

Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished Lecture
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“Performing Freedom in Troubled Times”
By E. Patrick Johnson

Biography

E. Patrick Johnson, Ph.D. is Dean of the School of Communication and Annenberg University Professor at Northwestern University. He is a 2020 inductee into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Johnson is a prolific performer/scholar, and an inspiring teacher, whose research and artistry has greatly impacted African American studies, Performance Studies, Gender and Sexuality studies. He is the author of *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (2003); *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South—An Oral History* (2008); *Black. Queer. Southern. Women.—An Oral History* (2018); and *Honeypot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women* (2019), in addition to several edited and co-edited collections, essays, and plays. Johnson’s written and performance work dovetail intimately. His staged reading, “Pouring Tea: Black Gay Men of the South Tell Their Tales,” has toured to over 100 college campuses since 2006. The full-length stage play, *Sweet Tea—The Play*, premiered in Chicago, toured across eight other cities, and to the National Black Theater Festival. Johnson is also among the subjects and co-executive producer of the film, *Making Sweet Tea*, which has received several awards, including Best LGBTQ Film at the San Diego Film Festival, Best Documentary Audience at the Out on Film Festival, and the Silver Image Award from the Association of American Retired Persons (AARP) for Positive Representation of LGBTQ People over Fifty at the Chicago Reeling LGBTQ Film Festival.

***Lecturer’s Note:** The following is not a verbatim transcript of the oral lecture delivered at the NCA Conference. It is the written edition of my address, which includes citations and references to text, slides, and media that I presented. Other aspects of the lecture, including live vocal performances by the Howard University Gospel Choir and myself are necessarily excluded.*

Lecture Text

It is an honor to deliver the Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished lecture because I know that I stand in the wake of many great orators who have come before me. Their rhetorical skills have shown us the depth and breadth of communication as a field of inquiry, creativity, and action. I aspire to meet the challenge of the occasion.

When First Vice President Marnel Goins invited me to give this lecture last year, she suggested that she wanted something more than just a speech: she wanted it to be “an event.” That is also when she hatched a plan to invite the Howard University Gospel Choir to be a part of the lecture. How auspicious that this incredibly talented choir would bookend the lecture with Gospel songs of freedom—about which I’ll say more in a bit. Indeed, my words today celebrate the central role that performance has played for so many Black people who have sought ways to communicate what freedom means, and how it might be realized.

My lecture is entitled “Performing Freedom in Troubled Times,” for we are indeed living in troubled times. Some might ask if our times have ever been “untroubled” given humanity’s penchant for conquering, colonizing, and imposing catastrophes upon itself. So, unfortunately, our current moment of “trouble” is not unique, yet our responses to these challenges have not only been inventive, but also inspiring and intrepid. Through my own personal identity as a Black gay man born and reared in the U.S. South, as well as my professional identity as an administrator and scholar of performance studies, queer studies, and Black studies, I want to take this time with you to share my thoughts about how Black people have used performance in their struggle to “get free.”¹

In 1903, about a decade before the founding of the National Association of Teachers of Speech (now the National Communication Association), the Black intellectual and political figure, W. E. B. DuBois famously published *The Souls of Black Folk*, in which he historicizes and theorizes the strategies Black folks have deployed in their struggle for freedom. According to DuBois, one barrier in this struggle is the difficult process of working through the “double consciousness” that Black people have endured. There is, in DuBois’ words, “the sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.”²

DuBois goes on to describe how this twoness places Black folk in a sociopolitical ring, shadow boxing in a fight that cannot be won. It is a seemingly Sisyphean tragedy. He writes: “Here in America, in the few days since Emancipation, the black man’s turning hither and thither in hesitant and doubtful striving has often made his very strength to lose effectiveness, to seem like absence of power, like weakness—it is the contradiction of double aims.”³ Yet, there is another contradiction that DuBois reveals beyond the Negro’s seemingly eternal dilemma as a “problem” in a white world—the subtle, yet complex difference between emancipation and freedom.⁴

As Black studies scholar Rinaldo Walcott has eloquently articulated in his book, *The Long Emancipation: Moving toward Black Freedom*:

