

A RHETORICAL CRITICISM: DR. BENJAMIN ELIJAH MAYS, INTERPRETER OF  
WORLD EVENTS, INSPIRER OF YOUNG MEN, AND PRESIDENT  
OF MOREHOUSE COLLEGE, 1940–1967

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## ABSTRACT

William A. Keyes IV: A Rhetorical Criticism: Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays, Interpreter of World Events, Inspirer of Young Men, and President of Morehouse College, 1940–1967  
(Under the direction of V. William Balthrop)

African American male students in the United States underperform in comparison to their classmates of every other race, at every level of schooling, regardless of socioeconomic background. They also underperform in relation to African American women. Though fifty years have passed since Benjamin E. Mays served as president of Morehouse College (1940-1967), the rhetorical practices that enabled him to prepare so many young African American men for high academic achievement, career success, and civic contribution offer important insights that may help address this critical issue today.

One of the central concepts that underpins the arguments in this dissertation is the replacement of negative images of African American men with intentionally-influenced *terministic screens*. As explored in this dissertation, *A Rhetorical Criticism: Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays, Interpreter of World Events, Inspirer of Young Men, and President of Morehouse College, 1940–1967*, Mays offered his students vivid, specific, positive images of the Morehouse Man, and encouraged them to accept the Morehouse Man’s complex collection of positive attributes instead of the negative images of themselves and African American culture they had likely absorbed previously. Another central concept is that of the *talented tenth*. I use the term as defined in the *Encyclopedia of African American History*, which refers to those whose talents should be cultivated to enable them to advance the interests of all black Americans.”

Using Kenneth Burke's *cluster-agon analysis* method and *terministic screens* concept to examine 54 of the 200-plus speeches I reviewed, I identified Mays' major themes: race, education, and religion. Through this analysis, it became clear that Mays sought to educate talented African American men to become citizens who would work to improve the lives of others and have positive influence in society. His rhetorical practices provide insights that can be utilized in 21<sup>st</sup> century America.

For my wife

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

God's greatest gift to me on this earth is my wife, Lola. She means everything to me. Our greatest gifts as a couple are our wonderful children. Our daughter, Lola Elizabeth, was the apple of our eyes at the time of her birth and remains so even today in her adulthood. Our son, BJ (William Augustus Keyes V), displays the rare combination of incredible talent and genuine humility. He is the man I wish I were.

I am blessed to be among the relatively small number of African Americans whose educated forebears treated their children's higher education as if it were a birthright. For that, I am most thankful to my late father, William Augustus Keyes III (Hampton Institute) and mother Ruby Poag Keyes (Bennett College and East Carolina University). I wish they were here to see what Billy has achieved.

Special thanks to Alston Gardner and Barb Lee, who have provided a home away from home for Lola and me in Chapel Hill, making our frequent trips there comfortable and enjoyable; and to our dear friends, Chuck Watts and Janis Ernst, who round out the Gardner-Lee/Watts-Ernst/Keyes family unit that sustains us more than is imaginable.

I am often told how much I have inspired my Institute for Responsible Citizenship alumni and scholars, but it is the inspiration they have provided for me that is most remarkable. They come from a wide variety of backgrounds and have a broad range of interests. Two of them have been named Rhodes Scholars and several others were Rhodes finalists, two Fulbright Scholars, six Truman Scholars, two Udall Scholars, and the recipients of many other prestigious awards. They have graduated from the top law schools—6 Harvard, 2 Yale, 1 Columbia, 2 Stanford, 1

Chicago, 3 Duke, etc.—and top graduate programs, including 6 from Yale Divinity School, 1 Candler Divinity (Emory), 1 Harvard Divinity, 1 Union Theological Seminary. Three have completed Harvard Business School and others have graduate from other business schools. Several are teachers, with one rising to the position of principal, and one was elected the youngest school board president in the United States. They are doctors, engineers, entrepreneurs, musicians and actors, etc. All of them are outstanding young men who are making a difference in their fields of interest. Benjamin Mays would be proud of them, but not as proud as I am. Two hundred-plus Institute scholars and alumni cannot be named individually. No disrespect to the MD's, JD's, MBA's, or ten others who are currently enrolled in a range of doctoral programs, but I will list those who have completed PhD's, ordered by Institute class year:

Malcolm Glover '04, Leadership Studies, University of Central Arkansas  
Elijah Heyward '04, American Studies, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
Robert Bland '07, History, University of Maryland  
DeMarcus Pegues '08, Psychology, Columbia University  
Jarvis McInnis '09, English Literature, Columbia University

Approaching graduation at the same time as Elijah and DeMarcus has been a wonderful blessing for me. More than protégés, they are two dear friends who prodded me to keep on course, which I hope I did for them in return. They played no small role in me getting here.

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This brings me full circle. I began with a word about my wife and so shall I end. The greatest blessings that God has bestowed upon me are the people he has placed in my life. Lola is at the top of the list. My greatest aim in life, after glorifying God, is to make her proud of me. I hope earning a PhD is another step in that direction.

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

Benjamin Elijah Mays is best known for his presidency of Morehouse College from 1940 to 1967 and his mentorship of Martin Luther King, Jr. In fact, he has been credited both with bringing quality and prestige to Morehouse and with inspiring King, its most famous alumnus, to pursue nonviolence as a strategy for gaining African American civil rights. More than a generation of Morehouse men were directly influenced by his leadership, and many others, far beyond the Morehouse campus, have benefited from his wisdom. Mays rose from being a poor farm child from South Carolina, the son of ex-slaves, to the heights of academia, earning a PhD from the University of Chicago and serving as president of Morehouse for twenty-seven years. The principles that governed his life, and that he used to shape the lives of so many others, are all recorded in his speeches and writings, which are held in the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University. In this dissertation, I survey Mays' work—published volumes and the archive of his unpublished work—to gain insight into his philosophies on race, religion, and education that enabled him to prepare so many young African American men for high academic achievement, career success, and civic contribution.

This study of Mays is important because America still faces the crisis of race that Mays worked to address. Though some of the challenges of Mays' day have been overcome, others persist. The matter that I am especially concerned about is the underperformance of African American male students in comparison to their classmates of every other race, at every level of schooling, regardless of socioeconomic background. Though these young men also underperform compared to African American women, many factors that lead to the young men's academic

difficulties stem from issues of race. The disparity begins as early as kindergarten, when African American students show up less likely to have been read to by their parents, having been exposed to fewer books, knowing fewer words than their white counterparts (Duursma, Raikes, and Pan 2008), and less capable of identifying letters, numbers, and shapes (US Department of Education 2010). The gap widens through elementary and secondary school, and the difference in achievement levels is enormous by high school graduation. While 78 percent of white male students graduated on time from high school in 2008, only 47 percent of black male students did so (Schott Foundation 2010), and those who do graduate are likely to have lower grades and standardized test scores than their classmates. In 1997, applications to twenty-eight highly selective colleges and universities showed that almost three-quarters of white applicants scored above 1200 on the Scholastic Aptitude Test, while little more than one-quarter of the African American students did so (McWhorter 2000, 76). That same year, 2,646 white students who applied for admission to top-ranked law schools scored 164 or higher on the Law School Admissions Test and had a grade point averages of 3.5 or higher. Only sixteen African American students had those qualifications (McWhorter 2000, 73). Although these college and law school application statistics are not broken down by gender, it is likely that the men's scores, broken out, would show an even larger gap, for African American men underperform relative to African American women. The gap between African American men and African American women is clear in college graduation rates. African American men earned postsecondary degrees at roughly half the rate of the women: 31.5 percent of black men who pursued associates' degrees succeed, compared to 68.5 percent of black women; 34.1 percent of black men entering four year colleges or universities earned bachelor's degrees, compared to 65.9 percent of black women; 28.2 percent of black men successfully earned master's degrees, compared to 71.8 percent of

black women; and 33.5 percent of black men who began doctoral programs earned doctorates, compared to 66.5 percent of black women (US Department of Education, 2010). African American women are also deserving of support, but this study is an effort to determine strategies for improving success rates for young African American men.

Though fifty years have passed since Mays served as president of Morehouse, I believe the rhetorical practices he employed are instructive for how this problem should be approached in the current era. All of the challenges to academic achievement during Mays' era persist today, many born of the systemic racism that has continued to shape governmental policies in areas such as employment, housing, criminal justice, and education. President Barack Obama recognized this legacy. As he said in his 2008 speech on race, formally titled "A More Perfect Union,"

William Faulkner once wrote, "The past isn't dead and buried. In fact, it isn't even past." We do not need to recite here the history of racial injustice in this country. But we do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist in the African American community today can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow.

President Obama continued, "Segregated schools were, and are, inferior schools; we still haven't fixed them, fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the inferior education they provided, then and now, helps explain the pervasive achievement gap between today's black and white students" (Obama 2008). These problems are still with us, and solutions that worked in the Crow era may be applicable in this era, when America faces the same problems.

In chapter 2 of this dissertation, I offer an overview of how we got to our present state, a reminder of the brutality to which black men were subjected from the time the first Africans were marched onto slave ships heading to American shores, continuing through the Reconstruction period and the Jim Crow era, and beyond. This history of how black men were deprived of access to education and other public goods still reverberates in the present day. But

any complete picture of the experience of African American men must also include their incredible successes, often in the face of nearly insurmountable obstacles. After providing context through chapter 2's reminder of the wretched mistreatment of black men, I turn my attention in chapter 3 to Mays. I examine his ideals and philosophies through the lens of his speeches and writings. Mays had incredible success in shaping a generation of young African American men into successful adults. I use the terms and techniques of Kenneth Burke to perform a rhetorical analysis of the themes that run throughout Mays' work. Chapter 4 is an intervention into present-day attempts to solve the achievement gap that harms young African American men.

First, though, in the remainder of this introductory chapter, I will address two central concepts that underpin the arguments of the rest of the dissertation. The first is the notion of the *talented tenth*. Though I did not uncover an explicit use of the term by Mays, I characterize his approach as an application of the talented tenth concept. I use the term "talented tenth" in what I believe to be the colloquial sense—not necessarily with all of the meaning that Du Bois intended in his uses of it. In fact, I use the term as it is defined in the *Encyclopedia of African American History*, which says of the concept, "The theory was simple yet profound: Cultivate the talents of the best and brightest African Americans and they will advance the interests of [and be of service to] all black Americans" (Alexander and Rucker 2010, 1047).

### **The Talented Tenth**

The term was originally coined by a white Baptist minister, the Reverend Henry Lyman Morehouse (Schaefer 2008, 1295). In his 1896 essay titled "The Talented Tenth," Morehouse wrote, "In the discussion concerning Negro education we should not forget the talented tenth man. An ordinary education may answer for nine men of mediocrity; but if this is all we offer the

talented tenth man, we make a prodigious mistake” (Morehouse 1896). The Reverend Mr. Morehouse served as Corresponding Secretary and Field Secretary for the American Baptist Home Mission Society, which was a major contributor to the establishment of what was then called Atlanta Baptist College (later renamed Morehouse College in honor of the Reverend Mr. Morehouse) and to higher education for African Americans.<sup>1</sup> Morehouse’s essay, which promoted liberal arts education for African Americans, seems to have been written in response to Booker T. Washington’s 1895 speech given at the Atlanta Exposition (now often called the “Atlanta Compromise” speech), which focused on industrial training for African Americans and asserted that equality would grow from material success and prosperity.

The concept of the talented tenth has been under debate since the higher education of African Americans began and, as chapter 4 will show, debates about the appropriateness of preparing the talented tenth for leadership continue today. While some have found the education of the best and brightest African American men and women to be self-evidently appropriate, others have argued that the attention paid to the top tenth is elitist, while still others believe it disadvantages the other ninety percent of African Americans. Du Bois popularized the term “talented tenth” in his 1903 essay of the same name, where he advocated for training the best and brightest:

The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass . . . If we make money the object of man-training, we shall develop money-makers but not necessarily men; if we make technical skill the object of education, we may possess artisans but not, in nature, men. Men we shall have only as we make manhood the object of the work of the schools—intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world that was and is, and

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<sup>1</sup> The school was founded in Augusta, Georgia, two years after the end of the Civil War as the Augusta Theological institute. It relocated to Atlanta in 1879, settled into the basement of Friendship Baptist Church, and changed its name to the Atlanta Baptist Seminary. It later changed its name to Atlanta Baptist College, and then finally, in 1913, to Morehouse College.



of the relation of men to it—this is the curriculum of that Higher Education which must underlie true life. (Du Bois 1903, 33)

In this essay, Du Bois famously contradicts Booker T. Washington's notion that training African Americans as artisans and aiming at material success is the road to equality. He argues instead that the most talented young people must have classic liberal arts education, so they can lead. He asserts that "the Talented Tenth as they have risen among American Negroes have been worthy of leadership." He shows "how these men may be educated and developed." Finally, he argues that the talented tenth may help to solve the problem of race relations facing America.

It is reasonable to assume that the most highly trained talented tenth of African American young people will have the most opportunities open to them. They must be prepared to pursue careers in medicine, which is vitally important because their people need health care; to succeed in business, which will benefit other African Americans because the products and services will be useful to them; and to teach young people, serving as role models and preparing students to live fruitful and fulfilling lives. As Du Bois noted, "From the very first it has been the educated and intelligent of the Negro people that have led and elevated the mass" (Du Bois 1903, 34).

Like Du Bois (and like Mays, I will argue), I believe that the most talented young African American men need inspiration to work hard and achieve great success to be in position to serve a cause greater than their own success. I also share their belief that training technical and intellectual capabilities without developing character is unwise.

Nearly a half century after he wrote the essay "The Talented Tenth," Du Bois "re-examined and restated" his theory, arguing this time that African American intellectuals could not lead the race forward without the involvement of the masses. This re-examination occurred after his introduction to Marxism and his 1936 and 1937 visits to Russia and China (Jucan 2012, 41). By this point, Du Bois had outgrown his youthful idealism. He realized that not all educated

people were like the “men and women of character and almost fanatic devotion” who had taught him at Fisk University. Instead, many were “selfish, self-indulgent, well-to-do men,” whose basic interest was in “seeing how much they could make,” men who had “no arousing care as to what became of the mass of American Negroes” (Du Bois 1948).

In this revision, Du Bois replaced his notion of the “Talented Tenth” with the doctrine of a “Guiding Hundredth.” He presented his refined view at Wilberforce University in Ohio, at a biennial gathering of Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity, an organization that was the very epitome of the talented tenth. As Du Bois pointed out, the organization consisted entirely of professional men (201 members were physicians, dentists, and pharmacists, nearly half the total audience; 144 were educators, ministers, and social workers; 65 were lawyers and businessmen, and the remaining 30 members were from a variety of other occupations). Du Bois criticized this group—and more, broadly, the black elite, which these men represented—for their narrow, specialized training and outlook. Du Bois asserted that the guiding idea of the organization (of which he was a member) appeared to be “rooted in a certain exclusiveness and snobbery” (Du Bois 1948). He argued, for example, that the medical professionals were “members of closed trade unions” that were governed by antiquated rules; that while the educators and ministers were in touch with social movements, they knew nothing of the industries of the day; and that the lawyers and businessmen were completely indoctrinated into “American business philosophy” and had limited exposure to the problems of the working class. Only nine men had technical training—an insignificant number, and authors and artists were completely absent. Du Bois, who did not appear to care whether he offended his audience of high-achieving fraternity brothers, concluded, “We do not represent then typical America . . . We are then in the mass, an old, timid, conservative group” (Du Bois 1948).

