

The Black Preaching Response to Cultural Trauma

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Abstract:

The Rev. Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays delivered the final eulogy of his student and friend, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on April 9, 1968 at Morehouse College. This eulogy is a rhetorical speech designed to resolve the cultural trauma of King's assassination by persuading the audience to continue King's legacy of the nonviolent Civil Rights movement for all of humanity. Rhetorically, Mays' eulogy adheres to Aristotle's classical rhetorical thought on invention with regards to the ethos, logos, and pathos. Additionally, Mays' eulogy addresses the communal grief of the African American community dealing with the collective loss. In as such, he models the Black preaching response to cultural trauma which consists of the following sermonic components: the identification of the pain, the identification of the victim, characterization of the relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience, attribution of responsibility, and redemption of the victim.

Introduction

Benjamin Elijah Mays delivered the final eulogy of his student and friend, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on April 9, 1968 at Morehouse College following the funeral service at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. This eulogy is a rhetorical speech designed to resolve the cultural trauma of King's assassination by persuading the audience to continue King's legacy of the nonviolent Civil Rights movement for all of humanity. As a leader in the African American community, Mays' responsibility is to address the communal grief associated with the collective loss. Therefore, I argue that the Black preaching response to cultural trauma is the collective grief work that consists of the following sermonic components: the identification of the pain, the identification of the victim, characterization of the relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience, attribution of responsibility, and redemption of the victim.

The first four components of the black preaching response to cultural trauma derives from Jeffery C. Alexander's Social Theory of Trauma, in which he explains how personal trauma becomes cultural trauma of a collective group. Alexander develops the theory of the trauma process as the four critical representations that are essential to the creation of a new master narrative.¹ I believe the creation of a new master narrative is in fact the grief work of the collective group to heal after the cultural trauma. However, with regards to the goal of black preaching following cultural trauma, I include the fifth component of the redemption of the victim that offers hope for the collective group.

The category of hope is a phenomena specific to African America preaching. Hope comes in many forms, including the celebration, "the final stage of the sermon (that) functions as the joyful and ecstatic reinforcement of the truth already taught and delivered in the main

¹ Jeffery C. Alexander, *Trauma a social theory* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2013), 17.

body of the sermon.”² This definition builds upon the earlier work of Henry H. Mitchell in *Celebration and Experience in Preaching*, who writes that the celebration is an ecstatic reinforcement through, “the timed peak of emotional impact is climatically applied to the sermon’s text and behavioral purpose.”³ In *Contemporary African American Preaching: Diversity in Theory and Style*, L. Susan Bond characterizes Mitchell as celebration “in spite of.”⁴

In *Teaching Preaching: Isaac Rufus Clark and Black Sacred Rhetoric*, Katie G. Cannon identifies other legitimate responses to the preached word based upon the homiletical methodology of the late Isaac Rufus Clark, homiletics professor at Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC). Based upon the message of the preached word, these responses represent the congregation’s ultimate response to God, “either entering into or growing up in the kingdom of God through a positive decision.”⁵ The preached word presents “the constant exposure to the abounding iniquity of the world (that) opens the congregation to a gracious message of deliverance.”⁶ Deliverance comes through the liberation practices of the church that offer hope to the collective group, not the celebration in spite of human injustice.

It’s important to note that these liberation practices derive from the theological perspective of preaching being “divine activity wherein the Word of God is proclaimed or announced on contemporary issues for an ultimate response to our God.”⁷ To Clark, the divine activity of preaching is done by God alone. And, preaching is a matter of life or death. These theological assumptions within the Black Church inform the liberation practices of the ultimate response to God that offer hope through the redemption the victims.

In this paper, I provide a cursory analysis of May’s eulogy of Martin Luther King Jr. based on Aristotle’s classical rhetorical theory of persuasion. I believe that Mays’ performance of Aristotle’s rhetorical theory substantiates the pastoral relationship between Mays and the African American community, particularly. This relationship establishes the credibility for the proclamation of the grief work in the form of the prophetic eulogy of King. The assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. is a cultural trauma that requires communal grief work within the African American community. Therefore, I use the lens of the social theory of trauma to outline the five components of Black preaching’s response to cultural trauma through the close reading of the Benjamin Elijah Mays’ eulogy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

According to the social theory of trauma, “cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.”⁸ With regards to the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the African American community lost a beloved leader who fought for their

² Frank A. Thomas, *They like to never quit praisin’ god: the role of celebration in preaching* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1997), 85.