The conditions of Black life, past, and present, work against any notion that what we inhabit in the now is freedom... We remain in the time of emancipation... In fact, one must note that at every moment Black people have sought, for themselves, to assert what freedom might mean and look like, those desires and acts toward freedom have been violently interdicted.⁵

Because this idea of the long emancipation is tethered to juridical and legislative hegemonic regimes of power, Walcott argues that Black freedom remains a desire, not a reality. More importantly for my purposes today, Walcott suggests that “Black people’s desires for freedom and to be free find expression in their resistances to ways of being that would deny them bodily sovereignty (through their embodiment, community formations, etc.)”⁶ He continues: “The manner in which Black people ‘own’ their bodies and the ways in which music, dance, clothing, attitude(s), posture, affect, optic, and opinion keep language and a range of practices both tied

¹ Slide image description: Image by Rashid Johnson titled *The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club (Emmett)*, 2008. Chromogenic print, National Gallery of Art, Washington, © Rashid Johnson, Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

² W.E.B. Du Bois. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Oxford University Press, 2007, 6.

³ Du Bois, 7.

⁴ Slide image description: Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled (Altgeld Gardens)*, 1995. Acrylic and collage on canvas, © Kerry James Marshall, Courtesy of the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Johnson County Community College, Overland Park, Kansas.

⁵ Rinaldo Walcott. *The Long Emancipation: Moving Toward Black Freedom*. Duke University Press, 2021, 1.

⁶ Walcott, 5.

closely to the body and emanating from it allow for us to glimpse Black freedom in fleeting moments.”⁷

What Walcott implicitly indexes is performance, or Black expressive culture as a vehicle toward bodily sovereignty and freedom.⁸ Black expressive culture has served as a beacon of hope, resilience, and a testament to the indomitable spirit of a people who have faced centuries of oppression, discrimination, and the denial of basic human rights. Indeed, as those of us who dwell in the subfield of performance studies within the broader field of communication have articulated for decades: performance is, as performance theorist Dwight Conquergood once said, “a tactic of intervention, an alternative space of struggle.”⁹ Speaking specifically about Black performance, critic bell hooks argues, “Performance practice was one of the places where the boundaries created by the emphasis on proving that the black race was not civilized could be disrupted. Radical ideas could be expressed in this arena. Indeed, the roots of black performative arts emerge from an early nineteenth century emphasis on oration and the recitation of poetry.”¹⁰ Performance, as a site of political engagement, then, has been a powerful tool in the ongoing struggle for freedom.¹¹

Performance, however, is not a cure-all for achieving freedom. It is a way to play with ideas about what freedom means, and to rub them against the grain of living through struggle and interdependency with others. Performing freedom is a way of mingling inside with outside, self with other. This is why performances of freedom take many forms that exceed notions of conflict, opposition, or refusal. Indeed, as literary scholar Kevin Quashie has argued, freedom may be acquired through the vagaries of a Black interiority that is not enjoined in a dialectic relationship with “resistance” which for Quashie “is not nuanced enough to characterize the totality of black culture or expression.”¹²

Following Quashie, we need to complicate Black expression as solely an external manifestation of resistance. Instead, we might think of freedom *intimately* as something more than a structuring concept of the public sphere; as something in excess of the political; as something in resistance to liberal strictures of governance; and something beyond the fantasies we communicate about freedom in America. Freedom is something performed in ordinary life to bring out its feeling when it is suppressed, and so it can be spontaneous, affective, and paradoxical in a way that punctures the veil of the quotidian to give one a sense of other possible realities. Yet, performing freedom is also bound to history, memory, and struggle—especially in the body. Performing freedom is therefore something that presents its potential (and potency) in the body as feeling and action. It blossoms in the shadow of its many clouded contradictions. Therefore, this powerfully provocative paradox of performing freedom encapsulates the central question of my lecture: how do Black people navigate the tension between performance as resistance and performance *beyond* resistance in their struggle to “get free”?

⁷ Walcott, 6. Walcott’s concept of freedom recalls Sixo’s understanding of love in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: “She is a friend of mind. She gather me, man. The Pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in the right order.” Toni Morrison. *Beloved*. Knopf, 1987, 272-273.

