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The Construction of a Mystical Body for an Empowered Black Community During the American Civil Rights Movement in Rev. C.L. Franklin's Sermons

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Rev. Clarence LaVaughn Franklin (1915-1984) was arguably one of the most influential Baptist preachers of his generation and a personal friend of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Known in his day and age as the man with the "Million Dollar Voice"—although he is better known today as Aretha Franklin's father—, he was one of the first ministers to place his sermons on records (a practice which continued into the 1970s), and also to broadcast sermons via radio on Sundays. In addition to his ministry, in the 1950s and 1960s, he became involved in the civil rights movement, and particularly in ending discriminatory practices against Black United Auto Workers members in Detroit.

C.L. Franklin's preaching was essentially about redeeming his audience's self-esteem, not unlike what his Muslim counterparts were doing in the same area and social context and during the same decades. And significantly, just like them, while acknowledging the necessity for the African-American community to break the bondage of self-despise and reach higher towards a new political dignity, he still fell short of building the case for emancipated Black womanhood. In his analysis of a late-1950s sermon delivered on Mother's Day and entitled "Hannah, the Ideal Mother," Franklin's biographer Nick Salvatore stressed the paradox of the preacher-womanizer who insisted on sticking to a nineteenth-century construction of woman's role as solely a childbearer and spiritual educator:

> [T]he essence of "Hannah, the Ideal Mother," for all the power of its delivery and the enthusiasm that greeted its repeated presentation over the years, remained mired in an earlier cultural moment. Franklin—who encouraged silenced southerners to find their voice, to envision a new political presence, and to explore various forms of cultural expression, all the while gently but insistently prodding them to transform their initially fundamentalist perspective—could not harness that creativity to present a revised understanding of the interior landscape of family life. Had Franklin been able to use his personal history as a resource in this regard, he might have explored the changing nature of marriage so as to allow a more compelling presentation of even his traditional ideas… Instead, as in "Hannah," he constructed an ideal to cover his actual, if imperfect, human experience. (1)

Interestingly, while celebrating the divine dimension bestowed upon women when they bring children into the world and receive the responsibility of shaping their minds and worldview by teaching them how to pray, it is rather the image of a threatening and potentially vengeful mother that he chooses to extol in his sermon.

Reminiscing about his own mother in front of the congregation—and of Rachel Franklin herself—he first evokes a night when he was awakened by the sound of his mother weeping (her teardrops falling down on his face) as she was praying for God to help her rear her children. "Let your children know you're praying for them," he tells his congregation. Combined with an earlier development on the necessity to keep the family name alive in order to reach immortality through their offspring, this vignette implicitly shifts the burden of responsibility from the parent onto the child. Hannah escapes the stigma of barrenness by dedicating her future manchild to God, but in the examples taken from his own mother's experience, the ongoing suffering of the mother figure is consistently aimed at humbling the child and justifying the sacrifices of the parent.

The image of Black motherhood delineated in this sermon is typically ensconced between the Christlike figure of the rebuked but patient sufferer and the more Biblical figure of the wrathful Maker, as when he evokes a childhood memory from his first experience as a public speaker, when he was in fifth or sixth grade. Simultaneously humbling himself before the congregation and playing with his dandyish image as the "preacher with the golden voice," Franklin pleasantly recalls

that at the graduation ceremony of the year, he had spoken too low because he was afraid of speaking in public, until by the end of his speech he caught a glimpse of his mother's glare, whose unmistakable meaning was that he was going to be beaten for his poor performance:

> and she looked at me a certain way, [*knowing laughter from the congregation*] and I knew that I was in for it. [*Laughter from the congregation*] She said, when she got home that night, 'the next time, when I'll be through with you, the next time you get up on a stage to speak, *you* are gonna speak! And believe it or not, I've been speaking ever since then!

"And I mean speaking where folks could hear me," he concludes, airily remarking that such methods may not be recommended by child psychology but that he still considered them effective, for they did "some positive things for me—some things that have serviced me and have helped me through my life."