³ Henry H. Mitchell, *Celebration & experience in oreaching*, rev. ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008), 35.

⁴ L. Susan Bond, *Contemporary african american preaching: diversity in theory and style* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003) 132.

⁵ Katie Geneva Cannon, *Teaching preaching: isaac rufus clark and black sacred rhetoric* (New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, 2007) 51.

⁶ Katie Geneva Cannon, *Katie’s canon: womanism and the soul of the black community* (New York, NY: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1995) 118.

⁷ Katie Geneva Cannon, *Teaching preaching: isaac rufus clark and black sacred rhetoric* (New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, 2007) 41.

⁸ Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Trauma a social theory* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2013), 6.

rights as citizens in America demanding equality and social justice. This event is forever etched in the minds of African Americans living during that time. Most people remember where they were when they heard the news of King's death. Independent of the sadness of losing a beloved leader, the thoughts that lingered in the mind of the African American community is, "what does King's death mean for us and our progress towards equality?" This internalization of the pain of the collective group elevates the personal trauma of the assassination of King into a cultural trauma within the African American community.

As a cultural trauma, some argue that the African American community never grieved the death of King. This is the sentiment of the Rev. Dr. Otis Moss Jr. and other preachers during that era. The absence of grief is beyond the scope of this paper. However, as a cultural trauma the Rev. Dr. Benjamin E. Mays is tasked with responding to the communal grief of the African American community in the sermonic moment of the eulogy. Mays engages in the trauma process that seeks to appropriate the communal grief in a manner that leads to wholeness.

Aristotle's Classical Rhetorical Theory and Cultural Trauma

The Rev. Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays adheres to Aristotle's classical rhetorical thought on invention in his eulogy of Martin Luther King, Jr. Classical thought divided speaking into five stages: invention, disposition, elocution, memory, and delivery.⁹ These five stages are characterized as follows:

- Invention – figuring out what to say to make one's case,
- Disposition – the outline the speech should follow,
- Elocution – style, especially in the sense of deciding what figures of sound and thought would best contribute to making one's case,
- Memory – preparation for delivery,
- Delivery – delivery itself.

Aristotle's theory contributes to the invention category in the development of the three kinds of "proofs": ethos – trustworthiness of the speaker, pathos – appeal to emotions, and logos – reason.¹⁰ He "defined the aim of rhetoric as the discovery of the available means of persuasion."¹¹

Benjamin Elijah Mays' rhetorical strategy was to persuade the African American community, the United States, and abroad to continue the legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. by fighting for equality for all human kind through nonviolence. As typically noted in classical rhetoric, ethos is placed in the introduction, logos in the body, and pathos in the conclusion. Mays' introduction presents the ethos that establishes his credibility with the audience. The ethos, "persuasive proof that arises as an effect of the character of the speaker," comes from both the reputation of the speaker and the rhetoric of the speaker.¹²

For example, Mays reputation probably preceded him with regards to the immediate audience of the congregation. Those persons gathered at Morehouse College would have undoubtedly been familiar with Mays who was the president of Morehouse College for 27

⁹ O. C. Edwards, *History of preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2016), 12.

¹⁰ Lucy Lind Hogan and Robert Reid, *Connecting with the congregation: rhetoric and the art of preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 15.

¹¹ O. C. Edwards, *History of preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2016), 12.

¹² Lucy Lind Hogan and Robert Reid, *Connecting with the congregation: rhetoric and the art of preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 30.

years.¹³ This audience consisted of members of the community, local and national clergy persons, Morehouse faculty, students, and alumni, and congregants of Ebenezer Baptist Church. Additionally, the immediate audience would have been familiar with the fact that King “often cited Mays as his intellectual and spiritual mentor.”¹⁴

Mays’ reputation from his administration as President of Morehouse College and as King’s mentor establishes his ethos with the immediate audience. However, Mays’ rhetorically develops his ethos for the wider audience who may not be familiar with him. He identifies the wider audience in the second paragraph by saying, “Although there are some who rejoice in his death, there are millions across the length and breadth of this world who are smitten with grief that this friend of mankind—all mankind—has been cut down in the flower of his youth. So multitudes here and in foreign lands, queens, kings, heads of government, the clergy of the world, and the common man everywhere are praying that God will be with the family, the American people, and the president of the United States in this tragic hour.”¹⁵ Those in foreign lands, queens, kings, heads of governments, clergy of the world, and common people may not have known of Mays’ reputation. Therefore, Mays provides the backstory of his relationship with King as the ethos to establish his credibility with the wider audience.