⁸ Slide image description: Lorna Simpson, *Riunite & Ice #20*, 2018. Collage and ink on paper, © Lorna Simpson, Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth, Photo credit James Wang.

⁹ Dwight Conquergood. “Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research.” *TDR/The Drama Review* 46, no. 2 (2002): 145–56.

¹⁰ bell hooks. “Performance Practice as a Site of Opposition.” In *Let’s Get it on: The Politics of Black Performance*, Seattle: Bay View Press, 1995, 210-219.

¹¹ Slide image description: Alexandra Bell, *A Teenager with Promise*, 2020. Photographic collage, © Alexandra Bell, Courtesy of the artist and Charlie James Gallery.

¹² Kevin Quashie. *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*. Rutgers University Press, 2012, 4.

The Sound of Resistance

The institution of slavery was a dark chapter in human history, marked by the brutal oppression and the dehumanization of millions. Enslaved Africans faced unimaginable hardships, from forced labor to the loss of their cultural identity. In the midst of this suffering, they found solace and empowerment through a powerful medium: sound. Drumming, for instance, provided not only a source of physical and emotional release but also a means of communication and cultural preservation. The drum was a tangible symbol of their cultural heritage and a way to maintain a connection to their ancestral roots. It was a reminder that they were more than just chattel; they were individuals with a rich history and a sense of identity.

As one can hear in this recording, drumming provides a means of emotional release.¹³ During slavery, it provided an outlet for catharsis, enabling people to cope with the immense physical and psychological toll of their circumstances. Drumming was a communal activity, bringing together enslaved individuals from various ethnic backgrounds and cultural traditions. It acted as a unifying force, transcending linguistic and regional differences.

Drumming was not just a musical expression of culture; it became a lifeline, the rhythms and beats of the drums used to communicate covertly, sending messages about escape plans, slave revolts, or other acts of resistance. These messages were often encoded within the drumming patterns, and those with knowledge of the code could understand and act upon them.

In addition to drumming, slave historians have provided evidence that sounds that cannot be categorized as music or song were created by enslaved Africans to get free. In their book, *The Sounds of Slavery: Discovering African American History through Songs, Sermons, and Speech*, historians Shane White and Graham White share archival evidence of enslaved Africans deploying sound to bear the burden of work, evade capture, and lynching. In one account, they relay the story of the execution of a seventy-year-old enslaved woman named Jenny, at the hands of a deputy sheriff. The execution occurred on October 21, 1821, in the town of Princess Anne in Somerset County, Maryland, about one hundred and fifty miles from where we are here at National Harbor. They write: "...seconds before Jenny was hung, 'several hundreds of colored people' turned their backs to the gallows, squatted on the ground, covered their faces with their hands and uttered a simultaneous groan, which while it expressed their feelings, added not a little to the horror of the scene."¹⁴ While in this instance the group of enslaved people's groan did not deter the white sheriff from executing Jenny, their collective sound was an attempt to intervene in her murder and did communicate "the horror of the scene."

The articulation of sound into music and/or song has long been established as serving a dual function. Spirituals and freedom songs represent both a form of solace and a coded language of resistance. Reference to bodies of water in these songs were especially significant to indicate temporal and geographical cues for escape. A song like "Wade in the Water," for instance, communicated coded strategies for making it to freedom. [Johnson sings the first stanza] The lyrics of "Wade in the Water" are laden with hidden messages and references. The spiritual encourages enslaved individuals to seek refuge in water, using it as a metaphor for a path to liberation and safety. It speaks to the belief that traversing water can confuse pursuing bloodhounds and mask the scent of those who had escaped. According to oral tradition it is believed that abolitionist Harriett Tubman used the song for this purpose during her many trips from the South to the North and back to help enslaved people escape.

¹³ Live sound clip: "Atsiagbekor," by the Ewe Drum Orchestra. From *Roots of Black Music in America*, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, LP (1972).

¹⁴ Shane White and Graham White. *The Sounds of Slavery: Discovering African American History Through Songs, Sermons, and Speech*. Beacon Press, 2006, xvii.