From the tearful eyes of the woman burdened with responsibilities to the vengeful glare of the One you are not allowed to disappoint, the mother's body appears as the strange blend of weakness and violence, patience and adamancy which makes her a quasi-divine being, endowed with uncommon perception of the potential greatness of her child's—especially her manchild's—destiny:

> I think it is necessary that we rethink about the problem of bringing up our children. And I mean that we examine ourselves on shouldering the responsibilities that are imposed upon parents. And certainly a mother has her place in this scheme of faith. For you see—We are largely responsible for our children. We are largely responsible. The Lord gave them to us, and the Lord is counting on us to bring 'em up. To live this abundant life, and to make the world a better place in which to live. As you look at a baby crying in his mother's arms, as you look at this little span of humanity, the eye, the physical eye cannot analyze the possibilities that's [*sic*] within that child. The physical eye cannot see all the things that he is capable of doing. And what he will do. And what contributions he will make to world order, and to human adjustment; as to what contribution he will make into making the world population a brotherhood, and making world society the kingdom of God, depend [*sic*] largely on mother [*sic*]. (As well as on father.)

Yet it seems that the mother's eye, so powerful and acute in its desire for recognition and pride, compelled the child to surpass himself—or die trying to escape such high expectations. Hannah is shown as an example in her desire to be a mother—and Franklin stresses the word in a purposely musical voice—for she craves the "respect associated to motherhood" in her day and age, which Franklin ironically contrasts with the nasty comments heard on mothers of two ("she lose her shape!") much to the appreciation of his congregation, men and women alike. But the biblical Hannah, so often taken as the example of the ideal mother in Protestant oratory, was the mother of Samson, one of Israel's greatest judges but never much of a seer himself. Just as typically, the preacher takes his own example and the fictitious yet easily recognizable example of a prodigal daughter, which serves as the stepping-stone to the climax of his sermon and the logical invitation to the seekers to come to the mourners' bench.

These two contemporary American examples also carry implicit messages for the congregation. Franklin gravely insists in the initial phase of his sermon that without his mother's example, "I do not know what I would have done," implying he could have put himself at risk either morally or politically, in the tense context of the lynching-riddled Mississippi of the 1930s. Clearly, he expects his audience to confirm the excellence of his mother, who made it possible for him to reach what he describes as "faith in myself" by equating in his young mind faith in prayer with faith in God, thereby turning the issue of disloyalty to God and unbelief into an impossible option for her son. By presenting her with the mirror image of her success as a spiritual mentor, he comes full circle in his identifying her with the ideal mother figure of Hannah—all the while covering up his widely-rumored weakness with women and close association with the all-too secular world of nightclubs, bluesmen, blueswomen, and jazz musicians. As Salvatore highlights in his work, C.L. Franklin felt no particular guilt about his belonging to two seemingly irreconcilable worlds, because of his love for good music and the inevitable interpenetration of the two spheres of musical creativity in African American culture. (2)

Very different is the parable of the prodigal daughter meant to bring low the yet-unrepentant members of congregation. The preacher had prepared his audience

for it by telling them the story of three little boys who had died of suffocation because of a fire caused by a malfunctioning coal stove by which they had been left alone to sleep; the mother had been found in town around 3:30 or 4:00 A.M., sitting in a tavern—not exactly the ideal mother, the preacher had dryly commented. Very similar to this anti-mother figure, his fictitious female sinner is a typical young urbanite gone wild in the big city, like so many Black southerners during the Great Migrations. She leaves town to escape from her "fogy and old-time" mother who kept harassing her and trying to make her feel guilty about her frivolous pleasures.

> I believe when you reach old age, —I wish somebody would pray with me—When your head has a-gone blooming to the grave, when you reach that age, when life has purged your mind of folly. And time has settled your mind and your attitude, as well as your body down, I think it's a wonderful thing to have a daughter or a son to say to you, 'Mother, I still love you. For you stood by me'" the whooping preacher had warned the roused audience just before telling this story

As can be expected, but in a very realistic style, the preacher depicts his character losing her health and looking back on her life on her deathbed at the tuberculosis asylum, only to discover that finally her mother knew what she was talking about and repent that she never wrote to her. She asks a friend to write in her place, too ashamed to describe her condition herself but intent on letting her mother know that she now understood she was right. Predictably enough, the weeping mother goes to see her dying child at the hospital, forgives her for her wild ways and inexperience and brings her back home to pray over either the restoration of her health or her passing away—but above all justified in her inflexible moral posture. Amid shrieks and rumble from the roused congregation, the preacher concludes, "the Lord is a door where every other door is closed. He makes a way out of no way. Thank God I've learnt this."