In the same speech, Du Bois argued that the advancement of the African American cause needed to be linked to the efforts of “culture groups in Europe, America, Asia and Africa” to create a “new world culture,” but he wondered whether African Americans who were beginning to enjoy even small economic successes in America would be willing to join forces with causes abroad. He surmised that those who had worked long and hard to prepare themselves for individual success and freedom would be those most intently focused on becoming Americans, on enjoying the rights and privileges of American citizenship, and that they would be less likely to give up any of their hard-earned advantages to help those further behind. He expressed his revised belief that the ranks of the African American elite would not produce leaders who were men of character who would advance the political agenda of the entire race. His audience, Sigma Pi Phi, comprised of the most successful African American men in the country and best exemplifying the notion of a talented tenth, illustrated for Du Bois the accuracy of his new position.

These changes in his beliefs, which were produced late in his life, are “ill promoted and infrequently acknowledged” (King 2013), but his original theory has endured as a strategic concept. When I suggest that Mays’ philosophy regarding the education of the most talented African Americans was a sort of talented tenth strategy, I mean a notion that includes the best of Du Bois’ original definition and addresses his late-life concerns. In short, when I speak of the “talented tenth strategy,” I mean that the most talented African Americans should be well prepared to take on roles of leadership and service, and that the selfish individualism that concerned Du Bois should be mitigated by character education, including constant reminders that, in Mays’ words, “to whom much is given, much is required” (Colston 2002, 197).

My call for support of the most talented young African American men is not intended to reduce the support for African American students facing academic difficulties or other challenges. I simply argue that those who are most talented should not be ignored because of the depth of the challenges that others face. As Du Bois argued, the problems of the many will be solved in part by the effort of the most talented, and supporting the exceptionally gifted does not mean reducing support for those who are not. I seek to remind people that the purpose of preparing the most talented young people for success is to increase their capacity for leadership and service *to others*. Preparing one excellent teacher, preacher, or doctor benefits the hundreds or thousands of students, parishioners, or patients whose lives that teacher, preacher, or doctor will touch over the course of their careers. The most talented individuals' success is not enjoyed by them alone. Du Bois says, "the work which lies nearest my heart is not that of the talented few in opposition to the needs of the submerged many. But . . . the first step toward lifting the submerged mass of black people in the South [and beyond] is through the higher training of the talented few" (Du Bois 1973, 32).

In his early vision of the talented tenth, Du Bois argued that this group of African Americans would be the strongest advocates for the liberation of their brothers and sisters. He pointed to the first convention of the National Negro Convention Movement, held in 1831 in Philadelphia (Du Bois 1903, 40), saying the delegates "bravely attacked the problems of race and slavery, crying out against persecution." He quoted convention delegates as declaring that "Laws as cruel in themselves as they were unconstitutional and unjust, have in many places been enacted against our poor, unfriended and unoffending brethren (without a shadow of provocation on our part)," and he asserted that "Side by side this free Negro movement, and the movement for abolition, strove until they merged in to one strong stream" (Du Bois 1903, 40). Du Bois

concluded by suggesting that “Too little notice has been taken of the work which the Talented Tenth among Negroes took in the great abolition crusade” (40). Like Du Bois believed about the talented tenth of the abolitionist period, I believe that too little attention is being paid to the significant contributions that the talented tenth can and must provide in the fight to advance African Americans today.

One of Du Bois’ goals for his 1903 essay was “to show how these [highly talented] men may be educated and developed” (Du Bois 1903, 34). This is also a goal of this dissertation, for such training is often neglected, and when it is attempted, it often fails. This dissertation offers an examination of an effort that yielded positive results over a sustained period: Mays’ tenure at Morehouse. Not all of Mays’ speeches and writings that are examined here were addressed to the students at Morehouse, and they are not confined to the period of his presidency. Mays was in tremendous demand as a speaker, and he delivered commencement addresses, speeches at the installations of new college presidents, sermons at church services, eulogies at funerals, in addition to his weekly chapel talks at Morehouse and his regular talks to the first-year students at Morehouse and its sister institution, Spelman College. The themes that emerge from these speeches provide insight into what was important to him and what he imparted to his students.

### **Negative Images**

The second issue that must be addressed in this introduction is another aspect of the institutional racism discussed in chapter 2: the construction, reconstruction, and dissemination of negative images of African American men, and the effects of these implicitly conveyed forms of racism. African American women also suffer the consequences of negative images, as Patricia S. Parker indicates (Parker 2005), and the negative images of them are pernicious through school and career. However, African American women have been far more successful than African

American men at overcoming the negative effects of these images, as the comparison in graduation rates, discussed above, shows.

As chapter 2 details, racists have used all manner of tactics—many violent—to prevent African Americans from gaining access to the full fruits of American citizenship. Alongside these explicit, codified, often legal obstacles to African American men’s success, negative images have also affected African Americans’ opportunities and treatment. As David Goldberg explains in *Racist Culture*, language can be used to construct cultures’ and societies’ ideas of the other (Goldberg 1993, 151). Similarly, Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom (2002) have argued that epistemological and linguistic othering has real effects in the world: white people walking down the street “are more nervous when they encounter a black man than when they encounter a white one” (116), and black men “are more likely than whites to be stopped and questioned by a police officer” when walking down the street, despite the fact that “a chance encounter with a black creates little risk” (116–117). Language and cultural imagery have real effects in the world. Because of these negative images, whites harbor increased and unfounded fear of being victimized by African American men. As Earl Hutchinson put it, “Many whites get cold, chilling nightmares about being attacked by blacks even though their waking reality is that their attacker will almost always be white. The majority of violent crime[s] against whites are committed by other whites, and in most cases . . . out in pristine suburbia” (Hutchinson 1994, 13).

This section examines how this linguistic and imagistic othering, which is founded in a process of dehumanization, and which serves to keep African Americans “in their place,” has been manifest since its beginning in the era of slavery. African slaves were viewed as property rather than as human beings. Black men were framed as empty physical bodies, machines with no affective, moral, spiritual, or intellectual value. They had only economic and material value as

workers. During and after Reconstruction, white Southerners continued to propagate this image, using language and image to undermine any credibility that African Americans might gain now that they were legal citizens. Over the last four decades, politicians have executed a comprehensive rhetorical campaign that paints young African American men as predatory criminals—violent, drug-dealing menaces who needed to be locked away for the protection of white society. Together, national politicians and the news media pushed the story that America was experiencing a drug and crime epidemic. New terms were even created to reference young men who participated in gang crimes: “they are not just gangs of kids anymore. They are often the kinds of kids that are called *superpredators* (emphasis mine). No conscience. No empathy. We can talk about why they ended up that way but first we have to bring them to heel,” Hillary Clinton said in 1996 (Gillstrom 2016). Clinton, as First Lady, was in New Hampshire speaking in support of President Bill Clinton’s Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, which he had signed in to law in 1994 (Graves 2016).

This image-making—these depictions of African American men as dangerous, lazy, stupid—portrayed on the stage, in literature, on the news, in films, and on television—has a long history. Many scholars have examined the images of African Americans in mass circulation at various periods and in various media, images that were primarily, though not always, produced by whites.

The first images of African Americans in America were created by whites for the stage, followed relatively quickly by portrayals by white authors in the emerging genre of the novel. According to Dates and Barlow, a black character named Sambo appeared on the American stage for the first time in 1781, in a play called *The Divorce*. He appeared again in 1795 in *The Triumph of Love*. In both plays, he danced and sang songs that made no sense and his dress,

manners, and speech inaugurated the “comic Negro” stereotype. In the 1820s, white actors began to do blackface song and dance performances, portraying as comic buffoons the African Americans they claimed to be imitating. The most renowned of the early blackface performers was Thomas D. Rice, who made “Jump Jim Crow” famous in the 1830s. Rice modeled his character after an elderly, physically handicapped African American stablehand. The production was an instant success, and the “Jim Crow” stereotype was born (Dates and Barlow 1983, 7).

The first slave depicted in a major American novel was Caesar Thompson Wharton, a house slave who appeared in James Fenimore Cooper’s 1821 *The Spy*. Caesar was devoted to his master and appeared to be comfortable with his position of servitude. His fear of ghosts and other superstitions provided comic relief (Dates and Barlow 1983, 6–7). The Jim Crow stereotype developed on the stage in the 1830s quickly made its way into novels created by writers sympathetic to slave owners. In early novelistic portrayals of plantation slaves, they were presented as childlike, comical, and contented.

By the 1850s, as the novel was growing in prominence as a genre, the prevailing stereotypes of slaves began to be challenged. Antislavery activists such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wrote *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, portrayed the slave master as cruel, selfish, and greedy, and Stowe’s main character, the slave Uncle Tom, was shown to be gentle and long-suffering, a brave man with strong Christian piety and warm family feeling. He was in no way a contented or comic slave, nor was he an angry or rebellious one (Dates and Barlow 1983, 8–9).<sup>2</sup>

The first black-created images of black people to be widely published and read were slave narratives, and soon after slave narratives became popular, former slaves also began writing fiction. The most enduring characters in these accounts were bold and rebellious slaves

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on how African Americans have been portrayed in American fiction, see Brown 1937.



who actively opposed their bondage. For example, Frederick Douglass' *The Heroic Slave* was based on a real mutiny carried out by slaves aboard the slave ship *Creel* in 1841. The novel's hero, Madison Washington, after leading the successful slave revolt, returns to the South to rescue his family, even though this action jeopardized his own newly won freedom (Dates and Barlow 1983, 10–11).

White writers were quick to rebut these accounts with slave characters who praised slavery. Joel Chandler Harris, a white writer from Georgia, created Uncle Remus, and Thomas Nelson Page, a white writer from Virginia whose family had long owned slaves, invented Uncle Billy. Page went on to present the brute Negro stereotype in his novel *Red Rock*, which depicted a character named Moses, a mulatto villain who craved political power and lusted after white women. Perhaps the most notorious of the depraved mulatto caricatures was Silas Lynch, who first appeared in Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman: A Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*, the novel on which the film *The Birth of a Nation* (discussed below) was based (Dates and Barlow 1983, 11–12).

This literary shift from the white-created caricatures of “grinning, buck-dancing, lazy, slightly larcenous darkies” (25) of the slavery era to the Reconstruction-era violent, menacing black villains was most likely influenced by the dissemination of pseudoscientific information by scholars such as Charles Carroll, a Northerner who in 1900 published the culmination of fifteen years' worth of purportedly scientific research under the title, “*The Negro a Beast*” or “*In the Image of God.*” While “race science” had its heyday in the late nineteenth century, “scientific” justifications for slavery had been extant since around the time of the Civil War. For example, a Virginia newspaperman named George Fitzhugh had written in *Sociology for the South* (1854) that slave owners had “rescued blacks from idolatry and cannibalism, and even brutal vice and

crime that can disgrace humanity” (Hutchinson 1994, 20–21). But the new race scientists used the discourses emerging out of evolutionary theory and earth sciences to try to prove that black people were naturally inferior to whites. Carroll relied heavily on the work of Alexander Winchell, a professor of geology and paleontology at the University of Michigan, and other sources, including scripture, to conclude that African Americans were “beasts” who should not be living among God’s real people, the whites. Other well-educated Northerners used the new “race science” to cast black men as violent and sex-crazed degenerates as well. They distorted Charles Darwin’s biological theory of natural selection to argue that blacks were genetically inferior to whites, even going so far as to say that blacks would soon become extinct because of “disease, vice, and profound discouragement” (Hutchinson 1994, 22–25). David Hoffman asserted in an American Economic Association publication that the black race would die out because of blacks’ “inferior organs and constitutional weaknesses” (Hutchinson 1994, 23). The chief statistician for the US Census Bureau, Walter F. Wilcox, who was later aided by the American Social Science Association, produced charts and graphs to project the significantly greater likelihood of blacks engaging in criminal activity than whites. These are but a few examples of the supposedly scholarly texts that were produced about black people’s subhumanity and innate criminality.

These claims seem laughable today, but consider what Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki found in 2000 when they conducted a content analysis of ten weeks of programming on the major Chicago evening news shows in 1993–1994. They believed it was most important to review the local news because, as they noted, the most popular and trusted source of news for most Americans is local television newscasts (Entman and Rojecki 2000, 79). According to their research, the average newscast included seven violent items, with 13 percent of stories showing

visuals of “bloodied or injured persons” and 6 percent of stories highlighting “flashing-light-bedecked police vehicles or other symbols of police emergency” (80). According to Entman and Rojecki, “The sense of urgency and threat that these visuals convey, combined with the verbal texts describing a variety of dangerous persons and events, constructs the world as hazardous and full of risks”—primarily risks to whites. Murders of whites were more likely to be aired than murders of blacks (80).

Not only did the coverage tend to emphasize the dangers to whites, but it was presented in such a way as to emphasize the dangerousness of African Americans. Because of these slanted depictions, “Blacks in the news tend to look . . . more dangerous than whites even when they commit similar crimes” (Entman and Rojecki 2000, 84). In Chicago, for example, black men arrested for violent crimes were four times more likely to be imaged using a mugshot, which made them look more guilty. Mugshots of white men were less often shown (Entman and Rojecki 2000, 82). African American suspects were also dehumanized. Only 26 percent of the black men’s pictures (again, mostly mugshots) were presented with their names on the screen. In contrast, 47 percent of whites accused of violence were identified by both name and photograph. According to Entman and Rojecki, “The presence of the accused’s name provides a sense of his or her individual identity. Its absence may suggest that individual identity does not matter, that the accused is part of a single undifferentiated group of violent offenders: just another black criminal” (Entman and Rojecki 2000, 83). Black men were much more likely to be shown under the physical control of the police. In the Chicago study, blacks accounted for more than two-thirds of the people shown handcuffed or restrained, although they were fewer than half of the accused perpetrators: “Night after night the parade of blacks in the literal clutches of police

authority far more than white defendants sends a series of threatening images that insinuate fundamental differences between races” (Entman and Rojecki 2000, 83).

These campaigns have demonstrable effects. Franklin Gilliam conducted a study examining people’s perceptions of crime and black men by showing participants a newscast of a robbery and murder at an ATM machine. He technologically manipulated the image of the perpetrator, making him sometimes black and sometimes white, and sometimes he offered no image of the perpetrator at all. Participants were asked to recall the race of the perpetrator. Most viewers who had actually seen an image correctly remembered the race of the perpetrator in the image they saw, but people who were shown no image overwhelmingly recalled that the perpetrator of the crime was black. Gilliam’s conclusion was that “when people saw crime, they often expected a black man to be linked to it—not necessarily because of blind racism but *because of images they had consumed their entire lives*” (emphasis added) (Merida 2007, 14–15). As Bill Clinton said in 1995, in a so-called racial healing speech, “Violence for white people too often comes with a black face” (Hutchinson 1994, 13).