[Johnson sings the first verse of “Lift Every Voice and Sing”] At the turn of the twentieth century, poet James Weldon Johnson penned what was originally going to be a poem in honor of Abraham Lincoln’s birthday on February 12:

Lift every voice and sing,
'Til earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the list'ning skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.

Sing a song, full of the faith that the dark past has taught us.
Sing a song, full of the hope that the present has brought us.
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun.
Let us march on 'til victory is won.¹⁵

What Johnson penned instead was the song that would become known as the Negro or Black National Anthem. According to scholar Imani Perry, “Lift Every Voice and Sing” became “a lament and encomium to the story and struggle of black people.”¹⁶ Moreover, Perry argues that because the song was taught to Black children, especially to those who attended segregated schools in the South, “it served multiple purposes: to educate, to inspire, to nurture collective identities, and to bolster a deep sense of worth in blackness.”¹⁷ That “deep sense of worth in blackness” permeates throughout most expressive forms in Black culture and particularly those popular forms during the Civil Rights and Black power movements.

From James Brown’s “Say It Loud (I’m Black and I’m Proud)”, Jesse Jackson’s “I am somebody, you are somebody, we are somebody,” to Angela Davis’s afro, Black cultural workers doubled their efforts to counter the anti-Black sentiment of the Jim Crow South and neoliberal North by instilling a sense of pride in being specifically Black, not colored, not Negro, but Black.

More important, however, is the command of the title of the anthem: to lift every voice and sing. It is not a question, but a call to collective communion through song. For example, the choir today opened with the freedom song, “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around,” a song that is emblematic of the collective determination of those working toward racial justice. What is important about songs like it, and others, is that they were sung collectively. The act of singing together in the face of adversity not only bolstered the spirits of those involved but also sent a powerful message to the world: we will not be turned around or deterred from our journey toward freedom.

Scrapping Together Freedom (in Plain Sight)

Black expressive culture during enslavement often necessitated the covert performance of freedom from the remainders of white culture, and in the overlooked spaces of Black life. By necessity, freedom’s relationship to enslavement had to be “both/and” rather than “either/or.” In other words, communication and creation often took on dual purposes for survival – as part of everyday survival and projected into an emancipatory future. Scraps of food that were given to enslaved people would become the foundation of the culinary tradition that we call soul food today. And the scraps of expensive silks and cottons used to create draperies, tablecloths, gowns, and dresses for white slave owners, would be spun into creative quilts and floor pallets.

¹⁵ First verse of “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” a hymn written as a poem by James Weldon Johnson in 1900.

¹⁶ Imani Perry. *May We Forever Stand: A History of the Black National Anthem*. UNC Press Books, 2018, 7.

¹⁷ Perry, 72-73.

While quilting was a traditional craft in African societies used for both artistic expression and practical purposes, when African captives were forcibly brought to the Americas, they brought their knowledge of this craft with them. Despite the brutal conditions of slavery, they adapted and transformed this practice into a powerful means of communication and resistance. Though their account is contested, art historians Raymond Dobard, Jr. and Jacqueline Tobin suggest that one of the most intriguing aspects of quilting during slavery was the subtle inclusion of hidden messages in the quilt patterns themselves. In their book *Hidden in Plain View*, Dobard and Tobin argue that enslaved individuals used specific geometric patterns and symbols to communicate with one another.¹⁸ These messages were usually disguised as everyday designs to avoid suspicion from overseers and slaveholders. Common quilt patterns like the “Drunkard’s Path,” “Log Cabin,” and “Bear’s Paw” took on new meaning when interpreted by those in the know. The “Monkey Wrench” quilt pattern, for example, signaled the need for enslaved individuals to gather tools and prepare for escape. The “North Star” pattern, on the other hand, indicated that it was time to head north to find freedom. Quilts could also convey warnings, with the “Crossroads” pattern suggesting that a decision needed to be made, and the “Flying Geese” pattern symbolizing a flight to freedom.

