphasis his].²⁵²

Indeed, West's rhetorical mode is hinged upon these kinds of "floating" signifiers.²⁵³ The narrative he floats, then, is a tautological one—or, following Derrida, *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*.²⁵⁴ In other words, the acts of courage mentioned above constitute a kind of

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 154.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 162.

²⁵² Ibid., 181, 210.

²⁵³ “. . . represent nothing more than that *floating signifier* [emphasis his] which is the disability of all finite thought (but also the surety of all art, all poetry, even mythic and aesthetic invention) . . . a symbol in its pure state, therefore liable to take on any symbolic content whatever”; see Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Works of Marcel Mauss* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 63-64.

²⁵⁴ “. . . it cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent . . . or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language . . . as regards the absence of the referent or the transcendental signified. *There is nothing outside of the text* [emphasis his]”; see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 158.

semantic field for West to maneuver. In this context, he himself is the sole arbiter of meaning. Imagine, if you will, the Signifyin(g) Monkey.²⁵⁵

In his performances, West juxtaposes the synecdoche of “the Cross” with that of “Empire”. “*Any time you make the cross subordinate to the flag,*” writes West, “*you have idolatry [emphasis his].*”²⁵⁶ Indeed, West often cautions against America’s idolatry of “the flag,” since, for him, patriotism obscures the worship of God. “Empire,” for West, then, is a metonymy for American exceptionalism, imperialism, and Manifest Destiny, all of which are *morally* anathema to him. “*We live in the American Empire,*” writes West, “. . . *Like all Empires, the American Empire is arrogant. It’s blind and believes it can shape the world in its own image [emphasis his].*”²⁵⁷ But over against the Christianity that sustains him, our political salvation is well beyond the compass of the Holy Spirit (as, for example, W. E. B. Du Bois has shown).²⁵⁸ For West, however, the Cross functions as a

²⁵⁵ “If the signifier stands disrupted by the shift in concepts denoted and connoted, then we are engaged at the level of meaning itself, at the semantic register. Black people vacated this signifier, then—incredibly—substituted as its concept a signified that stands for the system of rhetorical strategies peculiar to their own vernacular tradition. Rhetoric, then, has supplanted semantics in this most literal meta-confrontation within the structure of the sign”; see “The Signifying Monkey and the Language of Signifyin(g): Rhetorical Difference and the Orders of Meaning” in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 47.

²⁵⁶ West, *Hope On A Tightrope*, 80.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 86, 204.

²⁵⁸ “The slave went free; stood for a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery. . . . The mass of slaves, even the more intelligent ones, and certainly the great group of field hands, were in religious and hysterical fervor. This was the coming of the Lord. This was the fulfillment of prophecy and legend. . . . to most of the four million black folk emancipated by civil war, God was real. They knew Him. They had met Him personally in many a wild orgy of religious frenzy . . . His plan for them was clear; they were to suffer and be degraded, and then afterwards by Divine edict, raised to manhood and power; and so on January 1, 1863, He made them free”; see “The Coming of the

kind of “transcendental” signifier.²⁵⁹ Essentially, his rhetorical mode is unconstrained by the ambiguity inherent in the words he uses—keywords, to be sure, but without adequate referents.

West’s invocation of the Scriptures, however, is superficial in comparison to Farrakhan’s allegorical mode. Indeed, Farrakhan’s narrative performatism is invested in the rhetorical mode of exegesis, whereas West invokes the Bible for illustrative purposes only. In fact, the same might be said of West’s invocation of music. For West, song titles alone suffice to make his points, whereas Dyson’s lyrical mode attempts actually to “cover” the songs themselves. Nevertheless, West and Dyson see eye to eye on black music’s power, its so-called authenticity, and more. But here as elsewhere when political questions arise, West encourages us to think more carefully about the special powers of music:

. . . we learned to manifest our genius through what no one can take away—our voices and our music. We come from a tradition where the musicians are supreme . . . Music has been our most powerful creative expression. . . . I always conceived of myself as an aspiring bluesman in a world of ideas and a jazzman in the life of the mind. . . . Hip-hop is the most important popular musical development in the

Lord” in W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, intr. David Levering Lewis (New York: The Free Press, 1998), 30, 122-124.

²⁵⁹ “. . . the ‘transcendental signifier’—nonsense within the field of sense, that distributes and regulates the series of Sense. Its ‘transcendental’ status means that there is nothing ‘substantial’ about it . . .”; see Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating the Real* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 177.

last thirty years. . . . the most powerful cultural force on the globe right now
[emphasis his] . . .²⁶⁰

Of course, in spite of what West himself may realize, his bent for floating signifiers manifests itself in his use of the following modifiers: “genius,” “tradition,” “powerful,” and “cultural”—again, keywords without adequate referents.

Many of West’s performances make room for mention of “the Catastrophic,” a coded term for everything from slavery to Jim Crow. “*Black people’s deep memory of history,*” writes West, “*is a legacy of catastrophe* [emphasis his].”²⁶¹ For West, the so-called Catastrophic is a precondition for “freedom,” since “blues people,” for West (as for Amiri Baraka), are defined by their asymptotic quest for freedom in the face of catastrophe. “*Black people’s struggle for freedom,*” writes West, “*is the key to the moral and political history of the democratic experiment called America* [emphasis his].”²⁶² And like Du Bois, West himself often refers to American democracy as an “experiment”.²⁶³ Needless to say, “freedom” is as much a floating signifier as any of the other terms mentioned above.

The final trope to be taken up here reflects West’s growing disillusionment with President Obama’s politics. Indeed, West’s enthusiasm for Obama first waned when the

²⁶⁰ West, *Hope On A Tightrope*, 110-111, 114, 122, 178.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 188.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 190.

²⁶³ See, for examples, Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 653, 715; and *The Gift of Black Folk: The Negroes in the Making of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 84.

then senator reneged on his promise to attend the 2007 State of the Black Union, preferring instead to announce his candidacy for President of the United States. West's disillusionment, then, seems to have been exacerbated in part by the fact that he himself was not personally invited to Obama's first presidential inauguration.²⁶⁴ Needless to say, his frustrations came to a head, more recently, after Martin Luther King Jr.'s Bible was used to swear President Obama in for his second term.²⁶⁵ Since 2007, then, West's narratives have relied heavily upon an ahistorical dichotomy between King and Obama.

For West, the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. is reduced to the latter's Poor People's Campaign, which is a welcome alternative nonetheless. Indeed, King's own, late championing of the poor functions as a kind of benchmark against which West criticizes the Obama administration's controversial economic policies (namely, the bailout of 2008). "I'm attempting to make the world safe for the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.," writes West, "—and *King was the best of America* [emphasis his]!"²⁶⁶ The (false) dichotomy between King and Obama is crucial, since, for West, Tavis Smiley is the only one who can assume King's mantle. Indeed, West goes out of his way time and again, and to great lengths, to bid for Smiley's own canonicity. At the State of the Black Union

²⁶⁴ "“And as it turns out with the inauguration I couldn't get a ticket . . . What it said to me on a personal level . . . was that brother Barack Obama had no sense of gratitude, no sense of loyalty . . .”"; see Chris Hedges, "The Obama Deception: Why Cornel West Went Ballistic," *Truthdig*, May 16, 2011. Accessed February 6, 2013, http://www.truthdig.com/report/print/the_obama_deception_why_cornel_west_went_ballistic_20110516/.

²⁶⁵ "When I got the news that my dear brother, Barack Obama—President Obama, was going to put his precious hand on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s bible, I got upset; and I got upset because you don't play with Martin Luther King, Jr. . . ."; see West, "Tavis Smiley Presents Poverty in America," C-SPAN Video Library, January 17, 2013. Accessed February 6, 2013, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/310437-1>.

²⁶⁶ West, *Hope On A Tightrope*, 194.

alone, West twice compares Smiley to King (in 2007 and 2009). It would seem that Melissa Harris-Perry's rhetorical, titular question—"Who Died and Made Tavis King?"—is easy enough to answer: Cornel West.²⁶⁷ And not just any king, but King himself. West's attendance at Smiley's State of the Black Union, therefore, amounts to much more than allegorical or lyrical entertainment. Indeed, what West offers Smiley, in this regard, is a tacit endorsement for what we might expect from Tavis in years to come: his own run at the American presidency.

West has taken to explaining, in print and at the State of the Black Union, his and Smiley's special kinship. In his "Acknowledgments," for example, West sings Smiley's praises, referring to the latter as his "adopted" brother:

This book is the brainchild of my adopted brother, Tavis Smiley, who came up with the idea and created the road of its journey. . . . I am blessed to publish with SmileyBooks—a part of the grand project of love and service to everyday people—founded by the inimitable and incredible Tavis Smiley . . . We all have pledged our time and energy to sustain *Hope on a Tightrope*. And we intend to be faithful unto death!²⁶⁸

²⁶⁷ Melissa Harris-Perry, "Who Died and Made Tavis King?" *The Root*, February 15, 2008. Accessed February 6, 2013, <http://www.theroot.com/views/who-died-and-made-tavis-king>.

²⁶⁸ "Acknowledgements" in West, *Hope On A Tightrope* (New York: SmileyBooks, 2008), 234-235.

Needless to say, by the time we reach West's *Hope On A Tightrope*, his affinity for Smiley seems to have at least doubled in strength. A close reading of West's performance history at the State of the Black Union reveals two, seemingly related demagogic strategies: rabble-rousing and kingmaking.

In the *Politics*, Aristotle posits oppression (i.e., “when the oligarchs wrong the multitude”) as a cause for revolution.²⁶⁹ Needless to say, for him, this is the very context from which demagogues (sometimes translated as “popular leaders” or “skilled speakers”) arise and are made.²⁷⁰ Perhaps this might explain some of West's own, favorite platitudes, for examples, “corporate *plutocrats* [emphasis mine]” and “Wall Street *oligarchs* [emphasis mine]”. Indeed, he uses these pejoratives—“plutocrats” and “oligarchs”—often enough that they come to seem handy only as tropes. The question of West's “rabble-rousing” will be taken up later in connection with the State of the Black Union's broaching of Obama, but for now it is West's romantic treatment of Smiley to which we will do well to pay heed.