While Entman and Rojecki believe the media’s portrayals may reflect unconscious bias, which is then transferred to viewers (58), they also acknowledge that these image patterns “are the by-products of more or less rational profit seeking behavior by media organizations facing intense and increasing economic competition for the positive attention of white-dominated mass audiences.” This audience must be catered to if media conglomerates are to succeed in the competition for ratings and advertising dollars. The decision to cover crimes against whites, or to show the “perp walks” (defendants shown walking while in custody) of black suspects, are decisions made in pursuit of “good TV.” Producers know that certain images add “vividness” to crime stories and help audiences visualize the villains. The problem is also a reflection of the

arrested individuals' resources. Police make the black gang leader available to the TV cameras for the perp walk while the white defendant's lawyer arranges for him to avoid such a scene. This shapes the availability of images. Most images are of black criminals, not the larger number of white ones (73–74), and this disparity affects audiences' perceptions. "By tying appearances of blacks so frequently to narratives of crime and victimization, the news constructs African Americans as a distinct source of disruption" (Entman and Rojecki 2000, 67).

This framing of African Americans as violent and disruptive happens even when African Americans are the victims of the crime being reported. Consider the coverage of the Los Angeles riots in 1992 that followed the acquittal of the four white police officers who had brutally beaten Rodney King, an African American man, after a high-speed auto chase. A bystander recorded the beating—King was tasered, kicked, and hit with batons fifty-six times by the four Los Angeles police officers—and many saw the brutal footage of the apparently helpless man on television. During six days of riots, sixty-three people died and more than \$1 billion in property damage was recorded. More than 12,000 individuals were arrested, the majority Latino and many white, but the media almost exclusively showed African American rioters. It should be no surprise that most people think of the riot as a black riot and have an impression of African American men as exceedingly lawless, violent, and destructive (Entman and Rojecki 2000, 92).

The story of the Los Angeles riots and the media's selective depiction of the race of the rioters offers a good example of the concept of framing, which Entman and Rojecki define as follows:

Frames highlight and link data selectively to tell more or less coherent stories that define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. When we say a news report "framed" a drive-by shooting as a gang war story, we mean it selected certain aspects of the event that summoned an audience's stored schematic understandings about gang members. The story may have included visuals illustrating turf consciousness, exaggerated attachment to symbolic clothing, hand signaling, weapons, and aimless

loitering. By highlighting this gang frame, the report obscures other possible mental associations such as, perhaps, the shooter's absent father, unemployment or lower wages, and clinical depression. The gang frame makes these more sympathetic connections less available to the audience. . . . [T]he typical audience member's reaction when confronted with the gangbanger frame is to confirm long-standing expectations rather than to critically analyze the text for fresh insight. . . . Lacking much opportunity for repeated close contact with a wide variety of Blacks, whites depend heavily on cultural material, especially media images. (Entman and Rojecki 2000, 49)

Because the media repeatedly frames African Americans as criminal and violent, they construct a prototypical image in viewers' minds—one that is all the more powerful because it matches preexisting negative stereotypes of African American men (Entman and Rojecki 2000, 77). This negative framing is reinforced by what the media does not show. In the Chicago study, Entman and Rojecki found only one African American (and eighty-six whites) interviewed for an economics story and only one African American (and ninety-six whites) speaking on foreign affairs. The disparities were similar in coverage of science and technology, health, weather events, natural disasters and rescues, and deaths or anniversaries. Only in human interest features, sports and entertainment stories, and discrimination reports were African Americans interviewed in significant numbers. “We see here the outlines of the way media help construct the prototypical black person, that is, the traits characterizing the most representative members of the category” (Entman and Rojecki 2000, 64).

Movies, like news, have a potent effect on the cultural image of African American men. Sometimes this effect is intentional. For example, David W. Griffith and Thomas Dixon's infamous 1915 film, *The Birth of a Nation*, was produced and distributed “to demonstrate to the world that the white man must and shall be supreme,” as Dixon said at the opening of the 1906 stage version (Cripps 2007, 44). This film used its status as a visual and cultural spectacle to inflame racial tensions. Produced at the then-unheard-of price of \$100,000, the film was the longest film in America at the time—twelve reels long, with an approximately three-hour

running time. It was also the first film to have its own musical score. Its distribution was unlike anything the American movie viewing public had ever known. Theatres hosted live performances and fetched admission prices of up to two dollars. Millions of viewers saw it, many of them traveling long distances to do so, and many returning to watch it multiple times. Continuing strong audience demand meant that it ran in many theatres, for several months at a time. It was the first movie to be shown at the White House, the Supreme Court, and the U. S. Capitol. Newspapers treated the existence of the film as a story in its own right. It was by far the most profitable film of its time—“and perhaps, adjusted for inflation, of all time” (Stokes 2007, 3).

The anti-black messages of this incredibly popular film apparently made their way into the public consciousness. The year it premiered, at least one African American man was lynched, shot, or assaulted in a fatal or near-fatal way every week in the United States (Hutchinson 1994, 26). The film’s popularity in both the North and the South, and the violence it inspired, were shocking to African Americans.<sup>3</sup> In fact, this film was a catalyst for African American action against destructive image-making. What was needed was the creation of positive public images about African Americans to counteract the negative ones. Emmett J. Scott, who worked closely with Booker T. Washington, cultivated wealthy financiers in Chicago and individuals in the movie industry in California about making a film rebuttal to *The Birth of a Nation* (Cripps 2007, 135). One of the first and most significant films produced by this movement for cultural rebuttal was *The Birth of a Race*, whose first draft was based on Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery* (Cripps 2007, 143). This foray into filmmaking was an example of the political strategies that Du Bois would later propose in his 1926 “Criteria of Negro Art” and Alain Locke in his

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<sup>3</sup> For more information on *The Birth of a Nation*, see McEwan 2015.

1928 “Art or Propaganda?” Locke explained the importance of positive aesthetic images for minority groups this way:

The sense of inferiority must be innerly compensated, self-conviction must supplant self-justification and in the dignity of this attitude a convinced minority must confront a condescending majority. Art cannot completely accomplish this, but I believe it can lead the way. Our espousal of art thus becomes no mere idle acceptance of “art for art’s sake,” or cultivation of the last decadences of the over-civilized, but rather a deep realization of the fundamental purpose of art and of its function as a tap root of vigorous, flourishing living (Locke 219).

In other words, Locke saw positive, affirming artistic images of African Americans as central to helping African Americans see themselves as worthy in a world that consistently told them they were not, and to conveying that fundamental worth to majority-white audiences.

Du Bois, too, believed that it was important to convey positive images of African Americans to the public. *Crisis*, the publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which Du Bois helped to establish, became in 1909 a critical vehicle for propagating a new image of African Americans, that of the New Negro. The publication was “productive of aesthetic practices and aesthetic artifacts that encouraged new ways of being black in the world,” Eric Watts writes (Watts 2012). This effort by Du Bois and the NAACP was fundamentally political: “month after month Du Bois spat fire and poured molten lava onto [the *Crisis* ] pages and into coffee shops and barbershops to cultivate and publicize an emerging black communal politics organized and mobilized by the New Negro.” It was a vehicle for training “political agents” for the NAACP’s mission (Watts 2012, 19–21). The words African Americans read in the *Crisis* were intended to strengthen their self-image and embolden them to undertake varying levels of political action.

Much has changed since the time of the New Negro Movement, as African American men are now occasionally seen in major roles in expensive Hollywood productions. It is, however, a sad reality that African American men tend to be cast for some roles and not others.



The roles African American men win are the same roles that the news media frames them as occupying. They often call upon “stereotypes of irresponsible and irrepressible black sexuality and criminality [and present] one-dimensional characters who lack the rounded complexity of real people” (Entman and Rojecki 2000, 182). Critics point to the black-white male buddy films of the 1980s and 1990s as being especially guilty of exploiting regressive themes. In *Lethal Weapon* and *48 Hours*, both big box office hits, the African American characters were simply sidekicks and comic relief for the white leading male hero characters (Entman and Rojecki 2000, 183; Locke 2009, 57). And even when African American men are cast in leading roles, their characters are still burdened with stereotypical, negative traits, especially lack of sexual restraint, or an inability to follow white middle-class moral codes. Consider *Independence Day*, the highest-grossing film of 1996 and one of the biggest hits of all time. Although Will Smith’s character, Captain Steve Hiller, is the hero of the film, “he continues to be marked by stereotypically negative ‘Black’ traits as well. Despite his presumed college education (as an Air Force officer) he still speaks in ghetto slang. On the personal side, Steve . . . lives with a woman to whom he’s not married” (Locke 2009, 184). These movies’ characterization of African American men thus “tracks with a general conclusion that Black characters are more likely on average to violate what might be thought of as middle-class conventions of sobriety and restraint. White audiences know from the news that Black women bear children out of wedlock at comparatively high rates, reinforcing such impressions,” and it is therefore conceivable that “Hollywood depicts Blacks as more sexually driven on average than whites . . . because filmmakers assume audiences expect this of Black characters” (Locke 2009, 199).

In addition to portraying black men as violating middle-class sexual mores, many films portray African American men as violent criminals. These casting decisions create a strong

associational linkage between the fictional characters on the big screen and those who are shown on the news each night, perhaps serving to confirm viewers' preexisting stereotypes (Pines 1995, 69). Many people believe African American men are the greatest perpetrators of crimes, especially violent crimes, but these beliefs are incorrect. African American men do not make up a majority of those arrested for violent crimes. In 1997, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, 41 percent of those arrested for violent crimes were black and 57 percent were white. Yet, a survey found that a plurality of respondents believed that blacks accounted for more than 60 percent of violent crime (Entman and Rojecki 2000, 78).

These images—black men as lazy, comic, unintelligent, licentious, criminal, violent—exist in the minds of many people who have influence in the lives of young African American men, and are reinforced by media portrayals. Because many potential supporters, counselors, and mentors have been bombarded with these images, they may be less motivated to encourage young African American men to pursue academic and personal success, or to invest time and energy in those already on the path to success. This loss of educational and mentoring opportunities, which compounds from an early age, has deleterious effects on the lives of African American men over time: “Black children—especially boys, no matter their family income—receive less attention, harsher punishment and lower marks in school than their white counterparts, from kindergarten through college” (Merida 2007, 33). Across the country, “black boys make up 8.5 percent of public school enrollment but 22 percent of students expelled” (Merida 2007, 38). This disparity of treatment begins in kindergarten, where “black boys are expelled at three times the rate of white children” (Merida 2007, 33). And many police officers are conditioned to believe that African American men are dangerous—a belief that manifests in most dangerous ways.

White people are not the only ones who are influenced by these media-produced images. Many African American men also consume negative images from television, movies, and other media and internalize the images with which they are bombarded. Their internalization of negative images compounds “the self-doubts and suspicions that are the living legacy of more than three hundred years of legal and de facto discrimination” (Merida 2007, 24). Thernstrom and Thernstrom describe how some whites become visibly fearful when they are approached by African American men on the street. The same phenomenon exists for some encounters among African Americans, demonstrating that the negative images have been internalized. Merida reports an episode when an African American man who was stopped at a signal light in Washington locked his car door at the sight of another African American man walking in the direction of his car. The driver, a fifty-five-year old man who headed a research institute at an Ivy League university, was embarrassed when the other man, incredulous, screamed at him after he heard the click of the door lock. “I am a black man,” the offender noted, “and I know what it is like to have people respond to me with fear. Yet I did this. He assumed my response was to him as an individual, but it was directed to him as part of a larger group” (Merida 2007, 11). This incident, which is not unique, illustrates the enormous power of the media’s framing of African American men as violent criminals.

Hutchinson indicts the corporate-controlled media, saying it “pounds, twists, and slants all of these stereotypes into sensational headlines, soundbites, and doctored photos, and dumps them back on the public as fact” (Hutchinson 1994, 15). But it is not only white-produced negative images that influence African American men’s views of themselves. Some of these negative images are self-produced through popular media, especially movies and music. For example, some forms of rap music are especially known for glorifying the “thug life.” Many

music videos depict violence, drugs, even rape alongside flashy cars, almost-naked women, and lots of cash. Hutchinson indicts African Americans for being seduced by commercialism to create negative images of African Americans:

To secure a big Hollywood contracts and media stardom, some young black filmmakers say the “boyz N the hood” are gang bangers, drive-by shooters, dope dealers, and carjackers. To hustle mega record deals and concert bookings, some rappers and comedians say black men are “niggers” and, more incredibly “bitches.” To nail down book contracts and TV talk show appearances, some black feminist writers say black men are sexist exploiters or, put less charitably, “dogs.” (Hutchinson 1994, 15)

Similarly, bell hooks points out that “Opportunistic longings for fame, wealth, and power now lead many black critical thinkers, writers, academics and intellectuals to participate in the production and marketing of black culture in ways that are complicit with the existing oppressive structure” (hooks 2004, 148). She refers to this complicity, in which artists accept the cultural notion that blackness can only be authentic if it is representative of the underclass, as the “commodification of blackness” and “opportunistic materialism” (hooks 2004, 147). In this situation, successful African Americans, including those born into affluence, must pretend to be “down”—must create music, movies, or other works of art that comport with “the overseer’s vision of blackness” (hooks 2004, 147).

Another issue is the notion of “respect,” which is a recurring theme in rap music and in black popular culture. This demand for respect is not surprising, given the long history of the denial of respect for African American men, but as one interviewee for *Being a Black Man* worried, perhaps some young men “have gone too far—they’re getting themselves killed over nonsense” (Merida 2007, 25). Language- and image-constructed realities have serious consequences, as exists in the reality of police officers seeing black men as dangerous. Rap music has a major influence on the way many young African American men see themselves, even if their own lives have very little in common with the lives that are narrated in the music.

Much has written about the effects of these negative media portrayals and about how these young men cope with the challenges they face. Their assumption of various self-defensive patterns of behavior, such as avoiding participation in any activities that can be seen as uncool, can significantly affect performance in school. This phenomenon is documented by Richard Majors and Janet Bilson in their 1992 *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*:

Being cool, or adopting a cool pose as we call it, is a strategy that many black males use to make sense of their everyday lives. We believe that coolness as a strength may be linked to pride, self-respect, and masculinity. At the same time, coolness as a mask may contribute to dropping out of school, getting into trouble, sliding into drug and alcohol abuse, and being sucked into delinquent or criminal street gangs. (Majors and Bilson 1992, xi)

According to Majors and Bilson, the activities that may be shunned as uncool include studying, certain extracurricular activities, and relating positively to teachers (Majors and Bilson 1992, 46). The authors address other self-defensive techniques such as shucking (63), black humor (63–65), inversion (65–66), nonverbal styling (72–75), clothes (80–82), hustling (87), playing the dozens (91–92, 97–100, 101–102), insults (92–93), rhyming and expressiveness (95), and ripping, or zeroing in on personal defects (96) as elements of the cool pose. Many if not all of these devices are employed in classrooms at one time or another. All can have destructive results.

The authors examine how the assumption of “unique patterns of speech, walk, and demeanor” (2) that are culturally agreed upon as cool help young African American men achieve self-respect and gain respect from others in their communities. All of these matters of image, from internal coping to outward expression, impact the academic achievement of young African American men. They are matters that individuals and institutions responsible for black male achievement must confront.