The wider audience consists of those who were watching on television; those who would later read the transcript, and those who would later listen to an audio version of the eulogy who might not have been too familiar with him. In the introduction Mays is actually speaking to the wider audience when he identifies himself as King’s friend who has known him since King was a student at Morehouse College. Mays does not specifically state that he was King’s mentor, most likely due to Mays’ humility. Had Mays mentioned that he was King’s mentor, in that particular moment it may have been perceived as braggadocios. Mays’ humility is evident in his words, “It is not an easy task; nevertheless, I accept it with a sad heart and with full knowledge of my inadequacy to do justice to this man.”¹⁶

The ethos of this rhetorical speech derived from the intimate relationship in which Mays and King share as friends. Mays characterizes his intimacy with King as a father-son relationship by saying, “To be honored by being requested to give the eulogy at the funeral of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is like being asked to eulogize a deceased son.”¹⁷ Mentoring is implied in the reference of the familial bond, father-son relationship. Mays continues the development of his credibility to the wider audience by providing details of his intimate relationship with King. Mays says, “It was my desire that if I predeceased Dr. King, he would pay tribute to me on my final day. It was his wish that if he predeceased me, I would deliver the homily at his funeral. Fate has decreed that I eulogize him. I wish it might have been

¹³ Benjamin Elijah Mays (1894-1984) Mays was born in South Carolina to former slaves S. Hezekiah and Louvenia Mays. After graduating from high school in 1916, he matriculated at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine. Mays completed his graduate work at the University of Chicago Divinity School in 1925. In 1934, Mays accepted an appointment to the dean of Howard University’s School of Religion. In 1935, he received his doctorate from the University of Chicago. In 1940, Mays became the 6th president of Morehouse College and the first with an earned Ph.D. Mays taught Martin Luther King at Morehouse beginning in 1944.

¹⁴ Martha J. Simmons and Frank A. Thomas, *Preaching with sacred fire: an anthology of African American sermons, 1750 to the present* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2010), 563.

¹⁵ Martha J. Simmons and Frank A. Thomas, *Preaching with sacred fire: an anthology of African American sermons, 1750 to the present* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2010), 564.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 564.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 564.

otherwise, for, after all, I am three score years and ten, and Martin Luther is dead at thirty-nine.”¹⁸

Also in this second paragraph, Mays presents the first component of the trauma process - the identification of the pain. With regards to the cultural trauma of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the pain must first recognize the individual pain of the immediate family, i.e., King’s widow and children. Mays addresses the family’s pain in the second paragraph when he states, “...and the common man everywhere are praying that God will be with the family, the American people, and the president of the United States in this tragic hour. We hope that this universal concern will bring comfort to the family-for grief is like a heavy load-when shared it is easier to bear. We come today to help the family carry the heavy load.”¹⁹ As King’s friend, Mays briefly mentions his own pain by saying, “Our friendship goes back to his (King’s) student days at Morehouse College. It is not an easy task; nevertheless, I accept it with a sad heart...”²⁰ And, Mays speaks to the pain of others, including those within the African American community and beyond. He says, “...there are millions across the length and breadth of this world who are smitten with grief that this friend of mankind-all mankind-has been cut down in the flower of his youth.”²¹

The pain attributed to a cultural trauma cannot be limited to the grief of the loss because the deepest pain derives from the fear of the status of the collective identity. As Alexander notes, “The cultural construction of collective trauma is fueled by individual experiences of pain, but it is the threat to collective rather than individual identity that defines the suffering at stake.”²² The loss of the leader of the Civil Rights Movement presents one perspective of pain - grief. However, the deepest pain stems from the fear of the continuation of oppression, which is the threat to the collective group. Without a leader, does the movement end? Will African Americans experience social justice or continue to face racism? Will the garbage collectors receive a living wage? The assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. threatened the social progress of the African American community.

Now that Mays has established his credibility to the wider audience, he then moves into the logos, the “persuasive proof that arises as an effect of the argument and rational linkages presented in the speech.”²³ Mays’ logos seeks to persuade the audience to continue the fight for equality for all human kind based on the legacy of the deceased, Martin Luther King Jr. He structures this argument by:

1. Establishing King’s work as a calling from God;
2. Identifying King’s character and convictions that lead to activism;
3. Highlighting the successful activism efforts;
4. Making comparisons of King to other revolutionaries;
5. Attributing the responsibility of King’s assassination; and,
6. Pleading for the redemption of King through continued activism efforts.