In 2001, for example, West salutes Smiley in a manner to be expected: “First, I want to thank brother Tavis for bringing us together [*Applause*]”²⁷¹ Indeed, this simple, appreciative gesture is fine. In 2002, however, the degree to which West “appreciates” Smiley might seem superfluous to some readers:

²⁶⁹ Aristotle, “Why Oligarchies are Overthrown” in *The Politics*, ed. Trevor J. Saunders, trans. T. A. Sinclair (New York: Penguin, 1992), 314.

²⁷⁰ “Why Democracies are Overthrown” in *The Politics*, 312.

²⁷¹ West, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 4 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2006).

I just want to end by thanking Tavis Smiley, who is not just the most talented, but the most courageous and visionary journalists of his generation, of bringing us together. And you notice that Tavis Smiley has learned the profound insight of one of the greatest Philadelphians who ever lived—his name is John Coltrane. He said, ‘The highest level of the human spirit is to be a force for good’ . . . to keep the focus not on you, but on something bigger than you, namely that power that empowers those who are suffering. And we’re here because too many folk are suffering. . . . Thank you, Tavis. Love you deeply, brother.²⁷²

The disparity between the two examples of appreciation above may seem to be of little or no importance—that is, until we consider that West’s appreciation of Smiley is much more elaborate later on in the history of the State of the Black Union, not to mention that it is perhaps the most distinctive and unifying feature of West’s own performance history.

In 2004, West goes so far as to liken Smiley to his own nuclear and extended families. Needless to say, West’s fraternalism here dissolves into that now all too common “first black” rhetoric:

Well, let me first say that for me the black family is the conduit or the vehicle for a black love—a love of freedom, a love of justice, and a love of wisdom. And when I think of black family, I think not only of my loving mother and father, and

²⁷² West, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 5 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2006).

I think not only of my own wonderful son, Clifton, and my wonderful daughter, Zeytun, but I also think of you, Tavis. I think here's a brother who—the first black brother on public radio, the first black brother on public television, the first human being on both at the same time, and still has a love for wisdom, a love for justice, and a love for freedom.^{273,274}

Likewise, in 2006, West aggrandizes Smiley, this time painting him as a grass-roots organizer and potential martyr:

Well, first, let me just salute you brother Tavis for your work though, brother. It's very important that we acknowledge the work that has been done—tremendous hours, sacrifice . . . fusing a bold democratic vision with effective and strong organization on the ground. But, for me, most importantly, 'cause when I hear these brothers and sisters speak, for me, what's most important about brother Tavis is he has an undying love for black people. [*Applause*] . . . and when you

²⁷³ West, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 9 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2006).

²⁷⁴ “But this ‘first black’ rhetoric tends to interpret African-American political success . . . as part of a morality play that dramatizes ‘how far we have come.’ It obscures the fact that modern black Republicans [and Democrats alike] have been more tokens than signs of progress. . . . Clichés about fallen barriers are increasingly meaningless; symbols don’t make for coherent policies”; see Reed, “The Puzzle of Black Republicans,” *New York Times*, December 18, 2012, accessed February 7, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/19/opinion/the-puzzle-of-black-republicans.html>.

have an undying love of black people it's best manifest in your willingness to die for black people.²⁷⁵

In 2007, West's hagiographical treatment of Smiley reaches a highpoint when the former compares the latter to King. At the same time, however, West also uses President Obama as a foil for King. Indeed, it is as if West were here secretly interested in another, false dichotomy: the opposition of Obama and Smiley. West's attendance at the State of the Black Union, as I have noted, was perfect. But what is more is that in 2007 alone he was twice featured as a panelist, which Smiley had never done with anyone else before or since. Needless to say, his investment in West more than doubled Smiley's return. Consider the following two excerpts:

Look at brother Tavis himself. Part of his genius is what? He can use the marketeering, entrepreneurial skills—part of his genius—with his profound Christian and democratic roots, which is to find joy and service to others, to be willing to spend so much time—twenty hours every day—serving as he uses the market skills, and still try to find a little time to have fun. . . . Now that to me is what is inspiring.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁵ West, *State of the Black Union, 2000-2006: The Complete Collection*, DVD 15 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2006).

²⁷⁶ West, *State of the Black Union, 2007: Jamestown: The African American Imprint on America*, DVD 1 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2007).

Let me first say that I just want to thank you for your leadership, though, brother. You have built on the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. within the context of contemporary media conditions. It's a beautiful thing, it's a sweet thing, to see not just a young black brother with dignity and grace, but a celebrity who decides to use their energy and their talent, service to others, struggle for freedom, focusing on black people. So, I love you dearly, brother, and respect you profoundly.²⁷⁷

In both excerpts, then, West lauds Smiley's "service to others"—a virtue accorded its own chapter in *Hope on a Tightrope*. In fact, West here sees mass media as a condition of possibility rather than impossibility (as we have seen, for example, with Farrakhan). Here also, West calls into question Obama's commitment to "black folk" (or at any rate, to the agenda that Smiley had set for them):

. . . Obama is a very decent, brilliant, charismatic brother. There's no doubt about that. The problem is is [*sic*] that he's got folk who are talking to him who warrant our distrust, precisely because we know that him going to Springfield the same day brother Tavis has set this up for a whole year, we already know, then, that him coming out there is not fundamentally about us; it's about somebody else. He's got large numbers of white brothers and sisters who have fears and anxieties, and he's got to speak to them in such a way that he holds us at arm's-length

²⁷⁷ West, *State of the Black Union, 2007: Jamestown: The African American Imprint on America*, DVD 3 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2007).

enough to say he loves us, but doesn't get to close to scare them out. So, he's walking this tightrope. . . . But he's gotta be accountable; and starting off in Springfield, Illinois is not impressive to me.²⁷⁸

By 2008, West seems to have settled into a routine of praising Smiley and at the same maligning Obama. Again, West here takes to applauding Smiley's "service" and "love for black people": ". . . I want to begin by saluting brothering Tavis for his unbelievable quality of service. [*Applause*] . . . Brother, your love for black people is indisputable and undeniable; and I pay tribute to you . . ."²⁷⁹ West's pretensions to the Socratic method and prophetic gift, we are told, will inform his critique of Obama:

My calling is Socratic and prophetic, which means I have a suspicion of politicians—I don't care what color they are. My aim is to tell the truth, expose lies, and to bear witness. So, yes, I critically support Obama—I break my neck across the nation to support him. When he wins, I'll celebrate for a day—I'll breakdance that morning. The second day, I'm his major critic. . . . How come? Because it ain't about him; it's about those Sly Stone called 'Everyday People.'²⁸⁰

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ West, *State of the Black Union, 2008: Reclaiming Our Democracy, Recasting Our Future*, DVD 2 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2008).

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

Indeed, since Obama's first election to the American presidency, West has criticized him ad nauseam. This vehement criticism, however, is contrasted with heightened praise for Smiley. In 2009, then, West's romantic treatment of Smiley is more exaggerated than all of the rest, so much so that it is here worth quoting at length:

. . . Brother Tavis, who I was blessed to meet over twenty-two years ago, right here in Los Angeles—young brother, full of fire, fundamentally committed to the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.—and we decided we were going to be faithful until death in our endless quest for unarmed truth and unconditional love. And we come from a blues people, where the anthem is 'Lift Every Voice,' which means, for us, the condition of truth is to allow the suffering voices to be heard. And we come from a tradition that produced John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*, and Marvin Gaye's 'What's Going On,' and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. And, for them, justice is what love looks like in public. When you really love folk, you cant stand the fact they're being treated unjustly. What I love about brother Tavis is given all of the misunderstanding, the misinterpretation, the misconstruing, he's still strong, how come? Because he not only loves black people—he loves all of humanity; he's a Christian in the making like I am: always trying to keep our eyes on the Cross—but, most importantly, he also knows that when you really, really love black people, who are so wounded, and scarred, and bruised, that you gonna be wounded, and scarred, and bruised in your love; and those wounds, and those scars, and those bruises actually are the evidence of your love as you proceed.

That's why he's still standing here ten years with a smile on his face, and for the world to see. . . . So, I'm proud of you, brother. You're still standing strong; and that's why we're here.²⁸¹

It is important to note that West here was not assigned the task of introducing Smiley. Yet he provides an overindulgent, even self-indulgent (signaled by the pronouns “we” and “us,” and possessive determiner “our”), introduction that situates himself and Smiley as worthy custodians of the legacy of their forefather, Martin Luther King, Jr. Clearly, West here is a bit over the top, but the passage above suffices to demonstrate the grip of Smiley on West's demagogic imagination. The critique of Obama emergent in West's 2007 and 2008 performances is here still very subtle:

Brother Barack Obama . . . he won by neutralizing white fears as he capitalized on black support and solidarity. He knew, in fact, that black folk were going to come together, but he had to walk a tightrope to convince the white moderates and the white independents to vote for him. That's one of the reasons why he did at times hold the black community at arm's-length—he couldn't campaign. We knew on the down-low. We were for him, but he couldn't spend that much time with us. He had to get the white moderates. He had to get the white independents. And all we're saying is, we don't want that to become habit-forming. . . . Our memories

²⁸¹ West, *State of the Black Union, 2009: Making America As Good As Its Promise: 10th Anniversary of Conversations*, DVD (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2009).

are so short. We forget about people who loved us . . . that's why Jeremiah Wright could be mistreated after thirty-five years of struggle, and demonized, because we want to win so bad. . . . People talk about Minister Louis Farrakhan. We demonize him, we want to win so bad.²⁸²

Indeed, West alludes once more to the so-called “tightrope” across which Obama walked for election. But, despite his pity for both Jeremiah Wright and Louis Farrakhan, and perhaps against his better judgment, West here remains hopeful that President Obama is more than empty rhetoric; or, as Reed puts it, “a vacuous opportunist, a good performer with an ear for how to make white liberals like him.”²⁸³

In 2010, finally, West only briefly here appreciates Smiley: “I salute you, though, brother.”²⁸⁴ Instead the former devotes most of his time to discussing President Obama, though even here his critique is still very magnanimous. Indeed, West shifts the blame onto the “corporate elites” and “Wall Street oligarchs” (namely, Timothy Geithner, Lawrence Summers, and Austan Goolsbee). Consider the following two excerpts:

So, when I hear brother Obama say he's president of all America, I say, 'absolutely and I'm glad that you are. But, one, black people helped make you president of all of America.' . . . In the age of Obama, there's a lot of confusion.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Reed, “Obama No,” *The Progressive* 72:5 (2008).