In this sequence, the body of the pleasure-seeking woman emerges as the instrument of her own downfall as well as her mother's justification, and it seems only the sobering experience of motherhood and the physical and moral burden associated with it can make for a reconciliation of the selves with their quest for recognition. It is as if only two destinies were thinkable—that of the manchild, whose duty on earth would be to fulfill his mother's dreams for him, and that of the female

child, who seems doomed to fall a prey to alcohol, drugs and prostitution unless she heeds her mother's stern warnings and accepts the physical and spiritual burden of motherhood for herself—that is, old age and sacrificing herself for her offspring. The image of the ruined and repentant woman, replicating the earlier image of the drunk and irresponsible mother, consciously locks female auditors into the single path of escaping the guilt linked to their sex-appeal and reaching for immortality through bringing a manchild into the world and imposing on him the burden of meeting their expectations.

Yet when one learns of the particulars of the long romantic affair between the famous gospel singer Clara Ward and Rev. C.L. Franklin, and the sad outcome of it for Clara, whom he left childless, an alcoholic and as dominated by her mother as before their encounter (3), it is difficult not to wonder about the ability of this gifted preacher to stigmatize the very lifestyle he was himself involved in. As Salvatore pointedly remarks, father figures were never evoked in C.L. Franklin's sermons: "never once in a sermon did he ever mention Willie Walker or Henry Franklin" (4), and C.L. himself, who divorced his wife Barbara in 1948 after twelve years of marriage, remained eighteen years without recognizing the daughter he had fathered in 1940 with a teenage parishioner (5). As a single father, he always managed to preserve his own sexual freedom and sex-appeal by consistently eschewing new commitments with the surrogate mother figures he gave to his five children (6). The only steady mother figure who remained in the picture was his own "Big Mama" (as her grandchildren called her,) (7) again quite predictably and much more in keeping with the complex workings of twentieth-century Black families than the ideal bourgeois model he was preaching to the community.

How, then, could the African-American community of the troubled 1950s and 1960s be empowered and set free of its inner contradictions, if the only way to salvation was to yearn for old age while projecting motherly dreams of accomplishment and recognition into male children, themselves terrified with the responsibilities of commitment and/or fatherhood? C.L. Franklin was a friend of Martin Luther King, Jr and actively participated in the Civil Rights Movement in

Detroit; yet his sermons were much more typical of the Afro-Baptist tradition of preaching spiritual than actual, political liberation. His most overtly political sermon, "The Fiery Furnace," was preached in June 1968, after King's assassination, and, significantly, contains few metaphorical designations of the community. It is in the immensely popular "The Eagle Stirreth Her Nest", delivered circa 1953 (according to Franklin's biographer Jeff Todd Titon,) that we can find one of the most interesting metaphorical constructions of a body politic for the Black community.

In this sermon, based on *Deuteronomy,* Franklin first focuses on the exceptional physical endowments of the eagle as the animal which best symbolizes God, building his point on the eagle's physical strength, swiftness and "extraordinary sight" in a long parable sending coded, yet immediately deciphered, messages of hope and perseverance to those involved in the fight with Southern political authorities. True to the Afro-Baptist tradition, the preacher does not shun the resort to anthropomorphic or even, as is the case here, zoomorphic symbols to bring the deity closer to the intellectual and emotional grasp of his listeners, while clearly setting this metaphor in the context of the historical, and still ongoing, struggle for racial equality and brotherhood in America:

> The eagle here is used to symbolize God's care and God's concern for His people. [*Yeah*] …The eagle here is used as a symbol of God. Now, in picturing God as an eagle stirring her nest, the meaning is, history has been one big nest that God has been eternally stirring [*Oh Lord!*] to make men better [*Oh Lord!*] and to help us achieve world brotherhood. [*Yeah! Oh Lord!*] Some of the things that have gone on in your own experiences have merely been God stirring the nest of your circumstances. [*Oh Lord!*] Now the Civil War, for example, [*Yes!*] and the struggle in connection with it, were merely the promptings of Providence [*Oh Lord!*] er—to lash men to a point of being brotherly to all men. [*Amen! Yeah!*] In fact, of all the wars that we have gone through, we have come out with new outlooks, new deeds, and better people. [*Amen! Yeah!*] So that in our history God has been stirring the various nests of circumstances [*Yeah!*] surrounding us so that He could discipline us, help us know ourselves, and help us to love one another, [*Yeah!*] and to help us hasten on [*Yeah!*] the realization of the kingdom of God.