In the establishment of King’s work as a calling from God, Mays begins by mentioning King’s family pedigree in the third paragraph of the eulogy. He juxtaposes King’s calling by God with King’s genealogy. Mays states, “We are assembled here from every section of this

¹⁸ Ibid., 564.

¹⁹ Ibid., 564.

²⁰ Ibid., 564.

²¹ Ibid., 564.

²² Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Trauma a social theory* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2013), 2.

²³ Lucy Lind Hogan and Robert Reid, *Connecting with the congregation: rhetoric and the art of preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 15.

great nation and from other parts of the world to give thanks to God that he gave to America, at this moment in history, Martin Luther King Jr. Truly, God is no respecter of persons. How strange! God called the grandson of a slave on his father's side, and the grandson of a man born during the Civil War on his mother's side, and said to him: "Martin Luther, speak to America about war and peace, about social justice and racial discrimination; about its obligation of the poor, and about nonviolence as a way of perfecting social change in a world of brutality and war."

In this paragraph, Mays explains King's genealogy to demonstrate God's irony of calling a prophet with lineages in slavery to lead the social justice movement. King was a grandson of a slave on one side and the grandson of a man born during the fight against slavery, the Civil War. In a eulogy, the expectation is to use pedigree to boast of royalty, achievements, and status. Mays' use of pedigree establishes King's humility, service to the nation, and his calling to God.

After Mays presents King's calling from God, the rest of the body of the eulogy characterizes King's beliefs and his beliefs in action. Mays uses the rhetorical strategy of an anaphora, "He believed that..." to state Martin Luther King Jr.'s convictions. King believed:

1. the pursuit of violence at any time is ethically and morally wrong;
2. nonviolence would prove effective in the abolition of injustice in politics, in economics, in education, and in race relations;
3. the nonviolent approach to solving social problems would ultimately prove to be redemptive;
4. America would be united; and
5. the walls of separation brought on by legal and de facto segregation and discrimination based on race and color could be eradicated.²⁴

While discussing the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s beliefs, Mays addresses King's beliefs in action, the activism that came from his convictions. Mays identifies these efforts as the marches of Montgomery, Birmingham, Selma, and Chicago, the successful student sit-in movements that abolished segregation in downtown establishments, and the passage of the Civil Rights legislation of 1964 and 1965. The purpose of listing King's impact in the Civil Rights Movement, was not to list King's accomplishments, but to demonstrate the progress of a nation.

Furthermore, the demonstration of progress cleverly addresses the collective fears of the African American community. Instead of feeding into the fears, Mays celebrates the accomplishments of the Civil Rights Movement, which positively addresses the pain of the collective group. Mays is reminding the people how far they have come with the integration of downtown establishments and the passage of civil rights legislation. This reminder of progression serves as a reassurance to the African American community whose primary fear is the end of the Civil Rights movement and the social regression with the assassination of King.

Next, Mays shifts the logos from the success of the social justice movement to the not yet. He identifies the progress King strived for such as, the proposition that all men are created free and equal, peace, and economic security. King envisioned "even the poorest – the garbage collectors- will have bread enough and to spare; where no one will be poorly housed, each educated up to his capacity; and where the richest will understand the meaning of empathy."²⁵

²⁴ Martha J. Simmons and Frank A. Thomas, *Preaching with sacred fire: an anthology of African American sermons, 1750 to the present* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2010), 565.

²⁵ Ibid., 566.

In this move, Mays articulates the second component of the trauma process - the identification of the victim, the person(s) immediately impacted in the cultural trauma. Martin Luther King Jr. is the individual victim, since he was murdered. However, the cultural trauma presents the collective group as victims. These victims are the oppressed, marginalized, and the working poor of the collective group. The victims of the cultural trauma are those that experience the deepest level of pain – the fear of continued oppression. Those persons in seats of privilege may feel sad and even grieve King’s death as Mays acknowledged in the eulogy; however, they are not included in the group as victims. Following the cultural trauma event, a person of privilege returns to their privilege; whereas a victim returns to their oppression. The inclusion of persons of privilege in the victim category is a misappropriation of victimization.