²⁸⁴ West, “Tavis Smiley Black Agenda Forum,” C-SPAN Video Library, accessed January 28, 2013, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/292635-7>.

Because to have a black face in a high place easily leads us to forget so many folks . . . and we forget about the least of these. So, we put pressure on our brother—loving pressure—but we already see that any president is under tremendous pressure from the strong—the corporate elites, Wall Street oligarchs, various powerful folk at the top—and can easily push Obama in such a way that he tilts too much toward the strong and doesn't focus the way he ought on the weak, on the poor, on working people. That's why we're here today.²⁸⁵

He is our brother. He needs to be *protected* [emphasis his]. He needs to be *respected* [emphasis his]. But love also leads us to say he needs to be *corrected* [emphasis his]—corrected when he sides with the strong against the weak; and that's why this gathering is not just significant, but I think the world can see the truth-telling that has taken place around this table already, with tears flowing in our eyes, precisely because we know the level of suffering that's taking place this very moment. . . . People might recall, three years ago in Jamestown, we told folk, anybody who makes it to the Oval Office is going to in some way be predicated on various interests that, historically, have been indifferent to black people, poor people, and working people. And it's not just white brothers and sisters in the abstract. We're talking about corporate interests. We're talking about Wall Street oligarchs. We're talking about those at the top that have been making billions and billions and billions of dollars . . . But when you look at the folk around Barack

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

Obama—Tim Geithner, Larry Summers, Goolsbee—all of them come out of the Wall Street context. So, already, it was clear that they have no history of being concerned with poor and working people. Where were the progressive voices, trade-union voices, black voices, brown voices, red voices, who got him in?²⁸⁶

In the first excerpt, West invokes the first Gospel—“the least of these”—as an allegory for the plight of poor and working-class people.²⁸⁷ Indeed, the second excerpt ends with a clarion call to President Obama to take up their plight. Nevertheless, West shifts the blame onto Wall Street, even though he admits that President Obama here “needs be *corrected* [emphasis his].”²⁸⁸ In 2012, however, West is unabashed by the furor his words might provoke. In a recent interview with Amy Goodman, for example, West describes President Obama as nothing less than a “Rockefeller Republican in blackface.”²⁸⁹

Indeed, more recently, West and Smiley both have been outspoken in their criticism of President Obama. Needless to say, the dissolution of the Smiley Group Inc. is a result of their dissent. Al Sharpton and Michael Eric Dyson, for examples, have reinvented themselves after the fashion of Melissa Harris-Perry—that is to say, all three have abandoned themselves to on-air, public-intellectual careers with msnbc. “We’re

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Matthew 25:39-46, King James Version.

²⁸⁸ West, “Tavis Smiley Black Agenda Forum,” C-SPAN Video Library, accessed January 28, 2013, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/292635-7>.

²⁸⁹ West, “Tavis Smiley, Cornel West on the 2012 Election & Why Calling Obama ‘Progressive’ Ignores His Record,” *Democracy Now!*, November 9, 2012. Accessed February 13, 2013, http://www.democracynow.org/2012/11/9/tavis_smiley_cornel_west_on_the.

living in a society where everybody's up for sale," explains West, "—everything's up for sale. . . . They have sold their souls for a mess of Obama pottage."²⁹⁰ Moreover, West comes to realize this new, msnbc faction of the Smiley Group Inc. as "apologists for the Obama administration," whereas he and Smiley seem to be all that is left of the "black prophetic tradition."²⁹¹

Unlike Sharpton and Dyson, Melissa Harris-Perry never participated in the State of the Black Union; but she figures even more prominently here than do Sharpton or Dyson. In February 2008, Harris-Perry published a piece for *The Root* titled "Who Died and Made Tavis King?" And, in May 2011, she published another, related piece for *The Nation* titled "Cornel West v. Barack Obama." In the three and a quarter years that elapsed between their publications, however, some events are especially noteworthy: Smiley's ninth annual State of the Black Union (February 2008); Obama's first presidential inauguration (January 2009); Smiley's *Accountable: Making America as Good as Its Promise* (February 2009); Smiley's tenth annual State of the Black Union (February 2009); Smiley's debut film titled *Stand* (May 2009); Harris-Perry's review of *Stand* (June 2009); Harris-Perry's resignation from Princeton University (January 2011); the falling-out between West and Sharpton on *The Ed Show* (April 2011); and Chris Hedges' column, "The Obama Deception: Why Cornel West Went Ballistic" (May 2011). On the very same day that Harris-Perry's "Cornel West v. Barack Obama" was published, moreover, both she and West appeared as guests on a segment of *The Ed Show*

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

titled “Grading the President.”²⁹² Needless to say, even as Ed Schultz introduced her as “Associate Professor of Politics and African American Studies at Princeton University,” Harris-Perry had already announced (and tweeted!) her resignation to Princeton effective from July 1, 2011.²⁹³²⁹⁴ When asked to respond to the “substance” of West’s criticism, Harris-Perry referred to the former as “disingenuous,” “vague,” “critically messy,” “personal,” “anxious,” and “not at all like the Cornel West who [she] know[s] and whose work [she] respect[s].”²⁹⁵ In a 2012 interview with *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*, West is on record as having accused Harris-Perry of being a “liar,” “fake,” and “fraud”.²⁹⁶ Scathing, indeed; but this is not the worst. For in that same interview, West goes so far as to implicate not just himself, but also, more surprisingly, his colleagues in their “unanimous” vote against Harris-Perry’s promotion to full professor:

Harris-Perry’s scathing critique, West says, has more to do with the fact that the Center for African American Studies unanimously voted against her when she

²⁹² Margaret Judson, “West: Obama has a certain fear of free black men,” *The Ed Show*, May 17, 2011. Accessed February 18, 2013, http://ed.msnbc.com/_news/2011/05/17/6664499-west-obama-has-a-certain-fear-of-free-black-men?lite.

²⁹³ Ed Schultz, “West: Obama has a certain fear of free black men,” *The Ed Show*, May 17, 2011.

²⁹⁴ “Today I submitted my resignation to @Princeton effective July 1. I’m joining the faculty of Tulane this fall! #Thrilled”; see @MHarrisPerry, January 21, 2011. Accessed February 18, 2013, <https://twitter.com/MHarrisPerry/status/28528232491909120>.

²⁹⁵ Harris-Perry, “West: Obama has a certain fear of free black men,” *The Ed Show*, May 17, 2011.

²⁹⁶ Jamal Eric Watson, “Speaking Freely: Cornel West Takes Aim and Fires,” *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*, February 9, 2012. Accessed February 18, 2013, <http://diverseeducation.com/article/16821/>.

came up for promotion from associate to full professor, adding that her work was not scholarly enough.²⁹⁷

Cleary, West here acted without decorum, but it was Harris-Perry who was hoist by her own petard. In “Cornel West v. Barack Obama,” she thrice qualifies West’s critique of President Obama as “personal”.²⁹⁸ Harris-Perry’s polemic against West makes any number of compelling arguments, to be sure, but at the same time the substance of those arguments is diminished by the fact that they were made after West voted against her promotion to full professor. Worse still, their professional entanglements are bound up with their divergent critiques of President Obama. Over against West’s condemnation of the President, Harris-Perry herself has been something of an apologist for the Obama administration.

Indeed, almost as melodramatic as Obama’s ascension to Commander in Chief is the growing political fallout. In the six or so years since Obama first announced his candidacy for President, West’s growing disillusionment with the former’s politics seems to have worked in Smiley’s favor. Not that Smiley ever had to play second fiddle; West’s affinity for him is at least as old as the State of the Black Union itself. But the dissociation between West and Obama seems to have resulted in the former’s offensive

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ “West’s sense of betrayal is clearly more *personal* [emphasis mine] than ideological. . . West has made his *personal* [emphasis mine] animosity and political criticism of the president his main public talking point. . . . I can tell the difference between a substantive criticism and a *personal* [emphasis mine] attack”; see Harris-Perry, “Cornel West v. Barack Obama,” *The Nation*, May 17, 2011. Accessed February 19, 2013, <http://www.thenation.com/blog/160725/cornel-west-v-barack-obama#>.

alliance with Smiley. In the months leading up to the 2012 election, then, West's ambition to set an example for President Obama had him embodying the legacy of King.

On October 16, 2011, West was arrested at the dedication of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial in Washington, DC. "We want to bear witness today," megaphoned West, ". . . we will not allow this day of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Memorial to go without somebody going to jail. Because Martin King would be here right with us, willing to throw down out of deep love."²⁹⁹ Indeed, West's practice of nonviolent, civil disobedience here is a throwback to the modern civil rights movement. Of course this protest was an early outgrowth of Occupy Wall Street. On August 6, 2011, moreover, West and Smiley embarked for Wisconsin, the starting point of their "Poverty Tour" (a simulacrum of James Farmer's Freedom Rides and King's Poor People's Campaign?). Their week-long tour extended to a number of Midwestern and Southern states, including Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, West Virginia, Maryland, Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, and the District of Columbia.³⁰⁰ On September 12, 2012, the second and final iteration of their campaign—"The Poverty Tour 2.0"—touched down in the following "battleground" states: Ohio, Virginia, Pennsylvania and Florida.³⁰¹ Needless to say, the "Poverty Tour" culminated in the publication of their "Poverty Manifesto" titled *The Rich and the Rest of Us* (2012). On April 15, 2012, then, Smiley and West held their first book

²⁹⁹ Sheryl Huggins Salomon, "Video: Cornel West Arrested at Supreme Court," *The Root*, October 16, 2011. Accessed February 20, 2013, <http://www.theroot.com/buzz/video-cornel-west-arrested-supreme-court>.