The quilt is an important symbol in Black culture that has reverberated throughout history as an exemplary component of material culture, imbued with political meaning—from the AIDS quilt displayed on the lawn of the Nation’s capital to memorialize those who succumbed to the epidemic, to the employment of the quilt as metaphor in fiction like Alice Walker’s short story, *Everyday Use*, to Jesse Jackson’s explicit employment of the quilt as a metaphor in his famous 1988 speech at the Democratic National Convention. Jackson sermonized:

Now, Democrats, we must build such a quilt. Farmers, you seek fair prices and you are right, but you cannot stand alone. Your patch is not big enough. Workers, you fight for fair wages. You are right, but your labor is not big enough. Women, you seek comparable worth and pay equity. You are right. But your patch is not big enough. Women, mothers, who seek Head Start, and day care and pre-natal care, on the front side of life, rather than jail care and welfare on the back side of life, you’re right, but your patch is not big enough. Students, you seek scholarships. You’re right, but your patch is not big enough... But don’t despair; be as wise as my grandmama. Pull the patches and the pieces together, bound by a common thread. When we form a great quilt of unity, and common ground, we’ll have the power to bring health care and housing and jobs and education and hope to our nation.¹⁹

Jackson’s rhetorical strategy of using the quilt as metaphor operates on multiple levels. Namely, how a quilt is built—literally from the scraps of life—becomes a power metaphor for how Black folks can get free: by working together, across intracultural difference, by focusing on the “common thread” of blackness as a strategy of freedom.

Though Jackson delivers this speech on the stage of the Democratic National Convention, his style of delivery grows out of the sermonic tradition in which he was reared in the Black church—an oral performance that one can hear on any given Sunday at Black churches around

¹⁸ Jacqueline L. Tobin, and Raymond G. Dobard. *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*. Anchor, 2011.

¹⁹ Quoted in: Deborah Tannen. *Talking Voices: Repetition, Dialogue and Imagery in Conversational Discourse*. Cambridge University Press, 1989, 179-180.

the country. The sermonic tradition is steeped in the sacred but is also informed by the secular aspects of Black political and social life. Black vernacular culture that reflects quotidian rituals of communication often emerge within sermons to connect with the “earthly” struggles of parishioners who are “heaven bound.”

Opposite the sacred sermonic tradition is the toast tradition. Toasts are long oral epic poems that usually entail a male hero figure who outsmarts an authority figure (typically a white person) or positions himself as a master of words and actions. One of the most famous toasts is “Shine and the Titanic,” which recounts the sinking of the Titanic as told from the perspective of a Black man named “Shine” who works below the deck and tries to warn the captain that water is filling the ship’s boiler room. An arrogant and racist captain rebuffs Shine’s warnings:

Captain! Captain! Don’t you know?
There’s forty feet of water on the boiler room flo.
The captain said, “Go back, you dirty black!
We got a thousand pumps to keep this water back.

When the ship begins to sink, Shine jumps overboard and begins to swim to shore, refusing the captain’s offer of money and the captain’s wife and daughter’s offer of sexual favors to save them in the proclamations “Shine, Shine save poor me.” Shine’s recurring response is “Get your ass in the water and swim like me.” Shine outswims sharks and by the time the news reaches shore that the Titanic has sunk, “Shine was in Harlem on 125th street, damn near drunk.”

There is perhaps too much to unpack in the story of “Shine and the Titanic” but for my purposes here relative to performing freedom in troubled times, the toast teller is empowered through identification with Shine, the hero of the epic poem. The fact that that Blacks did not die on the Titanic because they weren’t allowed to take the voyage—not even as servants—is a delicious ironic twist of the tale. Moreover, the story refutes the racist stereotype that Black people are afraid of water and that they cannot swim. In this narrative poem, not only can the Black man swim, but his swimming is superhuman, while the white folks’ money and power can’t save them from their fate.