Mays does not feed into the victimization, but rather articulates the vision of the future free of victims. He imagines America being the lighthouse of freedom, no one being denied based on skin color, and the garbage collectors receiving a just wage. Mays says, “...this great nation of ours, born in revolution and blood, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created free and equal, will truly become the lighthouse of freedom: where none will be denied because his skin is black and none favored because his eyes are blue; where our nation will be militarily strong but perpetually at peace, economically secure but just, learned but wise; where the poorest-the garbage collectors-will have bread enough and to spare; where no one will be poorly housed, each educated up to his capacity; and where the richest will understand the meaning of empathy.”²⁶ As such, Mays identifies the victims as people of color, those without blue eyes, people experiencing war, those who are poor, people who lack education, and those with inadequate housing.

If Mays wanted to highlight the personal accomplishments of the victim, he could have mentioned King’s Nobel Peace Prize, induction into esteemed society’s and clubs, as well as his educational achievements. However, prior to his death, King preached a sermon in which he talked about what he wanted the preacher to say at his eulogy. On a Sunday, February 4, 1968 at Ebenezer Baptist Church, the church in which King pastored, he preached a sermon entitled *The Drum Major Instinct* from Mark 10:35-44. An excerpt of the sermon is now known as King’s Eulogy; whereby King eulogized himself on that Sunday morning. King’s eulogy was played at the funeral in Ebenezer Baptist Church at the request of King’s widow, Coretta Scott King. The Ebenezer funeral preceded the service at Morehouse College where Benjamin E. Mays delivered the final eulogy. The words of King’s eulogy are as follows:

“And every now and then I ask myself what it is that I would want said and I leave the word to you this morning... Tell him not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize--that isn't important. Tell him not to mention that have 300 or 400 other awards--that's not important. Tell him not to mention where I went to school. I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to give his life serving others... And I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity...”²⁷

In this sermon excerpt, it is important to note King’s rhetorical use of “that isn’t important and tell him not to mention.” The phrase, that isn’t important, represents an epistrophe, a repetition of a word or phrase at the end of a clause. The phrase, tell him not to

²⁶ Martha J. Simmons and Frank A. Thomas, *Preaching with sacred fire: an anthology of African American sermons, 1750 to the present* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2010), 565-566.

²⁷ “The Drum Major Instinct” Ebenezer Baptist Church, “The Drum Major Instinct” Ebenezer Baptist Church | The Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, February 04, 1968, accessed June 14, 2017, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/drum-major-instinct-ebenezer-baptist-church>.

mention, represents an anaphora, a repetition of the same word or group of words at the beginning of successive clauses. These rhetorical tools are used for emphasis and reflect the intertextuality of King's sermon and Mays' eulogy. Based on King's emphasis of what was important to him and telling his eulogist what not to mention, Mays' eulogy was influenced by King's sermon. Mays did not mention the unimportant things, but rather emphasized how King served all of humanity with love. Mays did not mention King's Nobel Peace Prize, his 300 or 400 awards, nor his academic pedigree. He highlighted King's character and convictions.

The conversation of King's character and convictions is in refutation to those who believed that King's nonviolence was a form of cowardice. Here, Mays' audience is no longer the wider audience of those who are unfamiliar with him. Now Mays is speaking to those persons in the African American community who believed in "any means necessary." This begins an apologetic discourse in which Mays indirectly speaks to King's opponents who believed nonviolence was a form of cowardice. The presentation of non-violence as moral courage seeks to thwart further violence as the African American communal response to the assassination of King.

Mays highlights the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s courage in stating that, "Moral courage was one of his noblest virtues."²⁸ He compares King's virtuous challenge of America to Mahatma Gandhi's challenge to the British Empire. Then, Mays identifies the ways in which King displayed courage by accepting the consequences of disobeying laws in serving his time in jail and embracing the possibility of death while refusing to carry a gun or knife for self-defense. Mays ends this section of courage by identifying that King relied on his faith in a just God.

The third component of the trauma process is the characterization of the relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience. The purpose of the characterization is to demonstrate how people who do not experience the pain of oppression can identify with the victims of the cultural trauma. The key to engaging the wider audience is to elevate the thoughts towards a higher consciousness of universal truths, such as morality, love, courage, dignity and respect. These universal truths point to the humanity of the collective group. For Christians and other persons of faith, the universal truth reflects the agency of God, God being with the oppressed collective group. These two truths, the humanity of the victims and God being with the collective group, forge the strongest argument in support of the trauma victims.