³⁰⁰ Tavis Smiley and Cornel West, *The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto* (New York: SmileyBooks, 2012), 205-210 (Appendix).

³⁰¹ "Tavis Smiley and Cornel West Take 'The Poverty Tour 2.0' to Battleground States," August 29, 2012. Accessed February 20, 2013, <http://www.povertytour.smileyandwest.com/2012/08/the-rich-and-the-rest-of-us-a-poverty-manifesto/>.

signing in Los Angeles (and even here we need to remember that their “book tour” spanned more than a dozen cities and included some twenty book signings altogether).³⁰² The irony here is that their “Poverty Manifesto” comes at a price: \$12.00, excluding shipping and handling.³⁰³ Indeed, Steve Harvey, for example, has called our attention to the ostensible commerciality of their “tours”:

[Smiley and West] have done a lot of ‘poverty pimping’ through book sales, TV appearances, speaking fees, and promoting the ‘woe is me!’ mindset among the disenfranchised and discouraged. This has been their hustle for a long time . . . Their plan is to discourage a large voting bloc of the president’s base so that their lucrative hustle will once again be secure.³⁰⁴

Harvey’s viral radio broadcast, however, was refuted almost immediately by Boyce Watkins, who came to the defense of West.³⁰⁵ Watkins’ ambivalence toward Smiley, on

³⁰² “Book Tour,” accessed February 20, 2013, <http://www.therichandtherestofus.com/>.

³⁰³ “Buy Now,” accessed February 20, 2013, <http://www.therichandtherestofus.com/>.

³⁰⁴ “Steve Harvey Calls Tavis Smiley & Cornel West Uncle Toms for Criticizing Obama,” ChasinDatPaperMedia, accessed February 20, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F3K1ZQIWkUU>.

³⁰⁵ “For Harvey to suddenly make himself into an ad hoc political pundit is no different from Cornel West trying to become a comedian—Steve needs to get back to telling jokes without making himself into one. . . . Times are serious and economic despair is hitting millions of Americans far and wide. But Steve Harvey doesn’t feel any of this economic pain because rich men have the luxury of playing politics”; see Boyce Watkins, “Harvey’s ‘Uncle Tom’ Remark to Cornel and Tavis Disrespects the Nation’s Poor,” *Huffington Post*, August 11, 2011. Accessed February 20, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-boyce-watkins/steve-harvey-uncle-tom-cornel-tavis_b_924247.html.

the other hand, seems to have been informed by the latter's "petty politics" and "close relationship with Hilary Clinton."³⁰⁶ The disparity here between Harvey's satire and Watkins' vindication, though, has less to do with the "Poverty Tour" than it does with Smiley's and West's dissent from the black majority. Indeed, their seemingly iconoclastic position on President Obama's politics is in stark contrast to that of Harvey, Harris-Perry, Sharpton and Dyson (and others?) alike. At issue, it turns out, is not so much the "Age of Obama" as the rise of Tavis Smiley. This returns us to Harris-Perry's 2008 polemic against him.

On February 15, 2008, Harris-Perry's titular question, "Who Died and Made Tavis King?," which seems to have been, at least in part, her reaction to Smiley's "temper tantrum," is also a vindication of the then senator Barack Obama.³⁰⁷ Indeed, Harris-Perry here empathizes with Obama, both for renegeing on his promise to attend the 2007 State of the Black Union, and his reluctance to commit himself to it in 2008. "I do not think that Obama should attend the State of the Black Union," concludes Harris-Perry.³⁰⁸ In her polemic, moreover, Harris-Perry refers to Smiley as a "jealous," "racial super-delegate [*sic*]," and satirizes Sharpton, West, et al. as "self-proclaimed racial power brokers."³⁰⁹

In less than a month after Obama's first presidential inauguration, and a little more than a week before the 2009 State of the Black Union, Smiley published his

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Harris-Perry, "Who Died and Made Tavis King?" *The Root*, February 15, 2008. Accessed February 22, 2013, <http://www.theroot.com/views/who-died-and-made-tavis-king>.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

political “yardstick” titled *Accountable: Making America as Good as Its Promise*.³¹⁰ And, lest that should not suffice, Smiley’s debut film, *Stand*, premiered some three months later. Needless to say, their “Poverty Tour” was not the first time Smiley and West chartered a tour bus. After the fashion of Spike Lee’s film *Get on the Bus* (1996), Smiley and his “soul patrol” (i.e., Cornel West, Michael Eric Dyson, Dick Gregory, BeBe Winans, and Eddie Glaude to name a few) decided to tour Tennessee to commemorate the 40th anniversary of King’s assassination.³¹¹ In *Stand*, West and Dyson receive much kudos (and lead roles) as “the nation’s leading public intellectual” and “the most brilliant rhetorician,” respectively.³¹²

On June 5, 2009, less than two weeks after the film’s premiere, Harris-Perry described *Stand* as “an enormous disappointment.”³¹³ In her CNN review, Harris-Perry undermines the cast’s pretensions to black politics and their ostensible misappropriation of King. Indeed, her analysis of black public intellectualism here is worth quoting at length:

³¹⁰ “The *Covenant* is the ‘what’; THE COVENANT *In Action* is the ‘how’; and *ACCOUNTABLE* is the ‘whether’—the yardstick for measuring whether elected officials and citizens have fulfilled or are satisfying their respective duties in our democracy”; see Tavis Smiley and Stephanie Robinson, *Accountable: Making America as Good as Its Promise* (New York: Atria Books, 2009), 3.

³¹¹ “. . . I knew I was overdue to spend some time dialoguing with my ‘soul patrol’”; see Smiley, *Stand* trailer, accessed February 21, 2013, <http://www.tavistalks.com/sivat/stand>.

³¹² Smiley, *Stand: What Do You Stand For?*, DVD (Beverly Hills: Sivav Productions, 2009).

³¹³ Harris-Perry, “Commentary: Don’t Hold Obama to Race Agenda,” *CNN Politics*, June 05, 2009. Accessed February 21, 2013, http://articles.cnn.com/2009-06-05/politics/lacewell.race.agenda_1_tavis-smiley-obama-s-lincoln-barack-obama?_s=PM:POLITICS.

[*Stand*] did little to reveal the shortcomings of the Obama phenomenon. Instead, the piece exposed and embodied the contemporary crisis of the black public intellectual in the age of Obama. . . . Smiley and his ‘soul patrol’ . . . are mostly public personalities and tenured professors largely unaccountable to the black constituency. . . . The era of racial brokerage politics, when the voices of a few men stood in for the entire race, is now over. . . . ‘Stand’ was sad because I still believe in a role for black public intellectuals. Scholars and journalists often have a particular capacity for curiosity, questioning and issue synthesis that has real value in public discourse. It was painfully clear that this particular accountability crusade is not informed by any of those skills. Instead, it seems determined to stand in the way of the maturation of African-American politics in order to maintain personal power.³¹⁴

Clearly, the notion of post-racialism is an idealization. As a political strategy, however, it necessarily calls our attention to the elections of black public servants, for examples, Justice Clarence Thomas, President Obama himself, Republican Herman Cain, and now Senator Tim Scott, in order to foreclose the discourse on racism. This in turn allows the State to surreptitiously undermine black interests. But the discourse on race (and especially racism) *is* the black public intellectual’s *raison d’être*. In this context, “post-racialism” renders the black public intellectual obsolete. Of course this is the

³¹⁴ Ibid.

“contemporary crisis” to which Harris-Perry here is referring. As Dyson explains, “I don’t want to stop being black—I’m too old to major in anything else.”³¹⁵

Excepting his recent interviews with *Diverse* and *Democracy Now!*, West has stayed aloof (at least publicly) from the bickering. His falling-out with Sharpton in 2011, however, seems to have been the last straw. On April 10, 2011, West and Sharpton went head to head in an unlikely debate. So heated was their msnbc debate, then, that Ed Schultz was unable to assert his role as moderator. No sooner had West here broached the reality of black tokenism than the show took a turn for the worse:

I worry about you, brother. Because you could be easily manipulated by those in the White House who do have the interest of Wall Street oligarchs, who do have the interest of corporate plutocrats that you oppose, but you end up being the public face. And if Barack Obama ends up just being another black mascot of these Wall Street oligarchs, we’re gonna be in a world of trouble.³¹⁶

Having taken offense, Sharpton reared up and lashed out at West:

³¹⁵ Dyson, “How We Go Forward” in *State of the Black Union, 2009: Making America As Good As Its Promise (10th Anniversary of Conversations)*, DVD (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2009).

³¹⁶ West, “A Stronger America: The Black Agenda,” msnbc, April 10, 2011. Accessed February 23, 2013, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/42422469/ns/msnbc_tv/t/stronger-america%20black-agenda/#.USfzGKVN-fQ.

I'm the one out there in the trenches at the labor rallies and during the marches . . . while a lot of people are sitting around inside their ivory towers, talking. . . . If you're scared, say you're scared! Don't blame that on Obama. Say, you're scared to stand up for the people.³¹⁷

Sharpton here seems to have completely misread West's critique. Indeed, his mistake lay in not realizing that West's critique of tokenism above (namely, Obama's functioning as a "mascot") in no way attempted to discredit Sharpton's own political activism.

Nevertheless, Sharpton's dichotomizing here between the "trenches" and the ivory tower of academia is well-taken, since professors (especially tenured, Ivy League professors) are not public servants; nor are they accountable—at least in any meaningful way—to citizens qua citizens. Public intellectuals, on the other hand, secure their wealth and status through the maintenance and negotiation of their social contracts with their fan bases.