Additionally, according to Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson, a presumption that African Americans are intellectually inferior produces low cultural expectations. These expectations are internalized by African American students and profoundly affect how they prepare for and take tests. This phenomenon, known as stereotype threat, was documented by Steele and Aronson in 1995, and has become a well-accepted explanation for the difficulties that some African Americans have with academic performance relative to their white counterparts (see also Steele 2010).

A central question this dissertation examines is this: If language can be used to create negative images of African American men, can it also be used to construct positive realities? According to Mark Anthony Neal, the efforts of Du Bois and Locke were precisely a form of positive image-making: “Image-making among elite black men dates back to the early twentieth century when black men like W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and others began to circulate terms like the ‘talented tenth’ and the ‘new negro’ in an effort to challenge racist depictions of black folk, and black men in particular. These were ‘positive’ and ‘strong’ constructions of black masculinity that would directly counter images of the shuffling Sambo or blackface caricatures of black men by white minstrel performers” (Neal 2006, 15). As cultural critic Clyde Taylor wrote in the catalog for a Whitney Museum exhibition, *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, “Black men are densely mythogenic, the object of layered fictions produced by others. . . . And like other mythogenic people, Black men are, as in self-defense, prolific generators of self-descriptive legends” (Taylor 1994, 169).

This dissertation examines how Benjamin Mays used language to motivate his students, countering low societal expectations, low levels of respect from others, and other factors that might invite destructive coping patterns. Mays projected faith in God, a sense of larger purpose,

self-respect, the importance of hard work, and high expectations. In the following chapters, I examine the violence that African American men have faced through the years to provide context for the challenges that African American men continue to face, and I survey the speeches and writings of Benjamin Mays to examine how he countered the effects of this violence and other obstacles. I draw out his major themes and values. I use Kenneth Burke's theories and methods of rhetorical criticism to analyze how Mays achieved the effects he did in his speeches and writings. Finally, I suggest a rhetorical strategy, based on Mays' strategies, aimed at fostering future successes for young African American men.

## **CHAPTER 2: TRAGIC REALITIES: A HISTORY OF OBSTACLES BLACK MEN HAVE FACED**

As the previous chapter argued, current-day American culture frames African American men in a negative light, which influences how they are viewed by many Americans and how they view themselves. But where did these images originate, and what purpose do they serve? This chapter traces the brutal history of violence and exploitation of black men in America, and examines how the legacies of slavery persists into the modern day. The background offered in this chapter is the historical context in which Benjamin Mays was working.

### **Slavery**

African men and women were purchased as property, bound in chains, transported across the Atlantic in dysentery-inducing conditions, and coerced, using extreme violence—beatings, mutilations, and humiliations—to work, primarily in cotton fields, where they were treated as subhumans, as machines. Berlin, Favreau, and Miller note that the history of slavery is “a tale of maniacal sadism by the frenzied slaveowners who lashed, traumatized, raped, and killed their slaves” (Berlin, Favreau, and Miller 1998, xxii). They argue that the sadistic acts of brutality directed toward slaves were both “systematic” and “commonplace.” They report, for example, that Virginia’s largest slave owner, Robert “King” Carter, successfully petitioned the court for permission to cut off the toes of his runaways, that William Byrd forced a slave who wet his bed to drink “a pint of piss,” and that Thomas Jefferson punished slaves with whom he was most upset by selling them away from their relatives (Berlin, Favreau, and Miller 1998, xxii-xxiii). These stories come from selections in the Federal Writers Project in the late 1930s and 1940s,



which recorded and took notes on interviews with thousands of former slaves. This project was undertaken when researchers realized that the men and women who had been enslaved were aging and dying. They would not be available indefinitely to describe “the conditions they faced, their oppressions, their resistance” (Berlin, Favreau, and Miller 1998, vii) and to counter the revisionist history being put forward by “white Northerners and white Southerners [who] began to depict slavery as a benign and even benevolent institution” (Berlin, Favreau, and Miller 1998, xiv.) The project records the abuses and the effects of slavery on people who lived it firsthand.

Yet even African Americans who did not experience slavery firsthand have been affected by its legacies. Du Bois asks in the 1930s, “What did it mean to be a slave? It is hard to imagine today. We think of oppression beyond all conception: cruelty, degradation, whipping, and starvation, the absolute negation of human rights” (DuBois [1935] 2017, 8). He continues, “It was in part psychological, the enforced personal feeling of inferiority, the calling of another Master; the standing with hat in hand. It was the hopelessness. . . . It was the defenselessness of family life. It was the submergence below the arbitrary will of any sort of individual” (DuBois [1935] 2017, 9). African Americans were traumatized by the history of slavery they had experienced.

The motivation for this entire brutal system was financial gain. To their owners, slaves were not human beings but property. They were to the plantation owners of the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth centuries what machines became to the factory owners of the twentieth century. Like factory owners, plantation owners endeavored to maximize their profits by limiting the costs of production, making a “determined effort to reduce black labor as nearly as possible to a condition of unlimited exploitation” (Du Bois 2017, 670). With “the black worker as founding stone of a new economic system” (DuBois [1935] 2017, 15), it was in the interest of

whites who owned farms, factories, and other commercial enterprises to do everything possible—both lawful and unlawful—to maintain the exploitation of blacks that enabled their economic advantage. Du Bois said to Congress,

Some planters held back their former slaves on their plantations by brute force. Armed bands of white men patrolled the county roads to drive back the Negroes wandering about. Dead bodies of murdered Negroes were found on and near the highways and byways. Gruesome reports came from the hospitals—reports of colored men and women whose ears had been cut off, whose skulls had been broken by blows, whose bodies had been slashed by knives or lacerated with scourges. A veritable reign of terror prevailed in many parts of the South. (DuBois [1935] 2017, 671)

White owners were willing to go to any lengths to maintain their investment and their labor force.

The brutality that the former slaves and their offspring endured did not end with President Lincoln’s signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 or the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1865. It continued through the next period, Reconstruction, and beyond, for during Reconstruction, whites who had been left destitute after the Civil War made an effective police force that returned ex-slaves to bondage. According to DuBois, “Slavery [had] bred in the poor white a dislike of Negro toil of all sorts. He never regarded himself as a laborer . . . If he had any ambition at all it was to become a planter and to own ‘niggers’. . . . Gradually the whole white South became an armed and commissioned camp to keep Negroes in slavery and kill the black rebel” (DuBois [1935] 2017, 12).

Another kind of slavery—a penal slavery, which, as the next section will show, paved the way for the modern system of mass incarceration—continued during and after Reconstruction. Douglas Blackmon illustrates the system with the following story. A twenty-two-year-old African American man, Green Cottingham, was arrested by the sheriff of Shelby County, Alabama. He was taken before the county judge and sentenced to thirty days of hard labor. He was unable to pay the fees to the sheriff, deputy, clerk of court, and (amazingly) the witnesses,

and his sentence was therefore increased sixfold. He was contracted by the county to the U.S. Steel Corporation to work off his sentence. He spent six long, hard months working inside a mine with a thousand other African American men digging and loading coal during the day. The subsidiary of U.S. Steel for which the convicted man worked paid the county twelve dollars per month toward his fines. The crime that had landed him in this predicament? Vagrancy, “a new and flimsy concoction dredged up from legal obscurity at the end of the nineteenth century by the state legislatures of Alabama and other Southern states” that punished one’s inability to prove at any given moment that he is employed (Blackmon 2009, 1–3). This practice continued for nearly fifty years after the Civil War (Blackmon 2009, 386), and it was not limited to counties leasing African American men to large corporations. Judges and sheriffs leased even larger numbers of these “convicts” to local farmers, and even to their neighbors and friends. In Alabama alone, says Blackmon, “hundreds of thousands of pages” of documents prove the arrest of thousands of African American men and the sale of their labor to mines, farms, factories, and work sites of just about every kind. According to Blackmon, “By 1900, the South’s judicial system had been totally transfigured to make one of its primary purposes the coercion of African Americans to comply with the social customs and labor demands of whites” (Blackmon 2009, 6–7). He suggests that even the intimidation and terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan and other white mobs paled in comparison to the official actions of governmental officials.

### **Jim Crow**

Whites could no longer legally own and control African Americans, but they could and did separate the races in all aspects of public life. In addition to the violence and trauma inflicted upon black men and women brought to America as slaves, post-Civil War blacks suffered under the public and private enforcement of discriminatory laws and policies that disadvantaged them

in areas such as housing, employment, education, and access to public accommodations. Mays and other people of his generation worked for racial equality and uplift were trying to counteract not only the traumatic legacy of the past but the deep inequity of the present.

The civil rights movement of the 1960s sought to change the housing, employment, and educational discrimination faced by African Americans, but these attempts to change the status quo of white supremacy triggered violence. In the 1960s alone, America witnessed the bombing of a black church in Birmingham, Alabama, that killed four African American girls (September 15, 1963); the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, who had sent three thousand federal troops to the University of Mississippi to enforce the admission of an African American student, James Meredith (November 22, 1963); the murder of three civil rights workers—James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, one African American and two white—in Mississippi (June 21, 1964); the beating of civil rights protesters marching across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, that was so brutal the event has since that day been remembered as “Bloody Sunday” (March 6, 1965); the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in Memphis (April 4, 1968); and the assassination only two months later of Attorney General and presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy (June 5, 1968).

This section examines the institutionalized (and often legally sanctioned) discrimination and racism that African Americans faced in the post-Reconstruction period in housing, employment, education, and criminal justice.

### **Discrimination in Housing**

For example, housing was deeply segregated, and this segregation was enforced both formally and informally. Opinion polls conducted in 1942 found that 84 percent of whites believed “there should be separate sections in towns and cities for Negroes to live in” (Allport

1958, 74). In 1962, 61 percent of whites believed “white people have a right to keep blacks out of their neighborhood if they want to, and blacks should respect that right” (Schuman 1993, 74–75). This means that during the period of DuBois’ writing and of Mays’ presidency at Morehouse, “there was widespread support among whites for racial discrimination in housing and for the systematic exclusion of blacks from white neighborhoods” (Massey and Denton 1993, 49). This preference was enforced by the same methods whites had used to impose their will on blacks since the start of slavery: violence (Brown et al. 2003, 91–92; Rothstein 2017, 139–151). In *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, Rothstein shows a striking photograph of a mob of white men—about one hundred of the six hundred men there can be seen in the picture—outside a house that an African American family had purchased in Levittown, Pennsylvania (Rothstein 2017, 114). This 1954 incident and many others show the type of intimidation by violence that whites used to keep African Americans out of segregated neighborhoods or to drive them out when they ventured in.

This type of violence was quite typical of Northern cities when African Americans tried to move into white neighborhoods. In Southern cities, which already had Jim Crow laws in effect, desegregation did not seem as likely or as threatening. Around 1910, African Americans had begun to gravitate toward cities—Southern cities like Atlanta and Northern cities like Chicago. In the South, Jim Crow laws already existed to keep African Americans “in their place,” but the political leaders of many Southern cities began to pass laws establishing separate neighborhoods along racial lines. By 1913, the Atlanta city council had passed such a law, and in 1920, the NAACP successfully appealed to a federal court to prevent Louisville, Kentucky, from implementing a new segregation law. Once these laws were deemed unconstitutional, however,

Southerners resorted to the same violent means of enforcement that their Northern brethren were using (Massey 2008, 60.)

As early as 1897, these violent tactics were being used in Chicago, where Mays spent several years in graduate school. In fact, the Hyde Park Improvement Protective Club (whose president was a prominent attorney) published a newsletter around 1907 promoting segregation. These intimidation tactics continued into the twentieth century, as white homeowners pressured African Americans to leave their neighborhoods and organized boycotts of merchants who did business with African Americans. Intimidation often took place with tacit police approval. According to Rothstein, “during much of the 20th century, police tolerance and promotion of cross burnings, vandalism, arson, and other violent acts to maintain residential segregation was systematic and nationwide” (Rothstein 2017, 143).

Between 1917 and 1921, 58 firebombings took place in Chicago. Nearly thirty of them occurred in the spring of 1919, when the powder keg of tensions created by the many violent attacks on African Americans and their property was finally ignited by the beating and drowning of an African American swimmer who had drifted toward a local whites-only beach (Rothstein 2017, 144). A similar spate of violence broke out after World War II. Between 1945 and 1950, 357 reported acts of violence were directed against African Americans who attempted to rent or buy homes in Chicago’s white neighborhoods. From 1944 to 1946 alone, there were forty-six attacks on African Americans’ homes, including twenty-nine firebombings, three of which resulted in deaths. The violence ratcheted up in the first ten months of 1947, when there were twenty-six firebombings. No arrests were made in any of these cases (Rothstein 2017, 143–145).

In 1951, an African American bus driver and Air Force veteran rented an apartment in the Chicago suburb of Cicero. The local police attempted to prevent him and his family from

occupying the apartment, threatening to arrest the parents if they moved in. The family would not be deterred, and police simply refused to check the violence directed toward the family by whites. After numerous smaller assaults on the property, about 4,000 people rioted, raiding the apartment, destroying furniture and fixtures, throwing the family's belongings out onto the lawn, and setting them ablaze. Once again, there were no arrests. An article in *Time* magazine reported that the police "acted like ushers politely handling the overflow at a football stadium," according to Rothstein (145).

While Rothstein suggests that it is not completely fair to hold the government accountable for every action (or refusal to act) by racist police officers, these officers' departments were aware of their lack of action against race-based violence. This means that the racist policemen were not rogue actors, but were carrying out what were effectively governmental policies, some written and some unwritten, and violating the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the US Constitution (Rothstein 2017, 142).

Because previous laws prohibiting housing discrimination had gone unenforced, a major focus of the civil rights movement in the 1960s was the enactment of a new federal law with enforcement powers. Shortly after the end of the Civil War, Congress had passed the Civil Rights Act of 1866, which provided that all men and women born in the United States were citizens and had equal rights to participate in real estate transactions. The major shortcoming of the 1866 law was that it could only be operationalized when aggrieved parties sued violators in court. The reality of the 1860s (and of many decades that followed) was that African Americans had no practical ability to bring successful legal action against whites. Judges and juries were all white and sided with white defendants, if they bothered to hear complaints at all. Therefore, civil rights activists advocated for the enactment of a new equal housing law that would have real

enforcement powers. The result of their efforts was the Fair Housing Act, or Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act of 1968. The law, passed just one week after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., has been used to nullify restrictive race-based covenants and confront mortgage companies' and insurers' practice of redlining—charging some people higher prices or by denying mortgages or insurance coverage for homes in certain areas, a practice that creates de facto segregation. To date, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development and the US Department of Justice have undertaken thousands of enforcement actions, and victims of housing discrimination have been paid hundreds of millions of dollars in restitution (Henderson 2018, xiii-xx).