Here, as in "Hannah," the mission given to the Black community—clearly the aim of his sermon, as his audience effortlessly inferred from the phrase "His people," solidly anchored in the tradition of Negro Spirituals, as well as from the more explicit reference to the Civil War and the Civil Rights struggle—is to bring about world brotherhood as a prelude to the millenarian advent of the kingdom of God on Earth. (8) By comparing the two sermons, the all-seeing, all-predicting mother figure appears even more godly in her anticipation of the great destiny she entrusts her child with, while, in parallel, the deity is described as a parent with rough but efficient methods who knows how to force His Chosen People to overcome historical odds and physical suffering by purposely throwing them into the turmoil of an unequal and perilous fight for their rights as citizens.

Ever since the days of the American Revolution, African-American Baptist as well as Methodist preachers had been feeding their audiences similar interpretations of African-American history as achieving God's secret messianic purpose for the African diaspora, in a conscious effort to give a moral purpose to the dehumanizing experience of slavery. But in the late 1950s, certainly due to the influence of Malcolm X's radical discourse on Black identity and racial pride, the key to the moral uplift and political awareness of the community now was to reach self-knowledge, without which liberation from fear is impossible:

> Then it is said that an eagle builds a nest unu-sually. It is said that the eagle selects rough material basically for the construction of his nest. And then up his nest graduates to a close or a finish (9), the material becomes finer and softer like down at the end. And then, er- he go about to, er- set up residence in that nest. And when the little eaglets are born, she [*sic*] go out and bring 'em food to feed them. But when they get to the point when they're old enough to be out on their own, why-er the eagle will begin to pull out some of that down and let some of those thorns come through, so that the nest won't be, you know, so comfortable. So when they get to loungin' around and rollin' around, the thorns prick them here and there. Pray with me if you please. I believe that God has to do that for us sometimes. Things are going so well, and we're so satisfied that we just lounge around and forget to pray. You walk around all day and enjoy God's life, God's health and God's strength, and go climb into bed and say, "Thank you Lord for another day's journey." We do that. God has to pull out a little of the plush around us, a little of the

> comfort around us, and let a few thorns of trial and tribulation stick through the nest to make us pray sometime. Isn't it so?

As in "Hannah", bodily comfort is represented as fundamentally antagonistic with salvation and suffering is the only single path towards spiritual maturity. But this message also addresses the community at large and needs to be heard also with regard to political maturity. The convenient metaphor of the nest makes both readings of the parable possible, for the nest is at the same time the family, community, or church milieu in which individual congregants find rest and comfort, along with personal recognition and a necessary sense of wholeness, and the historical circumstances of the Black community as a whole in God's hands, which He forces to hasten the achievement of its mission. The sin of sloth can thus be translated into political terms as the do-nothing attitude of those gradualist, conservative pastors whom King stigmatized as one of the major hindrances to the progress of the Black community in its march for equal rights. Significantly, after this passage Franklin, now whooping his sermon, immediately shifts from this reflection to his last metaphor of the eagle, a folkloric rather than biblical parable where the kingly and motherly bird is made to symbolize another entity than the deity:

> It is said that there was a man who had a poultry farm. And that he raised chickens for the market. And one day, in one of his broods, he discovered a strange-looking bird that was very much unlike the other chickens on the yard. And-umm, the man didn't pay too much attention. But he noticed—as time went on—that-er this strange-looking bird—was unusual. He outgrew the other little chickens, his habits were stranger and different. O Lord. But he let him grow on, and let him mingle with the other chickens. O Loord. And then one day a man who knew eagles when he saw them, came along and saw that little eagle walking in the yard. And—he said to his friend, "Do you know that you have an eagle here?!"