The shift from constituencies to fan bases, again, is attributable as much to the growing aestheticization of politics as to the (likewise growing) politicization of art. In this context, public intellectualism (and especially black public intellectualism) poses as politics even as politics entertains. Indeed, there is something uncannily entertaining about the performance of discourse, be it academic or otherwise. Understanding public-intellectual performances in this regard means taking seriously the defining and unifying features of their performativity. What an odd practice is politics, and what a curious exercise public intellectualism, that both lend themselves to a performance history like

³¹⁷ Al Sharpton, "A Stronger America: The Black Agenda."

this. Doubtless we will continue to do well to take as our inspiration here that basic question which has guided Christopher Small's hand: "*What does it mean when this performance (of this work) takes place at this time, in this place, with these participants?*" Or to put it more simply, we can ask of the performance, any performance anywhere and at any time, *What's really going on here?* [emphasis his]"³¹⁸

Doing his best to keep Sharpton on-topic, West interjected a seemingly defamiliarizing question: "Brother Al," nags West, "Do you have a *critique* of Obama?" [emphasis his]"³¹⁹ Unfortunately, Sharpton here offered no substantive comeback or critique. Instead, West's question revealed something of a blind spot in Sharpton's unshakeable faith in and apology for President Obama. Nevertheless, the shouting match came to a head when West criticized the administration's dearth of economic policies in favor of the under- and unemployed. Needless to say, Sharpton here stalemated, passing the buck to Congress. Five months later, President Obama proposed the American Jobs Act, which was all but killed by Republican filibustering.

The spectacle that West made of himself on msnbc, however, only provided more fodder for Harris-Perry. On May 17, 2011, then, Harris-Perry had another go at West. But her broadside against West here is much more pointed than in the previous articles above, where he is mentioned only in passing. Having already handed in her resignation to Princeton University, Harris-Perry's "Cornel West v. Barack Obama" seems to have been

³¹⁸ Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 10.

³¹⁹ West, "A Stronger America: The Black Agenda."

written with all guns blazing.³²⁰ In her polemic, Harris-Perry ruminates on President Obama's ostensible "betrayal" of West and the latter's "loyalty" to Tavis Smiley.³²¹ What Harris-Perry points to is the double standard with which West seems to have adhered:

As West derides the president's economic policies he remains silent on his friend Tavis Smiley's relationship with Wal-Mart, Wells Fargo and McDonald's—all corporations whose invasive and predatory actions in poor and black communities have been the target of progressive organizing for decades. I have never heard him take Tavis Smiley to task for helping convince black Americans to enter into predatory mortgages. I've never heard him ask whether Tavis's decision to publish R. Kelley's memoirs might be a less than progressive decision. He doesn't hold Tavis accountable because Tavis is his friend and he is loyal. . . . God help us if Cornel West and Tavis Smiley getting arrested is our last chance at a democratic awakening.³²²

So help us, indeed; but the same might be said of Harris-Perry's new paradigm for black public intellectualism: msnbc.

³²⁰ "'Princeton is the wrong fit for me,' says Harris-Perry. 'It's a wrong place for me to live and it's the wrong intellectual community for me'"; see Jamal Eric Watson, "High-Profile Black Political Scientist to Lead New Center on Race, Gender and Politics in the South," *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*, January 24, 2011. Accessed February 23, 2013, <http://diverseeducation.com/article/14651/#>.

³²¹ Harris-Perry, "Cornel West v. Barack Obama," *The Nation*, May 17, 2011. Accessed February 23, 2013, <http://www.thenation.com/blog/160725/cornel-west-v-barack-obama#>.

³²² *Ibid.*

On January 13, 2011, Tavis Smiley moderated a televised panel titled “America’s Next Chapter: Is There a Brighter Future for the Next Generation?” The panel was broadcast live on C-SPAN and featured but one of the usual suspects, Cornel West. In the absence of, for examples, Louis Farrakhan, Michael Eric Dyson, Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson, Smiley’s new, multicultural cast included Arianna Huffington (Greek-American), Maria Bartiromo (Italian-American), Maria Teresa Kumar (Colombian-America), John S. Chen (Chinese-American), and David Frum (Canadian-American) to name a few. But Smiley’s almost strategic, institutional multiculturalism here comes to seem different only in phenotype. Of course there are any number of reasons why Smiley here might have mucked the “race card,” so to speak. Firstly, we need here to remember that his and West’s criticism of Obama rendered them both unpopular with much of their black fan base. And, as we have seen, both have become targets of vicious ad hominem attacks. In a sense, what Smiley has done here is to transpose The State of the *Black Union* (or “black agenda”) into a simulacrum of the Poor People’s Campaign. Unlike King, who ruminated on the nature of poverty (cf., *Where do we go from Here: Chaos or Community?*) and was martyred for his iconoclasm, Smiley comes to seem trifling in comparison, if not disingenuous. Since African-Americans are disproportionately poor (the annual income for 23.5% of “black” households in America is less than \$15,000 compared to 11.4% for “white” households and 13% for “all” households), Smiley’s newfound *class* consciousness affords him opportunity to rehabilitate his (now hidden) *racial* agenda. Indeed, Smiley’s “black” agenda rears its head here under the guise of “poverty”—even though his panelists are now overwhelmingly nonblack.³²³ “I’m not

³²³ See “Table 690. Money Income of Households—Percent Distribution by Income

concerned just with black people,” says West, “but I start there. I love black people *first* [emphasis his], then I got to spill over the love for other brothers and sisters. [*Laughter. The camera here zooms in for a close-up of Smiley’s face and a smirk that is not to be described*]”³²⁴

Indeed, West remains the last vestige of Smiley’s former State of the Black Union and the only African-American the latter selected for his new, multicultural program. Of course West here runs the gamut of his polytropic mode, invoking, as it were, the first Gospel before seguing into the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. So compelling is West’s narrative performatism, then, that Arianna Huffington begins in awe:

Well, first of all, I want to say that I would like to spend the next three hours *listening* [emphasis hers] to Doctor West. [*Laughter*] I was just like completely spellbound. . . . I would so much rather just sit here listening; and one of the reasons is, that I think we are all so starved of poetry in our public discourse—everything is so prosaic, so much about data. So, just listening to Cornel kind of reminds us of how malnourished we are when it comes to that.³²⁵

Level, Race, and Hispanic Origin, in Constant (2009) Dollars: 1990 to 2009” in the United States Census Bureau’s *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (2012). Accessed February 25, 2013, <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s0690.pdf>.

³²⁴ West, “America’s Next Chapter: Is There a Brighter Future for the Next Generation?” January 13, 2011, accessed February 25, 2013, <http://www.americasnextchapter.com/watchlive.html>.

³²⁵ Arianna Huffington, “America’s Next Chapter: Is There a Brighter Future for the Next Generation?”

West here pulls out all the stops, paying homage to King at every turn, playing up Smiley, leveling accusations of corruption against Wall Street, and jabbing at President Obama. As we have seen him do in 2010, West points the finger at Geithner and Summers; and to these here he adds Ben Bernanke. As West explains, “this is not the ‘change’ we can believe in.”³²⁶ Of course West keeps faith with Smiley throughout and even contrasts him to “the right-wing *demagogues* [emphasis mine] who are willing to manipulate the masses in order to sustain stability.”³²⁷ What is more, West unsettles the ostensible teleology between King and President Obama: “Our beloved president is *a* [emphasis his] fulfillment of King’s dream, not *the* [emphasis his] fulfillment of King’s dream.”³²⁸ Moreover, despite his role as moderator, Smiley here enters the fray, piggybacking on West’s critique of Obama: “This is what I mean about holding him accountable. The excitement and the symbolism ain’t gonna do it. You need some substance.”³²⁹ It is striking, even ironic, finally, that West, to whom Smiley gives the last word, should invoke his faith in order to absolve himself from all political accountability: “In the end, brother, as a Christian, this world’s not my home, man. I’m just passing through . . . I’m bearing witness and gone.”³³⁰

One year later, on January 12, 2012, Smiley moderated another televised panel, this time titled “Remaking America: From Poverty to Prosperity.” Likewise, the panel was broadcast live on C-SPAN and featured the narrative performatism of Cornel West.

³²⁶ West, “America’s Next Chapter: Is There a Brighter Future for the Next Generation?”

³²⁷ Ibid.

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ Smiley, “America’s Next Chapter: Is There a Brighter Future for the Next Generation?”

³³⁰ West, “America’s Next Chapter: Is There a Brighter Future for the Next Generation?”

Indeed, West here begins with a familiar gesture: “Well, first, I just want to salute you and your leadership. Give brother Tavis a hand! [*Applause*] . . . I was blessed to go to eighteen cities, eleven states in seven days with brother Tavis on the Poverty Tour that he came up with and his team facilitated.”³³¹ Alongside West, then, filmmaker Michael Moore holds the stage throughout. Indeed, West calls our attention to Moore’s apparent bent for “the black prophetic tradition” in order to undermine President Obama’s nonblack politics: “The irony is just overwhelming for me that you get a white brother from Flint, Michigan, expressing the best of the black prophetic tradition to a black brother in the White House who’s head of the American Empire.”³³² Needless to say, once again, Smiley here abandons his own role as moderator to critique Obama’s rhetoric of hope and change: “. . . some folk don’t understand the critique of Obama from those of us who happen to be free black men, who want a more progressive view of this country. . . . we gotta move from symbols into the substance.”³³³

On January 17, 2013, finally, Smiley moderated his most recent, televised panel titled “Vision for a New America: A Future Without Poverty.” Again, it goes without saying that West here is just as prominent a feature of Smiley’s annual event. In fact, West’s performance here is arguably his most passionate one to date. This is because he assigns himself the task of policing the Obama administration’s use of the legacy (and bible!) of Martin Luther King, Jr. Even Newt Gingrich, who is here accorded a cameo

³³¹ West, “Tavis Smiley Hosts Symposium on Poverty in America,” C-SPAN Video Library, January 12, 2012. Accessed February 26, 2013, <http://www.c-span.org/Events/Tavis-Smiley-Hosts-Symposium-on-Poverty-in-America/10737427045/>.