The practice of redlining has been in existence since the 1930s, when the quasi-governmental Home Owner's Loan Corporation began to draft maps of American neighborhoods, color-coding them in terms of their favorability for the granting of mortgages. Neighborhoods that were home to African Americans were typically outlined in red to make it easy for lenders to identify them for the denial of loans (Badger 2015). Although the passage of the Fair Housing Act ended legalized segregation of the “no blacks allowed” variety, it did not end the practice of redlining by mortgage lenders and banks, which continues to this day. The *New York Times* reported on a study from the Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR) examining 31 million mortgage records, which was published on February 15, 2018. The CIR study found that African-Americans and Latinos in many cities around the United States were being denied conventional mortgages, while whites with the same or similar qualifications were being approved. In 2015 and 2016, *ten times* more conventional mortgages were approved for whites than African Americans in Philadelphia, although roughly equal numbers of African American and whites live there (*New York Times* 2018). In the same editorial, the *New York*



*Times* reported that a 2015 study in the city of Richmond, Virginia, found that African Americans were less likely to be approved for home loans, regardless of their incomes. In fact, upper-income African Americans were even more likely to be denied loans than similarly situated whites, and acceptance rates were closer to parity for lower-income African Americans and similarly economically situated whites (*New York Times* 2018). And in 2015, “one of the largest redlining complaints” that the US Department of Housing and Urban Development had ever settled punished Associated Bank for discriminating against qualified African Americans and Hispanics in Wisconsin, Illinois, and Minnesota between 2008 to 2010. Associated Bank agreed to make amends by financing nearly \$200 million in home loans in majority-minority neighborhoods over a three-year period, providing nearly \$10 million in down payment assistance over that same period, and opening branches in minority neighborhoods. The efforts of the federal government to identify and punish this form of discrimination are welcome and important, but the commonplace, legal acts of redlining from nearly a century ago continue to affect families today. Prior mortgage denials reduced many families’ ability to build wealth that could be passed on to succeeding generations, limiting the successors’ resources for down payments of their own (Badger 2015). This lasting effect of past discrimination was referenced by Barak Obama in his “More Perfect Union” speech in 2008 (Obama 2008).

These efforts to end segregation and to enact laws against housing discrimination and punish redlining were crucial, because housing has a major impact on many other aspects of people’s lives. It has been shown that individuals’ zip codes predict with great accuracy health, mortality, educational attainment, income, safety, access to quality healthcare, and even proximity to fresh produce at a full-service grocery store (Henderson 2018, xx).

## **Discrimination in Employment**

Like housing, employment was also deeply segregated, and another of the main objectives of the civil rights movement was to persuade Congress to pass legislation prohibiting race-based discrimination in employment. This effort began in 1941, when A. Philip Randolph, head of the first predominantly African American labor union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, threatened a major demonstration in Washington, DC, to protest discrimination in hiring in the war-related industries. In response, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Fair Employment Practices Commission. Eventually, efforts to create a national employment discrimination law were rewarded. The 1964 Civil Rights Act, signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson, included a ban on racial discrimination in employment in Title VII (Brown et al. 2003, 164).

It should be noted, however, that employment laws have also been used to help white workers maintain advantage over African Americans in employment. For example, to protect their jobs against competition, whites have advocated for and seen enacted various minimum wage laws. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, young African Americans had lower unemployment rates than whites of the same age group, but after the minimum wage was significantly raised, the black youth unemployment rate began to increase to a multiple of the white youth rate (Keyes 1982, 402). The effects of minimum wage laws on African American employment may be thought to be incidental to the realities of the market, but a quick look at the legislative history of another wage law, the Davis-Bacon Act, reveals that it was passed for the explicit purpose of limiting African Americans' ability to compete with white workers. During the Depression, the federal government undertook numerous public construction projects to stimulate economic activity and provide jobs. However, white workers in some Northern cities

saw limited benefit from the new jobs projects, because some workers, many of them African Americans pursuing opportunities outside of the violently discriminatory South, agreed to work for less than the customary wage of local white workers. To protect the local workers, Congress passed the Davis-Bacon Act, which sets the prevailing, or usual, wage in a particular geographic area as the required minimum wage on federally financed or federally assisted construction projects (Keyes 1982, 404). Congress passed Davis-Bacon, and President Herbert Hoover signed it on March 3, 1931. During the legislative debate, Congressman Miles C. Allgood, an Alabama Democrat, complained, “That contractor has cheap colored labor that he transports, and he puts them in cabins, and it is labor of that sort that is in competition with white labor throughout the country” (Bernstein 2001, 78). Allgood’s remarks represent the views of other supporters of the legislation. Many members of Congress wanted to ensure that federal projects secured for their districts would benefit their constituents. The law had the desired result, effectively blocking African American men from employment on federal construction jobs (Bernstein 2001, 78–80). With this avenue closed, African American men, especially in the South, faced continuing employment discrimination.

Although the 1964 Civil Rights Act banned employment discrimination, it did not end completely. It simply became more subtle. A 2004 study sent identical resumes, some with white-sounding names and some with African American-sounding names, to employers seeking help in the Chicago and Boston areas. The researchers found that the resumes with white-sounding names got 50 percent more callbacks for interviews, regardless of industry, size of employer, or occupation. They conclude that “Differential treatment by race still appears to still be prominent in the U. S. labor market” (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004).

## **Discrimination in Education**

African Americans also faced intense discrimination in the area of education, but the history of African American education through the middle of the twentieth century is not only a recounting of horrors. It is also a story of numerous remarkable achievements by African Americans—including those of Mays and Morehouse. White people had tried to deny African Americans education since they were brought to the colonies. Slaves, for example, were forbidden to learn to read (Hildreth 1853, 85–88). After Emancipation, many freed people believed that education would be key to their survival and success in the post-slavery world. States, however, had little motivation to educate African Americans, so African Americans began to educate themselves.

Indeed, blacks and white supporters of higher education for African Americans had begun to establish colleges in the North before the end of the Civil War. In 1837, Cheyney University was founded as the Institute for Colored Youth with a ten-thousand-dollar gift from a Quaker philanthropist, Richard Humphreys, who was saddened by the plight of so many descendants of Africa. He was interested in creating an institution “to instruct the descendants of the African race in school learning, in the various branches of the mechanic arts, trades and agriculture, in order to prepare and fit and qualify them to act as teachers” (Cheyney University n.d). In 1854, Lincoln University was founded by a Presbyterian minister and his wife, the Reverend Mr. John Miller Dickey and Sarah Emlen Cresson, as Ashmun Institute, an all-male college. It received its charter from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania on April 29, 1854, marking the founding of the first institution to provide higher education in the arts and sciences for African Americans (Lincoln University n.d.). In 1856, Wilberforce University, the first co-educational college for African Americans, was established in Ohio (HBCU Connect 2005). It

was not until 1881 that Booker T. Washington founded Tuskegee University in Alabama (Tuskegee University n.d).

Washington's alma mater, Hampton Institute (now called Hampton University), had been established informally in 1861, when the most senior officer at Fort Monroe, a Union Army outpost in Hampton, Virginia, decreed that any escaping slaves who reached Union-controlled territory would be protected from their masters. This pronouncement meant that many slaves rushed to the fort in search of freedom. Even though a Virginia law, enacted in 1831, forbade the teaching of slaves and even free blacks, Major General Benjamin Butler ordered that they receive education (Hampton University n.d.). Hampton Institute was informally begun with about twenty people under an oak tree, which still stands today as a focal point on the Hampton campus. To continue this work, in 1863, Butler founded the Butler School for Negro Children to teach students reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, and grammar, as well as various housekeeping skills. On April 1, 1868, Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute opened. Its mission statement made it clear that they aimed to teach young African Americans self-sufficiency, not offer charity. The school sought both to equip its students with the tools they needed to succeed in white-dominated society and to develop their character. The school aimed to uplift the entire race by training talented students, who would then pass along the benefits of their education to their people—an approach that can be seen as an early forerunner of the talented tenth philosophy.

Another noteworthy African American educational institution is Atlanta University, where Du Bois taught history, sociology, and economics from 1897 to 1910. Atlanta University, which was founded in 1865 by the American Missionary Association and later supported by the Freedman's Bureau, was the first black graduate school. By the late 1870s, the university's

priority was to do what most black colleges in the South were doing at the time—prepare African American men and women to work as teachers and librarians. To expand its academic reach, Atlanta University first joined forces with Morehouse College and Spelman College, and later with Clark College, Morris Brown College, and the Gammon Theological Seminary, to establish the Atlanta University Center. The alliance was formally ratified by the boards of the affiliate institutions in 1957 (Anderson 1903, 616).

This glowing assessment of Atlanta University first appeared in *Gunton's Magazine* and was reprinted in *Public Opinion* in 1903:

The standard of the Atlanta University is as high as that of the state university at Athens, and in the departments of sociology and technical training it is higher. The curriculum embraces a college course of four years, a three years' preparatory course, a normal course of four years, and an English high-school course of three years. (Anderson 1903, 620)

Anderson argues here that Atlanta University was as good as the University of Georgia overall, and better in some departments. She goes on to say that the combination of schools that came to make up the Atlanta University Center made the city of Atlanta the center of Negro education for the world (Anderson 1903, 620).

The folks at Howard University would have disagreed. In his presidential inauguration speech in 1927, Mordecai W. Johnson noted the number and quality of Howard's African American faculty:

There has been a decided increase in the number of Negro scholars gathered on the several faculties, it being the purpose of the original white founders of the university not merely to train Negro men and women for practical life, but to train educational leaders who participate with them on a basis of uncondescending equality in the whole enterprise of Negro education. Here during the years has gathered the largest body of intelligent and capable Negro scholars to be found connected with any enterprise of its kind in the civilized world. (Williams 2009, 41)

Johnson announced that Howard, with its outstanding scholars in the disciplines of sociology, economics, biology, anthropology, history, social philosophy, and religion, would be the

foremost resource for solutions to the problems faced by African Americans and other disenfranchised peoples around the world (Williams 2009, 42).<sup>4</sup> All of the African American colleges and universities established during this period shared the important mission of reducing the disparity in educational opportunities available to African Americans. These colleges and universities aimed to increase the number of African Americans with formal education—something that few whites saw as an issue.

However, despite African Americans' success in establishing black higher educational institutions, secondary and primary education were still incredibly unequal. White-controlled governmental entities withheld adequate resources from black schools in cities and towns through the South, reducing their ability to successfully teach their students. A major priority of the civil rights movement was to end the “separate but equal” policy that kept public schools in the South segregated. Desegregation would be the only way African Americans could gain access to the highest quality education from elementary school through college.

The 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* finally ruled that school segregation was illegal. The decision was actually a decision on five similar cases, two from states where the Court's ruling would have major consequences: Clarendon County, South Carolina, and Prince Edward County, Virginia. These cases were especially significant because African Americans made up 70 percent of the population of Clarendon County and 45 percent of the population in Prince Edward Country (Klarman 2007, 95).

Many people feared that a judicial high court decision against segregation would radicalize Southern politics and make schools targets for violent reactions from white

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<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Mays was an important part of Johnson's plan at Howard. Mays chaired the Religion Department, which Johnson believed to be central in his strategy of service to the African American community. He viewed the black church as the community's most powerful institution and the need to prepare competent leaders of the church to be critical. Mays' time in this position presumably prepared him for the presidency of Morehouse.

supremacists (Klarman 2007, 2). Some civil rights leaders, including the NAACP's general counsel, Thurgood Marshall, were concerned that bringing five school segregation cases in one raised the stakes too far, and that a majority of the justices were not yet ready to invalidate school segregation entirely (Klarman 2007, 95). Nonetheless, Marshall and others argued their case in 1952 and reargued it in 1953. On May 17, 1954, the Court handed down a unanimous decision invalidating racial segregation in public schools. Segregated public schools were "inherently unequal," which violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment (Klarman 2007, 96).

The 9–0 decision masked the enormous dissension that the Court had to overcome to reach unanimity (Klarman 2007, 96). The justices were heavily split in the initial conference over the case. Some justices saw the practical problems desegregation would impose (including the fear that some states would simply discontinue public education entirely), some seemed to believe that there was no justification in the Constitution or in precedent to desegregate schools, and some seemed to personally prefer segregation.<sup>5</sup> Yet in the end, these nine men voted to end educational segregation in the United States.

As the justices had predicted, the transition to desegregated schools was difficult and violent. Despite the legal victory in the Supreme Court, school desegregation would require more sacrifices, more violence, and more humiliations for African Americans. The opposition of the people of the deep South to desegregation is apparent in the political career of George C. Wallace, who campaigned for Governor of Alabama in 1962 with speeches written by a Ku Klux Klan leader: hard-line, defiant statements against desegregation. These speeches resonated strongly enough with white voters to help him win election with the largest vote count of any

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<sup>5</sup> See Klarman 2007, 90–102, for details of each justice's position in the initial conference.



gubernatorial candidate in Alabama history. In his inaugural address, on January 14, 1963, Wallace made pointed reference to the fact that he was taking the oath of office in the exact same place at the Alabama State Capital where Jefferson Davis swore an oath to become President of the Confederate States of America. The part of his address that was most remembered was this statement: “In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth, I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny, and I say segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever” (Torricelli 1999, 228).

One of the biggest tests of Wallace’s commitment to fight desegregation involved the desegregation of the University of Alabama. He announced at the outset that he would never allow African Americans to enter the university, but after many months of heated contestation between his administration and the federal government (the “tyranny” he referred to in his inaugural address), who controlled more federal troops than he could counter, Wallace stepped aside and allowed two African Americans to enroll. One of the students soon withdrew, but on May 30, 1965, Vivian Malone became the first African American student to graduate from the University of Alabama.

Virtually the same scene was playing out at the University of Mississippi, where on September 20, 1962, Governor Ross Barnett defied a federal court order and blocked the admission of James Meredith. Four days later, the university agreed to admit Meredith, but Barnett’s Lieutenant Governor, Paul Johnson, prevented him from enrolling. On September 28 and 29, respectively, Barnett and Johnson were found in contempt of court. On September 30, Meredith was escorted onto campus and 3,000 federal troops stood guard as rioting began. At the end of the following academic year, Meredith became the first African American to receive a

bachelor's degree from Ole Miss. In 1966, Meredith was shot by a sniper—not fatally—while participating in a voting rights march between Memphis, Tennessee, and Jackson, Mississippi.

All over the South, similar clashes occurred, with state and local political leaders refusing to follow court orders to desegregate public schools. A clash that saw major news coverage occurred in 1957, when nine African American students attempted to attend Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. One year after the *Brown* decision, the Supreme Court had heard additional arguments and decided that their previous ruling need not take effect immediately but could be implemented “with all deliberate speed.” This ambiguous phrase enabled lower courts and local governments to delay, in some case for many years (Fitzgerald 2007, 21). In fact, ten years after the *Brown* decision, fewer than one percent of African American children were attending previously all-white schools. (Fitzgerald 2007, 22). Virgil Blossom, the superintendent in Little Rock, Arkansas, had implemented a plan to integrate the schools in phases. In the 1957–58 school year—a full three years after the ruling—the high schools were to be integrated, then junior high schools, followed by elementary schools, with the system to be completely integrated by 1964. African Americans thought that this plan was more “deliberate” than was reasonable, so the NAACP endorsed a plan to integrate faster. In March of 1957, the US Court of Appeals had heard from the NAACP's lawyer, Wiley Branton; the court had also heard from the police chief and the school board in Little Rock that the court's order to integrate could be carried out without violence or any other trouble. The court thus ruled that Little Rock could not delay any longer. Unexpectedly, Orval E. Faubus, who wanted to win a third term as governor, decided to take a stand against integration with this ruling. He had built a positive reputation on civil rights—he had appointed several African Americans to state office and had seen Arkansas desegregate more of its public schools than eleven other Southern states combined (Fitzgerald

2007, 26)—but he changed his posture when he became aware of polls indicating that 78 percent of Arkansas voters were opposed to integration (Fitzgerald 2007, 28). The governor testified that he knew of plans for violent acts, and the court therefore once again agreed to a delay (Fitzgerald 2007, 28), but Branton and Marshall prevailed upon the court to have the integration order enforced. Faubus called up 300 National Guard troops, supposedly to “keep the peace.” The troops were buttressed by as many as two thousand whites, who assembled outside the school to prevent the African American students from entering (Fitzgerald 2007, 29–31). Organizers called African American students to inform them that they should delay their start of school, but Elizabeth Eckford did not receive the call. Eckford, then sixteen years old, was the only African American student to arrive at Central on the morning of September 4, 1957. When she saw the National Guard troops, she thought they were there to protect her, but it turned out they were there to prevent her entry.