How apropos, then, that an image of a young Black man swimming to help his co-worker would go viral this past summer. In what became known as the “Montgomery, Alabama Brawl,” a group of white people docked their pontoon in the space where the city’s riverboat was headed. When the Black dock worker, Dameion Pickett, asked the white pontoon owners to move their pontoon so that the riverboat could dock, they refused and Pickett untied the pontoon, which prompted a verbal confrontation that escalated to physical violence with the white pontoon owner and passengers punching and beating Pickett. The entire altercation was captured on cellphone videos by onlookers on the dock as well as by passengers on the riverboat. The outnumbered Pickett did not have to wait long for help as several Black folks joined in to help him fend off his attackers, with one person wielding a folding chair, while others used their bare fists. But one of his co-workers, sixteen-year-old Aaren Rudolph, jumped from the riverboat and swam to the dock to assist Pickett.²⁰

As if conjuring the mythic Shine from the toast tradition, this young man’s impulse was to save Pickett from the hands of the white mob. Though this sixteen-year-old is not likely to have known the symbolism of his courageous act, the image of his nautical journey from ship to shore went viral, touching something deep within Black onlookers who have witnessed the Black body beaten, burned, and butchered without any accountability for the perpetrators. To see a young man swimming to impugn the injustice of irascible hate, swimming to jettison the stronghold of Jim Crow, swimming to face the fateful fury of whiteness waiting ashore, evoked

²⁰ The viral video clip of Aaren Rudolph can be seen at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Efr6_kgVuQ

pride, compelling one onlooker to shout “Get up there, young buck! Get up there, young buck!” to shore up his courage.

Like “Shine and the Titanic,” the image also flips the script on the narrative that suggests that Black folks are afraid of water, when we know that water has sometimes been our only route to freedom—when we jumped from our captors’ ships, when we waded in the water on our journey North, when we knew we had one more river to cross—water was our saving grace. How serendipitous that the riverboat in Montgomery is named the Harriott II, invoking Harriet Tubman, the leader of the Underground Railroad and often referred to as “the Black Moses,” after the biblical figure who leads the Israelites out of Egypt by parting the Red Sea, and drowning Pharaoh’s army. Aaren Rudolph (nick named “Aquamayne”) jumping overboard the Harriott II, which was brimming with Black passengers, had no idea of how symbolic each stroke of his swim would be. All he knew is that he needed to help his coworker get free.

Spaces of Freedom

One of the things that undergirds the quest for freedom like that performed by young Aaren Rudolph is faith. He didn’t know if he would make it to shore, but he had faith that with the help of an inner power, or a higher power, that he had to step out on faith. Having faith in things seen and unseen, Black people have often drawn on their spirituality as a route toward freedom. Oftentimes, expressions of faith manifest through Black church rituals—from music, sermons, attire, and shouting, to speaking in tongues. These rituals represent the possibility of transgressive signifying practices due in part to their representational excess.

For example, the choir or preacher robe is an example of such excess as reflected in its design: excessive material on the sleeves and in the bodice, such that it bellows and balloons once caught in the wind when swept up by the Holy Spirit. As I have argued elsewhere, the robe allows for the expression of gender nonconformity within the context of a socially conservative space such as the church, providing for queer parishioners to sign and signal their sexuality and thus get free from religious conservative conventions.²¹

Moreover, the sartorial performances of church women through their dresses, shoes, and most importantly their hats or “crowns” provide another example of freedom. These ostentatious displays of bold, colorful, and creative crowns cut across class difference as they are adorned by working- and middle-class parishioners alike. This is an example of freedom of expression through embodiment, and an embodiment beyond the white gaze, evidencing again one of the ways Rinaldo Walcott argues Black people “own” their bodies.

Faith is not always bound to an ocular economy of expression; sometimes faith manifests in the inner life of Black folk—an interiority that holds, according to Quashie, “one’s desires, ambitions, hungers, vulnerabilities, fears.” He continues, “The inner life is not apolitical or without social value, but neither is it determined entirely by publicness.”²² What Quashie is ultimately calling our attention to is the dialogic dynamic of Black expressive culture in which it is simultaneously an agential response *to* white supremacy as well as a manifestation of Black culture *despite* white supremacy. Performing freedom, then, is not solely a Sisyphean cycle of performing resistance, performing freedom has a rejoinder of rejoicing for its own sake—an interior space of confirmation of self and an intra-cultural space of confirming community.