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Smiley, “Tavis Smiley Hosts Symposium on Poverty in America.”

appearance, admits to having felt intimidated to follow West's "brilliant oratory".³³⁴

"First, I just want to salute you, my brother," says West to Smiley. "We've been in the trenches now for twenty years, sometimes misunderstood, sometimes demonized, sometimes ostracized; but we're stronger than ever, and we're still coming, we're still going."³³⁵ Of course West's pretensions to having been "in the trenches" here harks back to his debate with Sharpton mentioned above. Laudable though West's recent focus on poverty might be, it is hard to imagine him not connecting his own declining approval rating to that of King.³³⁶³³⁷ Indeed, the confidence with which West presides over the legacy of King is here worth quoting at length:

³³⁴ Newt Gingrich, "Tavis Smiley Presents Poverty in America," C-SPAN Video Library, January 17, 2013. Accessed February 28, 2013, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/310437-1>.

³³⁵ West, "Tavis Smiley Presents Poverty in America."

³³⁶ "King increasingly butted heads with the soft, safe image manufactured for him. The more he protested poverty, denounced the Vietnam War, and lamented the unconscious racism of most whites, the more he lost favor and footing in white America. For the first time in a decade, King's name was left off the January 1967 Gallup poll list of the ten most admired Americans"; see Michael Eric Dyson, *April 4, 1968: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Death and How It Changed America* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2008), 53-54. "King was a complex figure who changed his mind—about race, about class, about leadership, and about poverty—as he matured into the powerful, disturbing figure he was to become. It is convenient to forget that in 1967, King failed to make the Gallup Poll's list of the ten most popular Americans"; see Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 303.

³³⁷ "In 1963, King had a 41% positive and a 37% negative rating; in 1964, it was 43% positive and 39% negative; in 1965, his rating was 45% positive and 45% negative; and in 1966—the last Gallup measure of King using this scalometer procedure—it was 32% positive and 63% negative. Gallup did not measure King in 1967 or 1968"; see Frank Newport, "Martin Luther King, Jr.: Revered More After Death Than Before," *Gallup*, January 16, 2006. Accessed March 1, 2013, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/20920/martin-luther-king-jr-revered-more-after-death-than-before.aspx>.

When I got the news that my dear brother, Barack Obama—President Obama, was going to put his precious hand on Martin Luther King, Jr.’s bible, I got upset; and I got upset because you don’t play with Martin Luther King, Jr. . . . you don’t use his prophetic fire as just a moment in the presidential pageantry without understanding the challenge that he presents to all of those in power no matter what color they are. . . . So, the righteous indignation of a Martin Luther King, Jr. becomes a moment in political calculation, and that makes my blood boil. . . . this is personal for me because this is the tradition that I come out of. . . . People say, ‘. . . there’s Smiley and West, hating Obama.’ No, no. We’re just loving the tradition that produced Martin Luther King, Jr., and we’re not going to allow it to be in any way sanitized, deodorized and sterilized.³³⁸

For both West and Smiley, the “true” legacy of King is, again, one that inspires a consideration of the poor and working classes. “Mr. President,” says Smiley, looking directly into the camera, “it’s time for a major policy address to eradicate poverty in America.”³³⁹

Altogether, “America’s Next Chapter,” “Remaking America,” and “Vision for a New America” are meant to undermine the Obama administration’s *laissez-faire* approach to poverty. But then, as I have made clear, the newfound class-consciousness of these post-State of the Black Union affairs is a strategic alternative to two related

³³⁸ West, “Tavis Smiley Presents Poverty in America.”

³³⁹ Smiley, “Tavis Smiley Presents Poverty in America.”

dilemmas. The first of these has to do with the fact that Smiley's and West's criticism of President Obama seems to have severed their relations both with regular participants (namely, Tom Joyner and Michael Erica Dyson) and black viewers alike. The second problem concerns the chasm between *black* public intellectualism and so-called "post-racialism". Both dilemmas seem to have been resolved here by supplanting the language of race and racism with that of class and classism, facilitating the move toward multicultural (and disproportionately nonblack) panelists and audiences. Doing so, therefore, as we have seen, has allowed Smiley and West to continue to function as public intellectuals both black and popular. Their poverty tours and manifesto are, in this regard, also strategic; they all reach beyond President Obama's staunch fan base—again, so as to include nonblack constituencies as well. After having fallen out with President Obama, West seems to have rebounded with Smiley (though even here we need to remember that West was already a longtime panelist for Smiley's State of the Black Union). Indeed, West's romantic treatment of Smiley here is bound up with the former's role as kingmaker. In *Stand*, Smiley refers to West not just as his "dear and abiding friend," but also as "the 'big brother' that [he] never had."³⁴⁰ Even as he continues to protect Smiley against public backlash, then, West is himself the answer to a question that comes up time and again: "Who Died and Made Tavis King?"³⁴¹

³⁴⁰ Smiley, *Stand: What Do You Stand For?*

³⁴¹ Harris-Perry, "Who Died and Made Tavis King?"

Conclusion

**On the Black Public Intellectual's Private Use of Reason;
Or, the Black Petit Bourgeois "Public Sphere"**

"The conflation of black intellectual leadership with academic entrepreneurialism is one sign of the 'tyranny of the market' and promises a dismal if not bleak political and intellectual future. . . . the media are most comfortable with black intellectuals who function as an extension of black entertainment, as professionally racialized bodies reduced to perform spectacular acts of blackness in intellectual face."

—Hazel V. Carby, "The New Auction Block: Blackness and the Marketplace," 2006

"The most published and publicized blacks on the American public scene today are well-dressed, comfortably educated, sagaciously articulate, avowedly new age, and resolutely middle class. . . . These 'new Negroes' are resonant and prolific but often utterly useless to the most fundamental interests of the black majority. . . . The new black public sphere (with some notable exceptions) is less amenable to black dissent than to black caricature, more receptive of neoliberal black economics and black neoconservative adventurism than to black social justice."

—Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Betrayal: How Black Intellectuals Have Abandoned the Ideals of the Civil Rights Era*, 2008

In his essay "What Is Enlightenment?" (1784), Immanuel Kant distinguishes between the "public"- and "private use of reason."³⁴² "By 'public use of one's reason,'" writes Kant, "I mean that use which a man, as *scholar* [emphasis his], makes of it before the reading public. I call 'private use' that use which a man makes of his reason in a civic post that

³⁴² Immanuel Kant, "What Is Enlightenment?" in *Contemporary Civilization Reader* (Sixth Edition), trans. Mary C. Smith (New York: American Heritage Custom Publishing, 1997), 75-79.

has been entrusted to him.”³⁴³ For Kant, then, the task (or “obligation,” as he puts it) of enlightenment lay in the public performances of scholars (or scholarly performances of citizens). As Jürgen Habermas explains, “Kant viewed enlightenment, the public use of reason, at first as a matter for scholars, especially those concerned with the principles of pure reason—the philosophers.”³⁴⁴ Moreover, Kant posits that the public use of reason “must be *free* [emphasis mine] at all times,” by which he presumably means a scholar’s “freedom” to make public use of his reason.³⁴⁵ Of course Kant’s eighteenth-century notion about the public use of reason above has taken on a new significance in Habermas’ book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962). Indeed, Habermas’ preliminary definition of the “public sphere” is here worth quoting at length:

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come [*sic*] together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people’s public use of their reason.³⁴⁶

³⁴³ Ibid., 76.

³⁴⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 104.

³⁴⁵ Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?” in *Contemporary Civilization Reader*, 76.

³⁴⁶ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 27.

Clearly, the commercial pressures of the private sector have compromised the public sphere—if, indeed, there really ever was an autochthonous “public sphere.” The project of enlightenment, however, is not much advanced today, even long after Kant’s clarion call for scholars to make public use of their reason; and this is because there are very few tenure-track faculty with the time or resources to enlighten pro bono. This is true as well of tenured faculty and even “public intellectuals,” whose speaking fees (commonly called “honoraria”) foreclose the public use of their reason. Doubtless Kant would have considered the privatization of public education (commodification of knowledge?) a “restriction” of intellectual freedom. “We find restrictions on freedom everywhere,” writes Kant. “But which restriction is harmful to enlightenment? Which restriction is innocent, and which advances enlightenment?” (and here we need to remember that Kant himself was an unpaid lecturer at the University of Königsberg, 1755-1770).^{347,348}

Needless to say, the situation has changed over the last two hundred years or so with the development of mass media, with the aestheticization of politics, and with the vicissitudes of democracy (namely, the rise of neoliberalism). Altogether they have rendered the public sphere more or less defunct. As Habermas explains, “The world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only. By the same token the integrity of the private sphere which they promise to their consumers is also an

³⁴⁷ Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?” in *Contemporary Civilization Reader*, 76.

³⁴⁸ “Immanuel Kant,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, May 20, 2010. Accessed March 3, 2013, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant/>.

illusion.”³⁴⁹ To be sure, innovative technologies have advanced new, global networks for the creation and dissemination of the public use of reason. The inventions and public use of Facebook, YouTube and Twitter all come to mind. Indeed, what we call cyberspace in general (and the blogosphere in particular) today bears a very close resemblance to what Kant meant by “a universal community—a world society of citizens” (World Wide Web?).³⁵⁰ Since the Enlightenment, then, humans have found new, post-Kantian ways to make public use of their reason. But here we ought not to confuse Kant’s notion of “intellectual freedom” (or “free thought”) with that of “bare”- or “ordinary human freedom.”^{351,352,353} At the end of his essay, Kant calls our attention to this paradox of the Enlightenment:

³⁴⁹ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 171.

³⁵⁰ Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?” in *Contemporary Civilization Reader*, 76.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁵² “Perhaps for him to have expected more than the *bare freedom* [emphasis mine] was too much for the time. . . . Toussaint was attempting the impossible—the impossible that was for him the only reality that mattered. The realities to which the historian is condemned will at times simplify the tragic alternatives with which he was faced”; see C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 291. “Toussaint is a tragic subject of a colonial modernity to which he was, by force, conscripted. His tragedy inheres in the fact that, inescapably modern as he is obliged by the modern conditions of his life to be, he must seek his freedom in the very technologies, conceptual languages, and institutional formations in which modernity’s rationality has sought his enslavement”; see David Scott, “Toussaint’s Tragic Dilemma” in *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 168.