Elizabeth assumed that the soldiers were there to offer protection for her and for Central High’s other black pupils. Believing that one of the guardsmen had directed her to go to a particular entrance, she walked down the street between a hostile crowd of whites and the guards. She tried twice to cross the National Guard lines, but was refused access to the school. In the meantime, segregationist whites closed in around her, shoving and yelling epithets. One woman urged her to “go back where you came from,” while others cried “Lynch her! Lynch her!” The frightened girl made her way to a bus stop, where a Guardsman ordered the crowd away [so she could escape safely by bus]. (Fitzgerald 2007, 2)

Elizabeth Eckford’s ordeal received worldwide publicity. The picture of Central High School student Hazel Bryan, her face contorted with hate, taunting a frightened but dignified Eckford, became a national and international symbol for racial politics in Little Rock. An editorial in the *Arkansas Gazette* said that the picture of Eckford in front of “the shouting white girl with her pretty face distorted by unreasoning hate and fear” spoke for itself (Anderson 2010, 2).

Eckford remembers the occasion this way: “My knees started to shake all of a sudden, and I wondered whether I could make it to the center entrance a block away. It was the longest

block I ever walked in my life” (Fitzgerald 2007, 10). This was a goal of the segregationists: to make life untenable for the African American children who would dare impose themselves in the privileged schools that white people had reserved for their own children. Central High School “was a big, beautiful school that took up two whole city blocks. It had five floors of classrooms, marble staircases, and a fountain in the entrance. More importantly, it had all the latest lab equipment and brand new textbooks” (Fitzgerald 2007, 32). The mobs were there to protect what they believed was rightfully theirs and for their exclusive enjoyment. They became so vicious that President Dwight D. Eisenhower federalized the Arkansas National Guard and sent in troops from the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division of the US Army. (Anderson 2010, 3–4). With the troops in place, a group of African American students, who came to be known as the Little Rock Nine, finally started school for good on September 25. Eight of them lasted the full year. This marked a milestone, but the fight was far from over. Little Rock, with federal troops in its high school, became a center of attention for whites who opposed what they believed was an unlawful intrusion by the federal government into the affairs of Southern states. In contrast, African American and civil rights leaders continued to push for total integration (Anderson 2010, 2–4).

These incidents took place during the period Mays was at Morehouse. He was undoubtedly influenced by them and needed to interpret them for his students and others. Remarkably, however, I found no direct reference to any of these incidents in his speeches. His general response to the various fights for school integration was to argue that even when white colleges became accessible to African Americans, a need would continue to exist for black colleges. He spoke of the virtues of black colleges and the need for them to improve their quality in order to be competitive in the hoped-for days of integration. Although *Brown v. Board of Education* made segregation illegal, it did not repair the problems caused by years of segregation

and underfunding—problems that still affect students today. In the current political climate, schools are slowly re-segregating, now under the guise of vouchers or school choice systems.

### **Discrimination in Criminal Justice**

Although the civil rights movement had great successes, passing legislation that removed legal discrimination in the areas of housing and employment and bringing court cases that desegregated education, structural and institutional racism that exploits African continues. In fact, some people have said that criminal justice policies and administration in the present-day United States constitute a new Jim Crow era. Michelle Alexander has argued that mass incarceration in the United States today is “a stunningly comprehensive and well-disguised system of racialized social control that functions in a manner strikingly similar to Jim Crow” (Alexander 2010, 4). Alexander argues that this system creates a *racial caste*, or a “stigmatized racial group locked into an inferior position by law and custom. . . . Jim Crow and slavery were caste systems. So is our current system of mass incarceration” (Alexander 2010, 12). Like Jim Crow, the current system of mass incarceration segregates African Americans in prisons and ghettos and restricts African Americans’ opportunities to work, vote, and serve on juries, and it limits their access to quality housing, quality education, and public services. Or, as critical race scholar Marcus Bell puts it,

Whereas the old Jim Crow was principally about stratifying people based on their race, the new Jim Crow stratifies people based on their criminal status. That is, access to employment, housing, the franchise, and public assistance, to name but a few, are all, to some degree, predicated upon your status as a felon or non-felon. Given the aforementioned racially desperate nature of mass incarceration, the deleterious effect of a criminal record reproduces racial inequality in ways that are consistent with Jim Crow. It is these restrictions on personal behavior and individual liberties—where you can live, where you can work, if you can vote—that led Alexander to compare the impact of contemporary criminal justice policies to those outcomes under the old system of Jim Crow. (Bell 2017, 172)

Bell, like Alexander, sees mass incarceration as serving as a proxy for racial caste, marking one's status—one's fitness for the benefits of citizenship—indelibly. Alexander similarly notes that the stigma of being a felon has replaced the stigma of being African American: "As a criminal, you have scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow. We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it" (Alexander 2010, 2). Both scholars point out that racism has not been eradicated. It has simply gone underground and been encoded in criminal status.

This new Jim Crow of mass incarceration was largely brought about by the government's War on Drugs. Indeed, the history of the effects of the War on Drugs reads like a recapitulation of the stories of slavery and of Jim Crow. President Richard Nixon's announcement in June of 1971 of a War on Drugs, which he asserted were "public enemy number one," was, according to Alexander, a rhetorical strategy aimed at ingratiating Nixon with poor and working-class whites, who had accepted as true the argument that federal spending on welfare and other programs unfairly benefited undeserving African Americans. In his 1980 campaign, presidential candidate Ronald Reagan continued this theme, condemning "welfare queens" and "criminal predators." Reagan's racialized appeal, which prominently featured a promise to be "tough on crime," resulted in the eighth-largest electoral victory in the nation's history, and his 1984 re-election was the fourth-largest electoral victory, garnering 97.58 percent of the electoral vote. His electoral strategy clearly worked. President Reagan lived up to his campaign pledge by announcing his War on Drugs in October 1982 and increasing the Federal Bureau of Investigation's drug-crime-fighting budget from \$38 million to \$181 million before the end of his first term. This increase was on top of a Drug Enforcement Administration budget increase from \$86 million to more than a billion dollars. Even the Department of Defense received a

dramatic increase in their budget for antidrug efforts, with allocations rising from \$33 million during Reagan's first year in office to more than a billion dollars ten years later (Alexander 2010, 47ff). His successor, Republican George H. W. Bush, continued Reagan's approach, later calling drug use "the most pressing problem facing the nation" (Beckett 1997, 44).

Reagan used the oratorical skills that earned him the title "The Great Communicator" to persuade the public and Congress to support his plan, but the so-called War on Drugs became a permanent fixture of US political rhetoric when crack cocaine hit the streets. According to David Kennedy, whose book *Don't Shoot* chronicles the drug-related violence that devastated wide swaths of so many American cities, "Crack blew through America's poor neighborhoods like the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" (Kennedy 2001, 10). Though crack was essentially the same as traditional powdered cocaine, it became popular in poor, urban communities because users were able to inhale it faster, achieve more intense highs, and buy it more cheaply than powdered cocaine. It quickly became the drug of choice on the streets.

In response to the crack epidemic, the government executed a campaign that the news media found to be "the hottest combat reporting story to come along since the end of the Vietnam War," according to one Reagan Administration official (Strutman 1992, 142). In fact, *Newsweek* called crack the biggest story of the post-Vietnam/Watergate era, and *Time* declared it "the issue of the year." The stories dominated the news cycle, typically featuring black "gangbangers," "crack whores," and "crack babies," highlighting the "predators" who made up the criminal subculture threatening the safety of the American people and requiring the government's action (Alexander 2010, 152).

As the introduction has shown, African American men have always been portrayed using negative images. During earlier periods, African American men were depicted as imbeciles who

needed protection from their own sloth and immorality. In the current era, in the wake of the War on Drugs, African American men are cast as violent criminals, hopped up on drugs and posing a threat to society. These negative portrayals of African American men have been deployed to justify the government's extreme response. The demonization of African American men as predators was politically successful, for Nixon, Reagan, Bush, and Clinton all rode the swell of white fear straight into the Oval Office.

George H. W. Bush's 1988 campaign, for example, used a television ad featuring the mug shot of an African American man, Willie Horton. Horton had been convicted of murder, escaped from custody while on a work furlough, and raped and murdered a white woman in her home in Massachusetts—the state where Bush's opponent, Governor Michael Dukakis, had approved the furlough program (Alexander 2010, 54–55). Four years later, candidate Bill Clinton, a Democrat, used similar racialized appeals to whites' fear of crime in his campaign to unseat Bush. Two weeks before the important Democratic primary in New Hampshire, the Arkansas governor flew home to personally oversee the execution of an African American man who was so mentally impaired that he asked the prison guards to save the dessert from his final meal for him to eat after his execution. Clinton was elected—with the overwhelming support of African American voters—and proceeded to be one of the toughest generals that the nation's War on Drugs had seen. He signed into law a \$30 billion crime bill that established new federal crimes, codified the "three strikes, you're out" rule into law, and funded the expansion and militarization of police forces and the construction of more prisons. According to the Justice Policy Institute, "the Clinton Administration's 'tough on crime' policies resulted in the largest increases in [the number of] federal and state prison inmates of any president in American history" (Alexander 2010, 55–58).



Clinton also made it possible for federally assisted public housing projects to deny housing to anyone who had a criminal record and to evict residents who were convicted of crimes (Alexander 2010, 57). Housing was denied to convicted criminals in the same manner that employment was denied to them. These actions echo the housing and employment discrimination against African Americans until the civil rights movement; they simply substitute “felon” for “black.” With these actions by Clinton, a man who some African Americans affectionately called the first black president, Alexander says, “The New Jim Crow was born” (Alexander 2010, 58).

It appears that the new Jim Crow is not going anywhere. On July 21, 2016, moments after Donald Trump concluded his nomination acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention, one of his campaign surrogates, former Speaker of the US House of Representatives Newt Gingrich, was interviewed in the convention hall by CNN news anchor Alysia Camerota. Camerota challenged Gingrich, saying that Trump’s statements about crime “painted too bleak a picture. Crime is down in America. Violent crime is down.” Gingrich replied that crime was not down in the biggest cities. Camerota replied, “Violent crime, murder rate, is down. We’re not under siege the way we were in, say, the eighties.” Gingrich replied that the ambush and shooting of fourteen Dallas policemen (five were killed and nine injured) during a rally protesting the growing numbers of police shootings of African American men told a different story:

The average American, I will bet you this morning, does not think crime is down, does not think they are safer. . . . When you can walk into a nightclub and get killed, when you can go to a party at a government building and get killed, people don’t think their government is protecting them. . . . People are frightened. People feel that their government has abandoned them.

This response played on the same themes that had sent Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton to office.

Although Camerota told Gingrich that she was reporting official crime statistics from the FBI,

Gingrich acknowledged the emotional (not factual) basis of his assertions: “As a political candidate, I’ll go with what people feel and I’ll let you go with the theoreticians.” In one brief television interview, Gingrich demonstrated that the strategy of inciting Americans’ fear of crime remained an important one for politicians.

Seldom does anyone discuss the impact of these strategies on young African American men, who see faces like theirs in anti-crime campaigns and hear the incessant political rhetoric about the dangers of African American–committed crime, but Cornel West does so in the preface of *Race Matters*. The following quotation seems to neatly summarize the brief historical sketch of racial discrimination, violence, and exploitation that this chapter has offered by this chapter:

Black people in the United States differ from all other modern people owing to the unprecedented levels of unregulated and unrestrained violence directed at them. No other people have been taught systematically to hate themselves—psychic violence—reinforced by the powers of state and civic coercion—physical violence—for the primary purpose of controlling their minds and exploiting their labor for nearly four hundred years. The unique combination of American terrorism—Jim Crow and lynching—as well as American barbarism—slave trade and slave labor—bears witness to the distinctive American assault on black humanity. This vicious ideology and practice of white supremacy has left its indelible mark on all spheres of American life. . . . The fundamental litmus test for American democracy—its economy, government, criminal justice system, education, mass media, and culture—remains: how broad and intense are the arbitrary powers used and deployed against black people. (West 2001, xiii-xiv)

As West points out, and as this chapter and the introduction to this dissertation have shown, African Americans continue to struggle against obstacles nearly as difficult as, though less overt than, those they faced during slavery and legalized discrimination. As West also shows, the psychic wounds of fighting this constant battle are exhausting.

This chapter has painted a mostly bleak picture of the struggles facing African Americans historically and in the modern day. But the mid-twentieth century before the civil rights movement was an era of both realism about the magnitude of the obstacles facing African Americans and of hopefulness that the obstacles would be overcome. The next chapter examines

how Benjamin Mays, the president of Morehouse College from 1940 to 1967, viewed the problems facing young African American men, and how he used particular rhetorical practices to motivate his students to face and surmount those problems, for their own good and for the good of their communities and their race.

### **CHAPTER 3: AN ANALYSIS OF MAYS' RHETORICAL STRATEGY**

In chapter 2, I offered an overview of the history of violence and exploitation of African Americans in the United States. Benjamin Mays, president of Morehouse College from 1940 to 1967, was very aware of this history, and it was his life's work to help young men cope with—and succeed in spite of—this history and the continuing challenges of his time. In this chapter, I survey Mays' extensive collection of speeches and writings through the perspective of rhetorical criticism in order to understand what constituted the message that inspired and prepared a generation of Morehouse men to pursue and attain academic achievement, career success, and an impressive level of civic engagement. My survey of thousands of pages of documents found that he addressed a wide variety of audiences in a wide variety of settings, including many speeches at Morehouse, most notably his Tuesday morning chapel talks. He spoke to all-white college audiences, all-black college audiences, mixed audiences, and many African American organizations for both women and men. He spoke at the installations of college presidents, preached at churches in the North and South, offered eulogies at the funerals of the prominent and the relatively unknown, and inspired high school students from low-income families to dream big dreams. His campus audiences ranged from South Carolina State College to the University of Chicago. Across these speeches, he focused the lion's share of his attention on three broad topics—race, religion, and education. To these speeches I apply Kenneth Burke's cluster-agon method of rhetorical criticism.