In the eulogy of Martin Luther King Jr., Benjamin Mays builds the bridge that connects the wider audience to the trauma victims when discussing the moral courage of King, making comparisons to Mahatma Gandhi and other "approved" revolutionaries, and referencing King's love for all humanity. These universal truths begin with Mays saying, "Let it be thoroughly understood that our deceased brother did not embrace nonviolence out of fear or cowardice. Moral courage was one of his noblest virtues..."²⁹ Mays compares King to public figures that the wider audience knows and accepts their legacy as change agents, such as President Abraham Lincoln, Moses from the biblical text, and Gandhi. And, he reiterates that Martin Luther King Jr. was called by God "to expound the doctrine of nonviolence and forgiveness...(and) to preach the Gospel to the poor."³⁰ These references point to universal truths.

²⁸ Martha J. Simmons and Frank A. Thomas, *Preaching with sacred fire: an anthology of African American sermons, 1750 to the present* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2010), 566.

²⁹ Martha J. Simmons and Frank A. Thomas, *Preaching with sacred fire: an anthology of African American sermons, 1750 to the present* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2010), 566.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 567.

In the next paragraph Mays turns to King's other strength, his love for all people, not just African Americans. This turn marks another shift in the audience. Mays begins to speak to everyone who is listening to the eulogy. Mays says, "Though deeply committed to a program of freedom for Negroes, he had love and concern for all kinds of people... It must be said, however, that one could hardly expect a prophet of Dr. King's commitments to advocate nonviolence at home and violence in Vietnam. Nonviolence to King was a total commitment, not only in solving the problems of race in the United States, but in solving the problems of the world."³¹

Then, Mays continues the comparisons to other revolutionaries. He compares the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to the biblical prophets - Amos and Micah, biblical leaders - Moses, Paul, and Jesus, historical figures who lead revolutions - Martin Luther (Protestant Reformer) and Gandhi, as well as other national leaders such as Abraham Lincoln and Woodrow Wilson. He emphasizes the ages in which several leaders died and disputes the claims that they died before their time. Mays says, "Too bad, you say, that Martin Luther King Jr. died so young, I feel that way too. But, as I have said many times before, it isn't how long one lives, but how well. It's what one accomplishes for mankind that matters."³²

In the last section of the logos, Benjamin Mays attributes the responsibility of the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Mays says, "We will pray that the assassin will be apprehended and brought to justice. But make no mistake, the American people are in part responsible... The assassin heard enough condemnation of King and of Negroes to feel that he had public support... The Memphis officials must bear some of the guilt for Martin Luther's assassination... The lowest paid men in our society should not have to strike for a more just wage. A century after emancipation, and after the enactment of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, it should have not been necessary for Martin Luther King Jr. to stage marches..."³³ Virtually, everyone with power and privilege in America is culpable in the assassination of King, not only the assassin, but those responsible for the laws that create the inequality and support White supremacy. However, when Mays references the American people, he is not referring to the black oppressed. The black oppressed are on the side of King. As mentioned, its King and the Negroes against the powerful and privileged in America.

These statements present the fourth component of the trauma process, attribution of responsibility. This is a constructive exercise to demonstrate how multiple entities contribute to the cultural trauma of the collective group. The preacher must attribute blame to as many parties as possible in order to confront the multilayered systemic oppression that caused the victimization of the collective group. A cultural trauma does not occur without multiple layers of explicit or implicit threats to the collective group. In the case of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Mays blames the assassin, the American people who condemned King and African Americans, the Memphis officials that could have ended the strike by increasing the sanitation workers' wages and those who fight against the rights of African Americans.

After the logos within the body of the eulogy, the Rev. Dr. Benjamin E. Mays continues to follow Aristotle's *piestis* during his close by encouraging the audience to ensure the redemption of King's death through the continuation of the non-violent, Civil Rights

³¹ Ibid., 566.

³² Ibid., 568.

³³ Martha J. Simmons and Frank A. Thomas, *Preaching with sacred fire: an anthology of African American sermons, 1750 to the present* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2010), 568.

Movement. Mays closes with this emotional plea designed to touch the hearts of the audience, the pathos:

“If we love Martin Luther King Jr. and respect him, as this surely testifies, let us see to it that he did not die in vain; let us see that we do not dishonor his name by trying to solve our problems through rioting in the streets... But let us see it to conditions that cause riots are promptly removed, as the president of the United States is trying to get us to do. Let black and white alike look in their hearts; and if there be prejudice in our hearts against any group, let us exterminate it and let us pray...” If we do this, Martin Luther King Jr. will have died a redemptive death from which all mankind will benefit.