³⁵³ “After emancipation there would come questions of labor, wage and political power. But now, first, must be demanded that *ordinary human freedom* [emphasis mine] and recognition of essential manhood which slavery blasphemously denied. This philosophy of freedom was a logical continuation of the freedom philosophy of the eighteenth century which insisted that Freedom was not an End but an indispensable means to the beginning of human progress and that democracy could function only after the dropping of feudal privileges, monopoly and chains”; see W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, intr. David Levering Lewis (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 20.

. . . a free state cannot dare to say: ‘Argue as much as you like, and about what you like, but obey!’ Thus we observe here as elsewhere in human affairs, in which almost everything is paradoxical, a surprising and unexpected course of events: a large degree of civic freedom appears to be of advantage to the intellectual freedom of the people, yet at the same time it establishes insurmountable barriers. A lesser degree of civic freedom, however, creates room to let that free spirit expand to the limits of its capacity.³⁵⁴

The problem of today, however, is that print and electronic media conspire to sustain the illusion of a public sphere, which is now closer to a free-for-all than a “scholarly” domain. For Kant, the public use of one’s reason “as a scholar” seems to mean an individual’s expression of “carefully examined and constructive thoughts.”³⁵⁵ Different than the public sphere, the blogosphere affords human agents opportunity to become makers (and consumers) of “meaningful” discourse—especially political discourse—but without political accountability or consequence. YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, for examples, have given way to channel-surfing, cyberstalking (commonly called “social networking”), and microblogging, respectively. Needless to say, the “Twittersphere” has come to usurp the public sphere in considerable ways. But over against the allure of our so-called “Information Age,” social media in turn has given rise to the illusion of “civic freedom.” In the Twittersphere and elsewhere consumers forsake

³⁵⁴ Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?” in *Contemporary Civilization Reader*, 78-79.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

enlightenment in favor of anti-intellectual entertainment (namely, “Internet memes”) and public narcissism (e.g., “status updates,” “check-ins,” “friend requests,” “retweets,” photo-sharing, etc.). What is more, scholars today have taken not just to televised debates or commentary, but also, more significantly, to social networking as well. In this context, public intellectuals are interpellated more and more to give their “expert” opinions on all matters of pop-cultural interest. It would seem that this new role of the public intellectual is in stark contrast to what Kant meant by the public use of one’s reason, or perhaps simply what we might expect from an intellectual per se. Everywhere the public intellectual is bombarded with (and privately financed to field) “false problems.” Consider the following passage of Gilles Deleuze:

Kant never ceased to remind us that Ideas are essentially ‘problematic’.
Conversely, problems are Ideas. Undoubtedly, he shows that Ideas lead us into false problems, but this is not their most profound characteristic: if, according to Kant, reason does pose false problems and therefore itself gives rise to illusion, this is because in the first place it is the faculty of posing problems in general.³⁵⁶

What Deleuze here points to is perhaps the most important task of the intellectual: not necessarily to find the solutions; but to ask the right *questions*. Too often, however, is the public use of reason reduced to triviality—“restricted,” so to speak—by the institutional expectations (and “private” obligations) of our public intellectuals. To be sure, the public

³⁵⁶ Gilles Deleuze, “Ideas and the Synthesis of Difference” in *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) 168.

sphere will remain an illusion so long as public intellectualism (intellectual labor?) remains a profitable corner of the market.

Above all others, the black public intellectual here has found *his* niche.³⁵⁷ Indeed, it is fair to say that over the past twenty years or so black public intellectualism has become a specialized but profitable corner of the public speaking sector (e.g., Tavis Smiley's "High Quality Speakers Bureau"). In our post-civil rights era, then, the black public intellectual has come to occupy a strange, even strategic space betwixt and between the academy and the everyday, political world:

Our current political moment is characterized by the public conflation of the terms 'black intellectual,' 'black academic,' and 'black leader' . . . The authentication of blackness has become celebrated and defined through the body and through the valorization of the impoverishment of ideas. Critical complexity is replaced by clichéd generalities and easily digestible sound-bites [*sic*]. The abandonment of intellectual insurgency in favor of the self-promotion of celebrities and the production of formulaic and acceptable interpretations of black America for general consumption is an indication of the extent to which academic entrepreneurs can function as the products and allies of corporate America.³⁵⁸

³⁵⁷ "The mass marketing of blackness, via the branding of black intellectuals as media stars and as logos for the field, has been an overwhelmingly masculine project"; see Hazel V. Carby, "The New Auction Block: Blackness and the Marketplace" in *A Companion to African-American Studies*, ed. Lewis and Jane Gordon (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 129.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 134.

These words from Hazel Carby reflect her growing disillusionment with black public intellectualism. For Carby (as for Michael Bérubé, Robert S. Boynton, Adolph Reed, Jr., Eric Lott and Houston A. Baker, Jr.), the black public-intellectual enterprise is on its own terms highly problematic.³⁵⁹ And nowhere have these public-intellectual performances of blackness been so elaborate as in the State of the Black Union and its outgrowths (2000-2010; 2011-2013).

Interestingly, the rise of the black public intellectual seems to have been more or less coeval with the State of the Black Union. Indeed, Smiley's annual event has functioned as a kind of public sphere for black leaders and intellectuals alike. Different than the charismatic performances of Louis Farrakhan, Michael Eric Dyson, Cornel West, Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson, the verisimilitude of this black public sphere qua public sphere is almost entirely attributable to the substantive contributions of Smiley's academic panelists, for examples, Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., Farah Griffin, Mary Frances Berry, Orlando Patterson, Darlene Clark Hine, Tricia Rose, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes and the late Manning Marable (though even here we need to remember that Glaude and Rose themselves pushed hard at the boundaries between demagoguery and the public use of reason, so much so that it would be difficult to distinguish categorically their performances from those of, say, West and Dyson).

³⁵⁹ Michael Bérubé, "Public Academy," *New Yorker*, January 9, 1995; Robert S. Boynton, "The New Intellectuals," *Atlantic Monthly*, March 1995; Adolph Reed, Jr., "What Are the Drums Saying, Booker?": The Curious Role of the Black Public Intellectual" in *Class Notes: Posing As Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene* (New York: The New Press, 2000); Eric Lott, "Public Image Limited: The New Black Intellectuals" in *The Disappearing Liberal Intellectual* (New York: Basic Books, 2006); and Houston A. Baker, Jr., "After Civil Rights: The Rise of Black Public Intellectuals" in *Betrayal: How Black Intellectuals Have Abandoned the Ideals of the Civil Rights Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

As we have seen, the State of the Black Union has collapsed important distinctions between the public sphere and classical theater. Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr.'s notion of the "community theater," again, is here most instructive.³⁶⁰ For Ramsey, community theaters are important sites for thinking about African-American cultural (i.e., "meaning"-making) practices (e.g., religion, music, dance, storytelling, etc.). Different than the public sphere, community theaters are effortful, socially constructed and ideologically informed spaces both "public and private."³⁶¹ Needless to say, despite their ubiquity, cultural practices themselves are still very much performances—performances of self- and group identity. In a sense, Smiley's State of the Black Union is the epitome of the community theater, even though it had all of the trappings of a political debate.

Needless to say, there are at least two reasons that complicate the State of the Black Union's pretensions to a black public sphere. The first, of lesser importance here, has to do with the fact that Smiley's event attracted a live audience at the same time that it was broadcast live on C-SPAN. Secondly, the spectacle of the State of the Black Union, in this regard, depended almost entirely upon the private patronage of, for examples, ExxonMobil, Nationwide, Wells Fargo, Walmart and McDonald's. These facts reveal a deep truth about Smiley's black public sphere that neither he nor his panelists seemed eager to broach publicly: that their "public" use of reason was made possible by the conditions of private institutions. Since 2000, the only noticeable exception is

³⁶⁰ Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., "It Just Stays with Me All of the Time: Collective Memory, Community Theater, and the Ethnographic Truth" in *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 77.

³⁶¹ Ibid.

comedian Dick Gregory, whose words at the 2008 State of the Black Union are here worth quoting at length:

. . . let me forget the ‘intellectual’ stuff right now, which I love. . . . I’ve got to get down to some personal business, which you’ll probably find out about after we leave here. I was standing back in the back, waiting to come on when you had your sponsors out here. So, when they came by, they passed me and I did say something to ‘em; and I know they gon’ tell you. See, I thanked the white dude from Walmart for my cousin; this past Christmas they had prices so low he didn’t have to shoplift. [*Laughter*] Now I know they gon’ tell you. The brother that passed by from ExxonMobil, now a lot of people don’t know, they had gift packages for us . . . and they had an ExxonMobil credit card for gas. I gave him mine back. Because I said, ‘. . . a gallon of water costs more than a gallon of gas. Can you give me a water card?’ [*Laughter*] And I’ll be honest, the black brother from Wells Fargo, head of the mortgages, I pulled him over and said, ‘I need to talk to you.’ He said, ‘Brother Greg, you need a mortgage?’ I said, ‘No, they took my house when times was good.’ [*Laughter*]³⁶²

However comedic, the passage above is especially telling when the scholars in attendance are so reticent about the privatization of the public use of their reason. In her review of

³⁶² Dick Gregory, *State of the Black Union, 2008: Reclaiming Our Democracy, Recasting Our Future*, DVD 2 (Los Angeles: The Smiley Group, 2008).

Stand and polemic against West, Melissa Harris-Perry calls our attention to Smiley's investors. Compare the following two passages:

. . . Smiley and his 'soul patrol,' who are mostly public personalities and tenured professors largely unaccountable to the black constituency. . . . Smiley is backed by powerful corporations, like Wal-Mart and Nationwide, that have troubled relationships with these communities. The college profs on the bus are comfortably supported by well-endowed universities. This does not invalidate their views on race, but it does make the analogy with King a poor fit.³⁶³

As West derides the president's economic policies he remains silent on his friend Tavis Smiley's relationship with Wal-Mart, Wells Fargo and McDonald's—all corporations whose invasive and predatory actions in poor and black communities have been the target of progressive organizing for decades. I have never heard him take Tavis Smiley to task for helping convince black Americans to enter into predatory mortgages.³⁶⁴

³⁶³ Melissa Harris-Perry, "Commentary: Don't Hold Obama to Race Agenda," *CNN Politics*, June 05, 2009. Accessed March 6, 2013, http://articles.cnn.com/2009-06-05/politics/lacewell.race.agenda_1_tavis-smiley-obama-s-lincoln-barack-obama?_s=PM:POLITICS.