At this juncture, the congregation has already understood that what the sermon really is about is the uniqueness of the Black community within the American nation. Drawing from the tradition of spirituals in which only "God's children got wings," the preacher is now totally at ease to extol his parable and let it play on the individual and communal planes at the same time, for it is clear to all that he is

following the same line of thought as when praising his mother for her ability to recognize talent in her shy little boy, or predicting that a baby crying in his mother's lap may contribute to the salvation of the world. The eagle now embodies the divine dimension of a community that has become conscious of its strength and potential empowerment, just as the key lesson learnt from the adamant, yet knowing, mother figure was that nothing could be achieved without faith in yourself. In the context of the nascent nonviolent Civil Rights movement, the image of the eagle outgrowing his cage could not but deeply resonate with the aspirations for political and social change of the whole community:

> The man went out and built a cage. And—every day he'd go in and feed the eagle. But he grew a little older and a little older. Yes he diiiid. His wings began to scrape on the sides of the cage. And—he had to build another cage, and open the door of the old cage and let him into a larger cage. Yes he diiid. Oh Lord! And—after a while—he outgrew that one day when he had to build another cage. So one day, when the eagle had gotten grown, Lord God! And his wings were twelve feet from tip to tip, oh Looord! He began to get restless in the cage. Yes he diiid. He began to walk around and be uneasy. Why, he heard noises in the air. A flock of eagles flew over and he heard their voices. And—though he'd never been around eagles, there was something about that voice that he heard, that moved down in him, and made him *dissatisfied.* Oh, Looord! And—the man watched him, as he walked around, uneasy. Oh Looord. He said, "Lord, my heart goes out to him. I believe I'll go and open the door and set the eagle free."… One of these days, one of these days—my *SOUL* is an eagle, in the cage that the Lord has made for me. My soul, my soul, my soul is caged in, in this ole body, yes it is! And one of these days, the Man who made the cage will open the door and let my soul go. Yes he will! You ought to be able to see me take the wings of my soul. …One of these ole days, one of these ole days, did ya hear me say it?—I'll fly away, and be at rest. Yeees. Yeees! Yeeees! Yeeeeees! Yeeeees! Yes. One of these ole days, one of these ole days. And when troubles and trials were over, when toil and tears are ended, when burdens are through burdening, ohhh! Ohhh. Ohhh! Ohh one of these days, one of these days, my soul will take wings

The stirrings of liberty at work in the non-White world, in Africa and in Asia, are implicitly evoked in the image of the flock of eagles calling to their caged brother, and now God is impersonated by the man who decides to liberate the eagle after

months of simply feeding him and keeping him in larger cages. The sermon ends with a preacher singing the coming of age of a community which realizes that it is endowed with a political identity only by hearing echoes of other peoples' liberations, and finds out that it can muster the strength of its mystical body in more ways than the traditional crossing to the other world, suggested by the traditional spiritual "Lay This Body Down," evoked in the closing verse chanted by the preacher.

While still celebrating the virtues of maturity, the preacher's artistically crafted metaphor of the eagle, by its very physical attributes, has finally endowed the community with godliness and superhuman strength. By touching the aspirations of each of its members, the sermon's climactic stage brought them previously-unsuspected power and self-confidence in their personal and collective ability to reach higher ground, and claim for nothing short of full-fledged civil rights. It is as if nothing could stop the community's flight from the cage of subservience and second-class citizenship, under the protective and comforting wings of the "collective I" borrowed from the oratorical tradition and which King, like Franklin ten years later, so astutely employed to lead the people to political action.

NOTES

1. Nick Salvatore, *Singing in a Strange Land: C.L. Franklin, the Black Church, and the Transformation of America,* New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005, 220.

2. See Salvatore, 130-131.

3. Salvatore, 208-210.

4. *Ibid*, 220. Willie Walker, actually C.L.'s father, left his Mississippi home never to return, shortly after coming back from fighting World War Two in France (Salvatore, 8). C.L's stepfather Henry Franklin adopted him at age 6 or 7, but while he loved him, he apparently never was proud of this illiterate, non-churchgoing man (*ibid.*, 24).

5. *Ibid,* 61-2 and 221-2.

6. *Ibid,* 220.

7. *Ibid,* 222-223.

8. In his famous "Dream Speech," Martin Luther King, Jr. also insisted that America could not fulfil its messianic mission of becoming "the Beloved Community" and achieving world peace—which had been President John F. Kennedy's explicit purpose in his inaugural speech—as long as it let racial injustice persist in its ranks.

9. Here the recording is unclear. I am indebted to Jeff Todd Titon for the transcription of "graduates to a close or a finish" in his written rendition of this sermon in his excellent book, the first biography of C.L. Franklin. Jeff Todd Titon, ed., Reverend C.L. Franklin, *Give Me This Mountain: Life History and Selected Sermons,* Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. 49.

SOURCES

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————*Sermons and Hymns,* Universal City, CA: Universal Music Special Markets, Inc., 1999.

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