## Cluster-Agon Analysis

Burke introduced the cluster-agon method in his 1937 book *Attitudes Toward History* and fleshed it out in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1957). Carol A. Berthold, in her 1976 article, “Kenneth Burke’s Cluster-Agon Method: Its Development and an Application,” suggests that even in the second book, however, Burke did not define clearly how the analysis is to be conducted, which she believes may explain why the method is rarely used. In describing the method, Burke said that every writer’s work contains a set of implicit equations, which Burke referred to as “associational clusters” (Berthold 1976, 20). By listing sets of terms in a text and grouping them—“what goes with what”—the critic statistically uncovers interrelationships, or “motives,” that the writer may not have been conscious of. All of the terms that the writer uses are “symbolic” of something and the clustering of the terms also tells a story.

The speeches and writings that I reviewed span a longer period of time than the years Mays served as president of Morehouse, but the larger body of work gives a fuller picture from which to examine the lessons Mays imparted while at Morehouse and the rhetoric that he used to communicate those lessons to his students. The largest collection of Mays’ work is housed at the Moreland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University. Mays donated the papers to Moreland-Spingarn, with the first batch deposited in 1976. During my first visit there, I was given the finding key, “Benjamin Mays Papers: Collection 223-1 to 223-181,” which is a 190-page, single-spaced list of Mays’ papers, which comprise 217 cubic feet of material in nine series. The series I relied on was Series D: Speeches and Other Writings. I chose not to review Correspondence, which represents an additional forty-eight cubic feet of material and includes communications with many prominent African American scholars, artists, and activists. I gave priority to the speeches Mays delivered at Morehouse, although I did not limit my study to these

speeches, instead extending the scope of the study beyond the period of his presidency to include a very early speech that Mays delivered in an oratorical contest during his undergraduate days at Bates and a very late speech—the eulogy he delivered for King, which was watched, listened to, and read by millions of people beyond those who attended the memorial service.

Personally influenced choices are typical in rhetorical analysis, according to Edwin Black. In the foreword to *Rhetorical Criticism, A Study in Method*, Black says that there are three types of analytical methods. The first type is the objective method; these types of methods are completely independent of the researcher's personality and preferences. The second type is mixed, used by people who want objectivity but cannot avoid personal influence in any or all stages of the process. The third type of method requires personal choices at every stage. According to Black, rhetorical criticism falls under the rubric of the third type (Black 1978, x–xi). I selected this problem to address because of my personal interest in it, for the crisis of underachievement among African American men relates to my professional endeavors as president of an institute that serves talented African American male college students. I selected Mays as the subject of my case study because at Morehouse he worked with the type of students I do—talented young African American men—and because of the wealth of available information about Mays. Throughout the research and writing process, I was influenced by my own interests, but I was careful to consider the full range of Mays speeches in order to maintain fidelity to his work and gain the most complete understanding of the man and his philosophies.

I selected hundreds of speeches and articles from Series D to review, making judgments based on their titles and audiences, focusing primarily on speeches related to education in some way. I selected all of his weekly chapel speeches I could find, as well as his annual “sermons” delivered to the first-year students of Morehouse and Spelman. These speeches were chosen

because he was speaking directly to the audience about which I am most concerned. I also selected speeches and articles that articulated his philosophy of education and his philosophy of life. These gave great insight into the man and the thoughts that governed his rhetorical strategy. The other large group of texts I selected were speeches Mays delivered on other college campuses, those presented at academic conferences, and speeches to organizations such as the United Negro College Fund, which are involved with higher education. Speeches he made at the installations of the presidents of Wilberforce and Dillard, historically black universities located in Ohio and Louisiana, respectively, also provided significant insight.

After reading approximately two thousand pages of Mays' work—primarily speeches, for I selected only a handful of articles—I organized them according to the themes they addressed. Though most of the speeches addressed more than one theme, I was able to assemble a significant number of texts that I categorized as being about either race, religion, or education. Once that was done, I identified key passages for deeper analysis in this dissertation. Of the hundreds of speeches I reviewed, I selected a sample of fifty-four from which to identify key terms. The sample was chosen using the same criteria that had governed the choice of the larger sample. Though I gave priority to the speeches Mays delivered at Morehouse, I extended the scope of the study beyond the period of his presidency to gain the greatest insight into his philosophies in the areas of race, religion, and education.

I selected one early speech, “Our Third Emancipation,” delivered in an oratorical contest in 1919 or 1920,<sup>6</sup> when Mays was an undergraduate student at Bates. This early speech was chosen because it gave insight into his early thinking, particularly about the issue of race, which

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<sup>6</sup> The date is uncertain. On a typewritten copy in the archives, a note matching Mays' handwriting says, “Delivered in oratorical contest at Bates 1918 or 1919.” Another typewritten copy in the same file folder has the same notation but has the dates as “1919 or 1920.”

could serve as a baseline with which to compare later ideas and opinions. The latest text examined was “In Defense of Negro History and the Colleges of the United Negro College Fund,” which he delivered at Wofford College in 1976, almost a decade after his retirement from Morehouse. Remarkably, that speech, delivered in his home state of South Carolina, rehearsed many of the observations he had made approximately forty-seven years earlier at Bates.

Then I began the cluster-agon analysis. Burke introduced this analytical method in *Attitudes Toward History* (1937) and provided more details in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1957). Berthold also provides a helpful explication of Burke’s method. The first step in cluster-agon analysis is to identify the important terms. The single most dominant of the terms, which the critic labels the “god term,” is surrounded by and connected to a relatively small number of other terms, labeled “good terms,” and the term that opposes the god term is referred to as the “devil term” (Berthold 1976, 303). The term “good terms” was introduced by Richard Weaver, who discussed this process in *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (1953). To determine the god terms, devil terms, and good terms, the critic weighs the intensity of their usage, the frequency of their appearance, their connections, and the clarity or vividness of their imagery. The critic also looks for conjunctions, cause-effect relationships, and mutual relationships to third terms (Berthold 1976, 303). Equations and associational groupings point to “clusters,” and oppositional terms to “agons” (Berthold 1976, 303).

My analysis thus entails identifying the terms that are most significant to the texts from which they are taken. I identified significant terms in each of the fifty-four texts in the sample. I then assigned the most significant terms in each of the texts as the god term, devil term, or good terms and placed them in three broad categories: race, religion, or education. The god terms and devil terms were those around which the good terms formed “associational clusters” through



conjunctions, cause-effect relationships, or mutual relationships with third terms (303). Seventy-five terms were placed in the race category, 117 were categorized in the religion category, and 168 were placed in the education category. Easily, the dominant term for the race category was the devil term, *segregation*. The god term for religion was determined to be *God* (or its synonyms, *Lord* or *Creator*), and the god term for education was determined to be *achievement*. The number of terms in each grouping includes multiple usages of the unique terms, and several of the terms were placed into more than one category.

### **Mays and Morehouse**

Morehouse College, which was founded in Augusta, Georgia, just two years after the end of the Civil War as the Augusta Theological Institute, was designed to prepare newly emancipated men to become the preachers and teachers who would move African Americans forward.<sup>7</sup> Its mission was to train the most talented men so that they, in turn, could help lift up their fellows. Morehouse continues to prepare men for work in education and the ministry, but it has grown to include many other academic disciplines while retaining its emphasis on training exceptional young African American men to use their talents to benefit their communities.

The college's mission was perhaps best carried out by its sixth and most well-known president, Benjamin E. Mays, a Phi Beta Kappa alumnus of Bates College who earned his doctorate at the University of Chicago. Mays is widely regarded as the individual who strengthened Morehouse's academic standing. He is credited with attracting highly credentialed faculty, developing the institution's international studies program, and bringing Phi Beta Kappa to the campus. He is also credited with creating and embodying the mystique of the Morehouse

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<sup>7</sup> Morehouse College joined with Atlanta University, formed in 1865 by the American Missionary Association; Clark College, established in 1869 by the Methodist Episcopal Church; Spelman College, founded in 1881 as the Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary; and Morris Brown College, established in 1881 by the African Methodist Episcopal Church; to form the Atlanta University Center.

Man.<sup>8</sup> I argue in this chapter that Mays created the notion of the Morehouse Man for rhetorical purposes—to offer an alternative vision of African American manhood to Morehouse’s students, who were daily bombarded with negative images about African Americans.

Mays showed his students a positive image of black manhood and offered an alternative view of situation to help students identify and work toward their ambitions.

I use the terms “motivated” and “motivation” throughout this dissertation. Since I ground my argument in Burke’s rhetorical theory, it is appropriate to reference Burke’s definition of “motive.” In *Permanence and Change*, he says, motives are shorthand terms for situations” (29). He continues, “When we wish to influence a man’s response, . . . we emphasize factors which he had understressed or neglected, and minimize factors which he had laid great weight upon. This amounts to nothing other than an attempt to redefine the situation itself. In this respect our whole vocabulary of motivation is tautological” (220). Thus, when I say Mays motivated his students, I refer to his use of language to redefine the situations in which his students were engaged and their abilities to perform within those situations.

Mays served as president of Morehouse from 1940 to 1967. Much has been written about him, including biographies such as *The Magnificent Mays* and *Benjamin Elijah Mays, Schoolmaster of the Movement*. He wrote a voluminous autobiography, *Born to Rebel*, and an enormous archive of his papers, including manuscripts, speeches, and notes, is held at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University. This body of material provides an

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<sup>8</sup> In 1994, a Morehouse student became the first Rhodes Scholar from a historically black college, and two other Morehouse men have been named Rhodes Scholars since then. These and other distinctions contribute to the mystique of the Morehouse Man. The college’s website lists many noteworthy alumni, including the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. of the class of 1948. See <http://www.morehouse.edu/about/legacy.html>. Mays is well known for delivering King’s eulogy, which took place at an outdoor memorial service on the Morehouse campus following King’s funeral at Ebenezer Baptist Church. Mays spoke to King’s widow, children, and more than 150,000 other people. The service was broadcast live on national television and radio. It was later included in *Say it Loud: Great Speeches on Civil Rights and African American Identity*, edited by Ellis and Smith, 2010.

incisive look into the challenges faced by Mays, the ethos he created at Morehouse, and the successes that Mays and his students achieved. The archive, in particular, offers a trove of data on Mays' rhetorical practices. Examining these techniques and the terms he used can offer insight into Mays' astonishingly successful motivation of Morehouse students.

### **Terministic Screens**

One of Mays' primary strategies for motivating Morehouse students was by offering them an alternative vision of themselves and their possibilities in life. In other words, Mays created terministic screens for his students. The terministic screen is a set of language terms through which people see the world, which serve as a lens that shapes their interpretations of events around them and messages communicated to them. Terministic screens can be changed, for terms can be used to create a certain picture that is then taken to be reality. The terms direct the hearer's attention toward the desired images and away from undesired images (Burke 1966, 45). Conversely, Burke points out that a speaker's terministic screen can be determined based on the language he uses, and this is the basis of the cluster analysis method used in this dissertation.

Mays offered his students vivid, specific, positive images of the Morehouse Man, and he encouraged his students to accept as desirable the complex collection of attributes that constitute the Morehouse Man in place of whatever negative images of themselves and African American culture they might have absorbed previously (see chapter 1).

As I will argue in this chapter, Mays created this screen in two primary ways. First, he used terms that created a positive image of the African American student more broadly, and the Morehouse Man specifically: a man fortunate enough to have been born with the intellectual capacity to take advantage of a college education and blessed with the opportunity to attend college; a man who was striving to achieve, never settling for mediocrity; a man guided by a

strong moral compass; a man committed to achieving something that would glorify God and bring benefit to mankind, especially to his community; a man who connected with the common man; a man who carried himself in a manner that commanded respect and who, even when respect was not given, always knew his value. Second, he embodied the success to which he urged his students to aspire and served as a living exemplar of the Morehouse Man. He modeled the absolute centrality of good character and service to the community that he wished his students to adopt. His success was always reinvested in his students and community and he taught the students to do the same. As I argued in the introduction to this dissertation, many of these young men had consumed negative images of the African American man over their pre-Morehouse lives, so Mays offered the screen of the Morehouse Man as a positive alternative.

According to Burke, “there are two kinds of terms: terms that put things together, and terms that take things apart. Otherwise put, A can feel himself identified with B, or he can think of himself as disassociated from B” (Burke 1966, 49). Mays asked students to “put things together,” to positively identify with the image of the Morehouse Man that he so vividly created for them. Mays deliberately encouraged the students to value being “identified with” previous successful students, whom he held up as models. At orientation, for example, Mays would review the stellar history of Morehouse as an institution, then ask the new students to identify with and carry on that tradition: “When I welcome you here, I am welcoming you to a great institution, an institution with great traditions. . . . to an institution whose achievements have called forth the respect and the admiration of the thinkers of America. It is our task to continue and increase this high regard which they hold for us” (Jelks 2012, 143). Mays refers here to the reputation gained by previous Morehouse men (using terms like *great*, *achievements*, *respect*, *admiration*, and *thinkers*) and holding them up as a model for the current class, who he expects

to “continue and increase” the “high regard” in which Morehouse is held by the intellectual community. He also assured the students that he believed they were up to the rigorous challenge he was setting for them.

At commencement, he would tell them (as he did in 1965), “never forget that you are a Morehouse Man, and that the College will never release you from the obligation to strive to do whatever you do so well that no man living, no man dead and no man yet to be born could do the work any better than you” (Mays Papers, D: 223-120, 72, p. 5). At the 1966 commencement ceremony, he explicitly connected the graduates with the Morehouse tradition: “Remember, you *are* Morehouse. A college is as great or as small as its alumni. . . . When [you] succeed, Morehouse succeeds” (Mays Papers, D: 223-120, 72, p. 6). In 1962, he not only identified the graduating class with the Morehouse Man but also with the spirit of the college, and placed the responsibility for the college’s continued success on the shoulders of each graduate: “We expect you to do well whatever you touch and to make a creditable, honorable mark on the world. From now on, you bear the stamp of Morehouse” (Mays Papers, D: 223-120, 72, p. 3).

Mays very frequently used the terministic screen of the Morehouse Man to counter the negative images that young African American men absorbed from culture, media, and personal interactions. He articulated high expectations for his students and expressed confidence that they would rise to meet them. This strategy is in evidence throughout Mays’ speeches and writings. Indeed, Mays’ use of this strategy has been recognized by previous critics. For example, Colston, who edited Mays’ work, says,

One of his key techniques was to refer to students who had recently graduated from Morehouse and were engaged in graduate study at institutions of higher learning. He would write to the dean . . . of these institutions to see how the students were performing, and thereby assess the quality of education they had received at Morehouse. After receiving reports on some of these former students, he would say to the students at chapel: “You remember John Doe who was here a year ago? Well, he is at Ohio State or

he is at Chicago or he is at Harvard or he is at Yale. Now I am going to tell you how he is getting along.” (Colston 2002, 15)

The students were also often aware of Mays’ use of this motivational technique. A Morehouse graduate, Sere Myers, who became an oral surgeon in Kansas City, Missouri, said that in his first year at Morehouse, “Dr. Mays's speeches sent chills down my spine. He made us feel that if we could succeed at Morehouse, we could conquer the outside world. . . . If you can make an A at Morehouse, you can make an A at Harvard. If you make a B at Morehouse, you can make a B at Oxford” (Colston 2002, 14–15). Myers here refers obliquely to Mays’ terministic screen of the Morehouse Man, which showed students that they were as bright and capable as students anywhere in the world. In Mays’ regular chapel talks, he showed students that high achievement was not only possible but expected.