The fifth component of the trauma process is the redemption of the individual victim and the victims within the collective group to offer hope. Mays closes the eulogy of Martin Luther King Jr. with a challenge to the entire audience to redeem King and the collective group by ending prejudice and injustice in America, King’s unfinished work. Benjamin E. Mays closes with these final words, “I close by saying to you what Martin Luther King Jr. believed: if physical death was the price he had to pay to rid America of prejudice and injustice, nothing could be more redemptive. And to paraphrase the words of the immortal John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr.’s unfinished work on earth must truly be our own.”³⁴

The ending of prejudice and injustice is the ultimate response to God following the hearing of the preached word, Benjamin May’s eulogy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. This response requires actions from those indicted in the assassination of King as well as Negroes. As May’s stated, “It is time for the American people to repent and make democracy equally applicable to all Americans. What can we do? We, not the assassin, represent America at its best. We have the power-not the prejudiced, not the assassin-to do things right.”³⁵ Whites and blacks must not harbor any unforgiveness in their hearts and continue to pray for their oppressors. May’s says, “Let black and white alike look in their hearts; and if there be prejudice in our hearts against any group, let us exterminate it and let us pray, as Martin Luther King Jr. would pray if he could: Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”³⁶

Conclusion

This paper outlined Benjamin E. Mays’ use of two rhetorical theories: Aristotle’s rhetorical proofs and what I call Black preaching’s social theory of trauma. In future papers, I hope to explain the social theory of trauma more in-depth as it relates to the collective grief response in Black preaching. There are aspects of Black preaching that I mentioned, but did not discuss in great detail. For example, I stated that Mays’ ethos allowed him to address the communal grief through the creation of a new master narrative in the sermonic moment. The pastoral credibility of the preacher is important to the grief work of the collective group.

Furthermore, Jeffrey C. Alexander identifies carrier groups as those who carry out the trauma process for the collective group. I want to discuss the Black church as a carrier group that performs two tasks: 1) allows space for the expressions of grief, i.e., funerals, memorials, vigils, litany etc. and 2) advocates for the collective group as an expression of grief. This advocacy comes in two forms: 1) the promotion of institutional systematic change and 2) the

³⁴ Ibid., 568-569.

³⁵ Martha J. Simmons and Frank A. Thomas, *Preaching with sacred fire: an anthology of African American sermons, 1750 to the present* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2010), 568.

³⁶ Martha J. Simmons and Frank A. Thomas, *Preaching with sacred fire: an anthology of African American sermons, 1750 to the present* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2010), 568.

provision of individual self-care. Fighting for institutional systematic change without individual self-care leads to burnout of the carrier group.

To substantiate Black preaching's social theory of trauma, I will develop close readings on other sermons by African American preachers whose primary audience is the African American community following a cultural trauma such as, black preachers' sermons after the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln. I do not want to limit my analysis on black preachers. I am interested in a close reading of Senator Robert Kennedy's impromptu speech announcing the assassination of King to the African American community of Indianapolis.

In my preliminary research, I believe Kennedy adheres to Aristotle's classic rhetorical proofs. I do not believe Kennedy's speech engages in the communal grief process of the African American community for the creation of a new master narrative. Kennedy's speech represents an imperial speech of the Empire designed to control the African American community's expressions of grief and their continued bonds with the deceased, rather than a speech that engages in the trauma process to heal the communal grief within the community.

In an article published in *Death Studies* entitled "A Social Constructionist Account of Grief: Loss and the Narration of Meaning," Robert A. Neimeyer, Dennis Klass, and Michael Robert Dennis state that the dominant culture i.e., religious, political or social structures, have an investment to regulate the mourning of the community with regards to public grief. The regulation of the communal mourning occurs in two ways: 1) by policing the expressions of grief, and 2) by managing the continued bonds with the deceased.³⁷ Therefore, Kennedy's speech is a rhetorical tool of the Empire that manipulated the public grief of the African American community. There is a contrast between the cultural trauma rhetorical response of the Black preacher and the politician even though both of their authority comes from the African American community.

³⁷ Robert A. Neimeyer, Dennis Klass, and Michael Robert Dennis, "A Social Constructionist Account of Grief: Loss and the Narration of Meaning," *Death Studies* 38 (2014): 493.