³⁶⁴ Harris-Perry, "Cornel West v. Barack Obama," *The Nation*, May 17, 2011. Accessed March 6, 2013, <http://www.thenation.com/blog/160725/cornel-west-v-barack-obama#>.

Clearly, the practice of American politics itself is fraught with similar danger. According to the *New York Times*, the Democratic and Republican National Committees and “super” PACs spent some \$2 billion on the 2012 presidential campaign.³⁶⁵ To be sure, Smiley has been extraordinarily canny in this regard—that is to say, in attracting private sponsorship. Moreover, outside of the State of the Black Union, Smiley has enjoyed a lucrative career as a radio and television personality. Since his falling-out with Black Entertainment Television (BET) in 2001, Smiley has set up shop as a talk show host for National Public Radio (NPR), Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), and Public Radio International (PRI), not to mention his long-standing relationship with Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network (C-SPAN). In addition, Smiley has tried his hand at writing, publishing, directing, and, of course, entrepreneurialism and philanthropy. More importantly, he is the founder and CEO of High Quality Speakers Bureau.

High Quality Speakers Bureau (or HQSB) is a contract negotiation strategist mostly for black, Ivy League professors, including Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Eddie Glaude, Tricia Rose and Cornel West. In other words, HQSB is the middleman between “high-quality” public intellectuals and the public (think of the work that most graduate students do for colloquia). One can only imagine how much more it would cost for HQSB to organize an event, or what, exactly, is meant by “HQSB can provide you with the best quotes” (imagine, if you will, the priceline.com for quoting honoraria).³⁶⁶ Their tagline:

³⁶⁵ Nicholas Confessore and Derek Willis, “2012 Election Ended With Deluge of Donations and Spending,” *New York Times*, December 7, 2012. Accessed March 6, 2013, <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/07/2012-election-ended-with-deluge-of-donations-and-spending/>.

³⁶⁶ “HQ Services,” Speakers Bureau, *Tavis Talks*. Accessed March 6, 2013, <http://www.tavistalks.com/speakersbureau/services>.

“High Quality Speakers Bureau: Bringing You the Faces, Voices and Visions Changing the World!”³⁶⁷ And, lest that should not suffice, the homepage thrice boasts the promise of “entertainment”:

. . . Our mission is to help organizations create powerful meeting experiences and messages using high quality talent, entertainment and creative media. . . . Our speakers are major thought leaders, celebrated personalities and top experts on the most important contemporary issues. They have their own unique style, presence, perspective and have been used with proven results by organizations, associations, public forums, educational institutions and corporations. HQSB provides an enormous intellectual base from which to draw expertise, informed commentary and even enjoyable entertainment.³⁶⁸

But here as elsewhere when the public use of reason beckons, “thought leaders” seems to mean “enjoyable entertainment,” and “high quality [*sic*]” might as well mean high-definition, as in HDTV.³⁶⁹ Needless to say, the “powerful meeting experiences” that HQSB (and others?) promise might very well come to upend more appropriate situations for the public use of reason. According to the website, HQSB is, after all, meant to

³⁶⁷ “About HQ,” Speakers Bureau, *Tavis Talks*. Accessed March 6, 2013, <http://www.tavistalks.com/speakersbureau>.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

“enlighten, entertain, or to catalyze action.”³⁷⁰ But it is hard to imagine, for example, that stock lectures on “DNA analysis,” “Spirituality,” “The Hip Hop Wars,” or “Blues, Funk, Hip-Hop and Their Transformative Effect on American Culture” might come to inspire some sort of radical political movement.³⁷¹ Indeed, the subtleties and nuances (commonly called “politics”) of black popular culture remain the black public intellectual’s hermeneutic forte and his most lucrative talking point, to be sure. The true problem here, however, is that HQSB itself seems to function as a conduit for black entertainment. “The culture industry,” writes Theodor Adorno, “reveals the truth not only about style but also about catharsis. . . . Amusement always means putting things out of mind, forgetting suffering, even when it is on display.”³⁷²

It goes without saying that “the public” is itself a rather ambiguous term. Clearly, the audience *for whom* black public intellectuals are paid to perform is in stark contrast to the imagined community *on behalf of whom* they are paid to speak. As Lott explains, “It may be vulgar to suggest that ‘public’ mostly functions in this discourse as a euphemism for white people, but thus far there hasn’t been enough sustained reflection on how alternative or counterpublic spheres intersect and interact with an extensive, broad-based,

³⁷⁰ “HQ Topics,” Speakers Bureau, *Tavis Talks*. Accessed March 6, 2013, <http://www.tavistalks.com/speakersbureau/topics>.

³⁷¹ “HQ Speakers,” Speakers Bureau, *Tavis Talks*. Accessed March 6, 2013, <http://www.tavistalks.com/speakersbureau/speakers/henry-louis-gates-jr>; <http://www.tavistalks.com/speakersbureau/speakers/eddie-glaude>; <http://www.tavistalks.com/speakersbureau/speakers/tricia-rose>; and <http://www.tavistalks.com/speakersbureau/speakers/cornel-west>.

³⁷² Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002), 115-116.

and hegemonic ‘public’ one.”^{373,374} The State of the Black Union’s *immediate* audience was overwhelmingly black, to be sure, but the composition of its *mediated* audience is unknown, since C-SPAN is not subject to the Nielsen ratings.³⁷⁵ Still, it is hard to see many white viewers mortifying themselves, sitting through hours of demagoguery aimed at them—unless, of course, they found it to be entertaining. From this vantage point, Smiley’s immediate, black audience is part of the spectacle. “I usually watch this event every year,” writes Harris-Perry. “It is fun, enlightening and inspiring. This year I will have to TiVo it.”³⁷⁶

From all this and more, the notion of a black public sphere is merely a chimera. Perhaps it is not so much that the black intellectual *ought* to make public use of his reason as that he *cannot*. For that use of one’s reason requires, as it were, “a lesser degree of civic freedom,” as Kant notes.³⁷⁷ Needless to say, Habermas himself understood very well that the public sphere he theorized was always-already a matter of bourgeois society: “. . . the abstract human being who in the pursuit of his private interests never left behind

³⁷³ Lott, “Public Image Limited: The New Black Intellectuals” in *The Disappearing Liberal Intellectual*, 96.

³⁷⁴ “When we consider that these performances are directed to white audiences, their minstrel quality stands out as especially distasteful because it masquerades as being in touch with the latest wrinkles of refined black hipness. This, admittedly, puts off those affronted by coon shows”; see Reed, “‘What Are the Drums Saying, Booker?’: The Curious Role of the Black Public Intellectual” in *Class Notes*, 87.

³⁷⁵ Brian Stelter, “C-Span Puts Full Archives on the Web,” *New York Times*, March 15, 2010. Accessed March 8, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/16/arts/television/16cspan.html>.

³⁷⁶ Harris-Perry, “Who Died and Made Tavis King?” *The Root*, February 15, 2008. Accessed March 8, 2013, <http://www.theroot.com/views/who-died-and-made-tavis-king>.

³⁷⁷ Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?” in *Contemporary Civilization Reader*, 79.

the unfreedom of the property owner . . .”³⁷⁸ In a sense, the counterpublic performances of black intellectuals are symptomatic of a much more general disorder: neoliberalism.

WHAT IS DEMAGOGUERY?

What we call *demagoguery* today, therefore, is quite simply the public performance of reason. Supposing that the etymology of the word *demagogue* is contained in *demos* (“the people”) and *agōgos* (“leader”), it must have meant *leader of the people*. Yet there is in the popular use of the term a pejorative sense of which the meaning would seem to suggest political chicanery. In part this is because here we have mostly Aristotle to thank. So that the reader of two millennia since the *Rhetoric*, who encounters that word which has become something of an issue for black intellectuals (for examples, W. E. B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, and Malcolm X), must interpret it as a kind of sophistry. Needless to say, the Sophists are likewise implicated in the *Rhetoric* (though even here we need to remember that the invention of rhetoric itself is attributed to them). In our post-civil rights era, then, it is one of the strengths of the black public intellectual that he has been able to conflate two distinct practices: the private and public uses of reason. In a sense, the black public intellectual is at once a sophist and a demagogue, a teacher and a charismatic leader.

³⁷⁸ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 125.

Unfortunately, nothing here can give an exact idea of the demagogue to those who have not experienced him firsthand. Hearing Louis Farrakhan for the first time, the demands of the reader rise to maintain the necessary critical distance. This is true even of scholarly readers, who will also most probably and often find themselves moved to suspend their disbelief. And this is because demagoguery is aesthetically pleasing. As we have seen, there are at least three narrative modes of demagoguery:

ALLEGORY.

The allegorical mode of emplotment achieves its aim through homiletics. The demagogue is here a simulacrum of the black (and especially Baptist) preacher. Indeed, he invokes the authority of Holy Writ in which reason has no part.

EPIDEIXIS.

The epideictic mode achieves its aim through rhythm. The demagogue is here literally a performer, singing and reciting lyrics to black popular music.

POLYTROPOS.

The polytropic mode of emplotment achieves its aim through a multiplicity of modes, including those mentioned above.

Here are three narrative modes that we have seen and might expect from the State of the Black Union's leading exponents of demagoguery: Louis Farrakhan, Michael Eric Dyson, and Cornel West, respectively. Now, as to the priority of entertainment over that of enlightenment, it seems more than probable. This is in fact the demagogue's tragic dilemma, which is bound up with the also tragic—and similarly so—mode of the spectacle. Modern technology, it turns out, is a condition of political (im)possibility. Here we have said nothing of Barack Obama's charismatic authority; and this is because his is a different affair altogether—even though it is inferior in comparison.

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