The mise-en-scene of charismatic Black church worship service is emblematic of this dialogism as witnessed by the outward expression of the Holy Spirit through the waving of hands or shouting through which the manifestation of spirit is both visible and invisible: the body in

²¹ E. Patrick Johnson, “Camp Revival, or the Sissification of the Black Church,” *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International* 9, no. 2 (2020): 30–33.

²² Quashie, 6.

motion with outward stretched hands and the same body, with bowed head, closed eyes in trance-like liminality, index that we can bear witness to the outward expression but not to the inner life of the person under the spell of the spirit moving through them.

Most famously, folklorist and writer Zora Neale Hurston captured how Black folk protect their inner lives from white folks as a strategy of freedom in her folklore study, *Of Mules and Men*. Hurston writes:

The white man is always trying to know into somebody's else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song.²³

Through Hurston's words, we come to understand that the optics of performance—something “outside the door of my mind”—might conceal a strategy or tactic a Black person deploys to protect their private thoughts and desires, their space of freedom. As an anthropologist, Hurston understood that her discipline was founded on a colonial project that for decades delighted in the desecration of the sacred and secular spaces of the Other by pilfering and appropriating their culture. But as political theorist James C. Scott has argued those subjects pummeled by power also have at their disposal an arsenal of strategies or “hidden transcripts” that disavow power's total authority.²⁴

I draw on the example of my maternal grandmother Mary Lewis Adams, who for eighteen years worked as a live-in domestic worker throughout the Civil Rights movement from 1955-1973. During her time as a domestic she worked for a white family, the Smiths, and cared for their four children.²⁵ She was particularly fond of the youngest child, Carol. Indeed, in her oral history, my grandmother says that “Ah jus' love dat lil' ol' youngin' tuh death. Ah hated tuh leave. Ah had tuh cry one day. Ah jus' hated tuh leave Ca'uh. Ah jus' had got attached tuh Ca'uh 'cause she was jus' uh sweet lil' ol' youngin'.”²⁶ While my grandmother's love for the youngest of her white charges was undoubtedly genuine, that love did not supersede her sustaining love of self or dilute her indelible dignity. Despite the fact that she “hated tuh leave Ca'uh,” she did end up leaving her when she quit working for the Smith family. The circumstances under which she left, however, are germane to my discussion here about what James Scott calls “hidden transcripts” and the protection of one's inner life and one's freedom.

When Carol was preparing for her wedding ceremony, she asked my grandmother to walk down the aisle with and sit beside Carol's biological mother, Mrs. Smith. It is important to note that when I interviewed Mrs. Smith for my research about my grandmother's time under her employment, she refers to my grandmother several times as her “mammy” in my grandmother's presence.²⁷ Despite being silent and deferential to the Smiths during eighteen years of her employment, performing as “mammy” in public by attending the wedding was a bridge too far for my grandmother. Instead, she concocted a story about a sick brother in Washington, D.C., for whom she had to care, which meant that she could not attend the wedding. Not only did it get her out of the wedding, but it also gave her the opportunity to quit her job with the Smiths altogether, as she never returned to work for them. Her guileful ruse provided a way to get out of public

²³ Zora Neale Hurston. *Mules and Men*. Midland Books, 1978, 3.

²⁴ James C. Scott. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. Yale University Press, 1990.

²⁵ I use a pseudonym here to protect the identity of the family.

²⁶ E. Patrick Johnson. *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*. Duke University Press, 2003, 134.

²⁷ Johnson, 311.

humiliation and keep her reputation intact, given the small-town community of Hickory, North Carolina. As Dwight Conquergood notes: “Enslaved and other vulnerable people do not have the luxury of transparent, clear, direct, and open communication when interpersonal encounters are framed and reverberate with power.”²⁸ Following Hurston, Grandmother gave the Smiths the “play toy” of the story about her sick brother to avoid the wedding and quit her job so that the Smiths would “go away.” She then had her say and sung her song and that song was of freedom.

My grandmother’s performance of freedom encapsulates what historian and cultural critic Robin D. G. Kelley calls “freedom dreams,” or “visions of freedom born out of the circumstances of struggle.”²⁹ Grandmother dreamed of freedom through her faith based on her “knowing the Bible” despite being illiterate. Her epistemological foundation of religion was through the Black oral tradition—one that she passed down to her children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren through her foretelling: “We living in the last days”; “It’s the beginning of the end”; “They’ll be wars and rumors of wars”; through her mother wit and chastisements: “a hard head makes a soft behind”; “That child ain’t got a lick of sense, bless her heart”; “Boy, you gwine catch cold if you don’t put somethin’ on your head!; through her preparation for a life beyond this one: “I’m going way over yonder to the new burying ground”; “I’m bound for glory”; but also “I can’t come to the wedding ‘cause I gotta tend to my sick brother in Washington.” She didn’t just dream about freedom, she created it.

Just a short distance from where we are gathered today is Cedar Hill, the home of the great orator and abolitionist, Frederick Douglass. Author of three autobiographies, Douglass’s life and works exemplify the affective and effective aspects of Black expressive culture in the pursuit of freedom. Indeed, his incisive rhetorical reflections on enslavement, his oratorical skills as a preacher and speaker of truth to power, and his persistent critique of white supremacy and sexism elevate him to the pantheon of prophets in Black culture. Douglass’s legacy has always resounded with me not only for what he did for enslaved peoples, but also for his recognition and support of women’s suffrage and their necessary involvement in the political process. In an 1888 speech before the International Council of Women in Washington, D.C., he said, “Her right to be and to do is as full, complete, and perfect as the right of any man on earth. I say of her, as I say of the colored people, ‘Give her fair play, and hands off.’”³⁰ Douglass spoke these words almost a century before members of the Combahee River Collective, a Black lesbian feminist socialist organization argued in their 1977 manifesto: “If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.”³¹ Given his forward thinking during his time, Douglass is, in many respects, the proto male feminist, as he understood that equality can only exist in absolutes—to be an abolitionist is to fight against oppression in all its forms.

My grandmother, born one hundred years after Douglass and the granddaughter of a once-enslaved man, is an extension of Douglass’s feminist outlook. She knew how to navigate a world hostile to her existence and taught her daughter—my mother—myself and my six siblings what it meant to not only survive but thrive as Black Americans—to dream freedom dreams and keep open the space for Black radical imaginings. My grandmother, Frederick Douglass and all of my ancestors, my current comrades, and those yet unborn into this freedom

²⁸ Dwight Conquergood. “Rethinking Elocution: The Trope of the Talking Book and Other Figures of Speech.” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (2000): 325–41.

²⁹ Robin D.G. Kelley. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Beacon Press, 2022, 3.

³⁰ Frederick Douglass, “I am a Radical Woman Suffrage Man: An Address Delivered in Boston, Massachusetts, on 28 May 1888.” Found in *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Volume 5, Series One: Speeches, Debates and Interviews, 1881-1895*, ed. John W. Blassingame and John R. McKiving (Yale University Press, 1992.): p. 379.

³¹ Reprinted in: Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*. Haymarket Books, 2017, 15-27.

journey have the benefit of the benevolence of bowed heads and body-bent souls; the benefit of the courageous cudgel to white supremacy in the face of fierce odds; the benefit of play toys being placed on the stoop of surveillance but beyond the Black interior; the benefit of scraps of cloth, scraps of food, scraps of shelter, spun into the warmth and warnings of a quilt, transformed into sustenance that would start a culinary revolution and cultivate an architectural wonder to curate the story of our being.³² The benefit of moans and groans, weeping and wailing of our oppression transformed into a sonic, transcendent respite for the weary, jubilant jump-joy-for-Jesus gospel, and Big Freedia and Beyonce telling everybody, “You won’t break my soul.” The benefit a melodic muzzled voice cracking open the silence with oration that would envelop, that would enrapture, that would engulf all those under its spell with an historic speech that took place on the lawn of a memorial to a man who signed the emancipation proclamation, but who, alas, did not get us free.³³

[Johnson sings “Freedom is a Constant Struggle,” a protest song of the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement by singer and activist Barbara Dane.]

Thank you.

³² Slide image of the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

³³ Slide image of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivering his “I Have a Dream” speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial at the March on Washington, August 28, 1963.