Additionally, Mays “embodied elegance, an aspect of his life he assiduously honed” (Jelks 2012, 153), and his “stylishness was a great influence on all the young men” (Jelks 2012, 153). Students certainly noticed his self-presentation. Jelks notes that Russell Adams, a Morehouse alumnus, remembered Mays’ rhetoric and his appearance with equal vividness: he remembered Mays’ “precisely selected words lovingly and rhythmically enunciated” (Jelks 2012, 153) and his habit of being “always dressed *Gentlemen Quarterly* style . . . usually some version of pin-stripe gray suit accentuating his height and lack of body fat. He was camera ready” (Jelks 2012, 153). Mays was a living example of what Morehouse's students could become, and they seemed to follow his model. In two historical accounts of the Mays era at Morehouse that rely principally on pictures (Dumas’ 2006 *Benjamin Elijah Mays: A Pictorial Life* and Cohen’s 2000 *Black Colleges of Atlanta*), nearly all of the men are wearing business suits or graduation robes and ties. Mays’ style was not simply for style’s sake. His “embodiment of black manliness, characterized by integrity, nobility, and eloquence, pulled his male students

toward a larger vision of their humanity and what they could accomplish,” and he projected “an overarching ideal of how black men should behave” (Jelks 2012, 154).

But Mays did not wear his clothes or use his considerable talents only to increase his own individual success. Instead, he modeled for his students the precept that success is only meaningful if it has positive impact on one’s community. Mays presented himself always as a dedicated servant: “I will serve you and this institution as if God almighty sent me into the world for the specific purpose of being the Sixth President of Morehouse College. I will serve you with the same dignity that Franklin Roosevelt serves the people of the United States” (Jelks 2012, 144). Note the repetition of variants of *serve* here, and the connection of this service with high honor—serving as does the president of the United States—rather than with the humiliation and degradation of servility, an attitude that many African Americans had been forced to adopt for self-protection. Mays was not interested in simply preparing young men to succeed in a chosen line of work. He was creating principled leaders by directing students’ thinking and developing their characters (Jelks 2012, 144). He aimed to turn each of his students into a Morehouse Man (Jelks 2012, 150).

The importance of Mays’ high expectations, embodiment of high ideals, attitude of humility and service, and positive example to his students cannot be overstated. His successor, Hugh Gloster, said of him that “Dr. Mays was the best and greatest role model that I have ever seen or known” (Rovaris 2005, 135). And Samuel DuBois Cook, a student at Morehouse during Mays’ tenure who went on to become the president of Dillard University from 1975 to 1997, said of Mays, “for Bennie Mays, a better life is the thing. For him, we are called by God to human betterment and enrichment” (Rovaris 2005, 135). In other words, Mays called for and modeled how his students could live better lives and improve the world in which they lived.

The voluminous collection of Mays' speeches and writing illustrates his prominence as an inspiring orator. His work teaches a great deal about Mays' success and the techniques he used to motivate a generation of African American men to succeed academically and in their future lives and careers. In virtually every talk he gave, he addressed at least one of three topics—race, religion, or education—and often all three. This chapter surveys these broad themes in his oeuvre and offers the results of cluster analysis of the sample of fifty-four speeches, using specific passages to illustrate how the selected subgroupings of good terms and opposing terms used by Mays helped him carry out his mission of motivating students to do well and serve their communities.

## **Race**

Race was a central topic in Mays' speeches. He had dealt with the barriers erected by racism in America, and most of the people in his audiences had also been affected by racial issues (see chapter 2). The cluster data shows that Mays focused significant attention on the negative aspects of race in America. The largest cluster of terms in the race grouping were negative: *segregation, discrimination, circumscriptions, subjugation, denigration, marginalization, inferiority, and subhumanity*. This grouping also includes references to race-based violence, such as *slavery* and *lynching*. In this grouping, Mays also discusses ancillary concepts that follow from American racism, such as *politically disenfranchised* and *economically suppressed*. There were forty terms in this grouping.

These terms were often used in conjunction with discussions of how many whites ignored the mistreatment of blacks and even misused Biblical scripture to justify the mistreatment. For example, in a May 1960 speech he delivered at Florida A. & M. University, titled "The



Challenge to Overcome the Major Disabilities of 341 Years in a Quarter of a Century,” he used many of the race-group terms to express the horror of slavery and racism.

The slave era was the era of subhumanity, the era of depersonalization, when the Negro was not human but property owned and sold like cattle. . . . The bodies of the slaves belonged to the masters . . . Slavery like all great evils had to be justified. Conscience had to be silenced if the system was to be perpetuated. And all experience proves that there is no sin, however colossal, that the human mind cannot justify, thus making it easy for one to sleep at night without a disturbed conscience. (Mays Papers, D: 223-121, 42, p. 1)

The negative terms (*subhumanity, depersonalization, not human, property, owned, sold, belonged, masters, silenced, perpetuated, sin, justify*) are all associated with the poor treatment and dehumanization of African Americans, not with African Americans themselves. Mays used these negative terms to describe whites’ justification of this treatment and the system that enabled it. He juxtaposed these terms, which applied to the whites that profited from the system of slavery, to the positive term *conscience*, which appears twice and is also connected to *mind, sin, and justify*. Since there is no human being attached the word *conscience* here, it almost seems as if conscience—right action, justice—is an abstraction that Mays cannot yet imagine as clearly as he can see the horrors of slavery.

Racism was no abstraction for Mays, though. He, like nearly every other African American of his day, had personally experienced racism from his childhood onward. His autobiography, *Born to Rebel*, describes many incidences of racism to which he was personally subjected. The theme of racism is present throughout his autobiography, which covers both broad historical events such as the Atlanta Riot of 1906,<sup>9</sup> in which as many as five thousand

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<sup>9</sup> The Atlanta Riot was sparked by the victory of heavyweight boxer Jack Johnson, an African American, over a white man. Though this bout took place in a ring far from Atlanta, in Reno, Nevada, the fight symbolized race relations for many whites, who sought a “Great White Hope” to defeat Johnson. Unfortunately for African Americans, Jack Johnson not only beat James Jeffries, his white opponent, but was also socializing with white women. Neither of these facts could be tolerated by white Southerners, and riots broke out all over the country. Many African Americans were killed (Mays 1987, 19).

white men participated, to the smaller indignities that he, his family, and their neighbors were subjected to on a daily basis.

*Born to Rebel* opens with an anecdote about Mays' first childhood experience with racism—an experience that colored the lens through which he saw the world and influenced his life's work. Mays was outside with his father when they were accosted by a mob of white men. Mays says,

I remember a crowd of white men who rode up on horseback with rifles on their shoulders. I was with my father when they rode up, and I remember starting to cry. They cursed my father, drew their guns and made him salute, made him take off his hat and bow down to them several times. And then they rode away. I was not yet five years old, but I have never forgotten them. I know now that they were one of the mobs associated with the infamous Phoenix Riot which began in Greenwood County, South Carolina, on November 8, 1898, and spread terror throughout the countryside for many days thereafter. My oldest sister, Susie, tells me, and newspaper reports of that period reveal, that several Negroes were lynched on the ninth and others on subsequent days. That mob is my earliest memory. (Mays 1987, 1)

Note the repetition of *made him* alongside terms like *mobs* and *terror* and *riot* and *lynched*.

Mays' retelling of this terrifying event, in which he witnessed his father being forced into a position of servility by threats, connects terms of fear and moral opprobrium to the whites who terrorized them. This early incident was seared into Mays' memory. The quotation shows that Mays recognized the terror and violence of white supremacy, and that he associated it with the white perpetrators. He never put the burden of it on his father, whom he portrayed as doing what he needed to do to keep himself and his son safe.

That incident, and many subsequent ones, taught Mays that no matter the situation, “Negroes always got the worst of it. Guilt and innocence were meaningless words: the Negro was always blamed, always punished,” with no recourse (Mays 1987, 17). In this grouping of words, the term *Negroes* is connected to *worst* and to *blamed* and *punished*; *guilt* and *innocence* float in the void, unconnected to other terms, pure meaningless abstractions. This mirrors Mays'

experience in the world, where “it was always the Negro’s responsibility to find ways and means to get along with white people; never need white people concern themselves with getting along with Negroes” (Mays 1987, 22). When black parents told their children to be careful and stay out of trouble, what they really meant was “stay out of trouble with white people” (Mays 1987, 23). Mays summed it up this way: “In this perilous world, if a black boy wanted to live a halfway normal life and die a natural death he had to learn early the art of how to get along with white folks” (Mays 1987, 22).

African Americans spoke of the injustice of this system among themselves, but they dared not speak of it within earshot of whites (Mays 1987, 17), and certainly not to whites directly, for no arguments were allowed, no talking back: “No matter how false or stupid,” the white man’s word was law and gospel. If a white man cursed you, you could not curse back. If he hit you, Mays and his fellow African Americans were warned, you could not strike back (Mays 1987, 22–23). Here, each term is paired with its opposite. White people are allowed the term (and the action it conveys) and African Americans were denied it: *white man/curse, you/not curse; white man/hit, you/not strike back*. Mays interviewed 118 men and women of his approximate age about their experiences. When he asked them “how their parents taught them to behave toward white people,” more than half (63 percent) said they were instructed to show respect to white people at all times. Twelve (10 percent) were taught to be submissive, to “stay in your place!” And ten of them (11 percent) said their parents advised them to avoid white people altogether (Mays 1987, 23). In discussing race, Mays freely used language that was highly negative toward the treatment of African Americans in the United States, and often highly critical of the whites who actively supported the system or passively benefited by it, indicting the

white people who ran the system and serving as a voice for African Americans who were oppressed and silenced by that system.

Mays was fully aware that racism was an enormous barrier to African Americans' success, and he used strong negative terms to excoriate the racism and the ancillary violence, such as segregation and lynching, that was inflicted upon African Americans to keep them subjugated. In his Bates oratorical contest speech, he discussed slavery's long history—"four hundred years the chains of slavery bound [the Negro] fast"—and the enormous human cost. He said, "It has been conservatively estimated that the slave traffic in Mohammedan and Christian lands costs black Africa 100,000,000 souls." Pointedly, he summed up the slave trade as "the Rape of a continent" (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 1, p. 1).

The intensity of the terms he used in conjunction with slavery—*chains, slavery, bound, rape*—match the brutality of the practices used to keep African Americans in subjugation. He discussed this further in a speech delivered on December 11, 1977, at the 100th anniversary celebration at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. Dexter was the church at which Martin Luther King, Jr. had served as senior pastor from 1954 to 1959. Mays began his talk by noting that 1877, the year the church was founded, was the year of the Hayes-Tilden Compromise, which enabled a spate of violence against African Americans during Reconstruction. He gave a history of this compromise: After the close election in 1876, the United States House of Representatives had to choose the president, and Rutherford B. Hayes was chosen on the condition that he would withdraw the federal troops that had been protecting the Reconstruction-era African American office holders in the South. This left post-Civil War African Americans defenseless against Southern whites who were anxious to regain control. Approximately 5,000 African Americans were lynched between 1877 and the early 1950s, and

“not one [perpetrator], no not one, was ever brought to justice” (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 56, p. 1). Here again, *justice* is floating alone in the void, connected only with *not one*—an absence, one that is repeated so it cannot be missed.

Like lynching, segregation was designed to keep African Americans subjugated. Mays called segregation a “badge of inferiority” (Mays 1945, 15). During his October 18, 1945, chapel talk at Morehouse, Mays told the Morehouse students that the “object of all segregation is to impress the subjugated with the fact that he is inferior—unfit to associate with other human beings” (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 24). Similarly, during his 1950 address to the Women’s Division of the United Negro College Fund, he said that the imposition of segregation was a denial of human dignity (Mays Papers, D: 223-121, 39, p. 1). Though he was mainly concerned about the debilitating effects of segregation on African Americans, he believed that segregation was “a system that destroys the souls of both the segregated and the persons who do the segregating,” as he said in a speech titled “The Function of a College,” which he delivered at Stillman College in Tuscaloosa on October 28, 1949 (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 60, p. 4). Mays’ use of negative terms—*inferiority*, *unfit*, *denial*, *destroys*—and opposing positive terms—*dignity*, *souls*—reinforced his message here: that segregation destroys good in both the segregated and the segregators, and that it has negative effects on the entire country. As a later section will show, Mays was concerned for America as a whole, and wished for racial reconciliation partly in order that the country would live up to its democratic and Christian ideals.

Mays was fully aware of race science, contemporary spurious attempts to prove that African Americans were an inferior race, and, as we will see, he was somewhat suspicious of science if it was taught without ethics. Mays was working in a context of conflicting theories of

race grounded in social construction, biology, and history that are frequently in conflict with one another. Segregation is a social construction, not a biological determination. But race, like segregation, is used as a trope of power.

During a 1949 Golden Jubilee Address at Virginia Union University in Richmond (February 11, 1949), Mays told his collegiate audience about the many efforts made to prove African Americans' supposed intellectual inferiority (D: 223-119, 55, p. 1–3). Mays noted that the American Anthropological Society had written just after the end of slavery that the organization's "greatest achievement" would be "the speedy convincing of all civilized nations of the utter uselessness of all these old and expensive attempts to civilize uncivilized races of men"; that *Anthropology in America* had stated authoritatively in 1865 that African Americans were inferior; and that "Dr. Samuel George Morton, the most noted craniologist in the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, concluded: 'that the capacity of the Negro cranium was less than that of the Anglo Saxon by twelve cubic inches, and that therefore the Negro was incapable of intellectual equality with the Anglo Saxon'" (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 55, p. 1–3). Mays juxtaposed terms like *inferior*, *capacity*, *incapable*, which whites applied to African Americans, to terms like *equality*. In his Bates speech, he called race science a "mythology" that was disseminated by the press and taught by parents to their children, mythology which paints [the Negro] as inherently inferior, diseased, criminal, shiftless and irresponsible" ("Our Third Emancipation," Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 1, p. 3). Here again, Mays contrasted negative terms used by whites against African Americans—*inferior*, *diseased*, *criminal*, *shiftless*, *irresponsible*—with the term *mythology*, which reframes all those negatives as motivated falsehoods, meant to comfort an ignorant people and uphold existing structures.

Mays knew that the tropes of racism had “the capacity to draw and transmit intense effects,” to use Watts’ words, and that the affective intensity of the trope results from the “strength and duration of the impact of an emotional encounter (Watts 2012, p. 14).” As mentioned above, Mays’ oldest memory was of a mob of white men humiliating his father. Following that incident, he witnessed and experienced other assaults at the hands of whites. As a junior in high school, for example, he suffered racial violence directly. When his family stopped on their way home from an event at church at the post office in his hometown of Epworth, South Carolina, a local doctor, Wallace Payne, who had a reputation for being prejudiced and violent toward African Americans, walked over to the young Mays and “struck me a mighty blow in the face,” leaving him “stunned, momentarily blinded by the force of his blow” (Mays 1987, 45). Payne said to him, “Get out of my way, you black rascal. You’re trying to look too good anyway.” Mays’ offenses, apparently, were standing erect and wearing clean clothes. “I was black and he was white; accordingly with or without provocation, he could—without impunity—do to me what he wished.” By the time Mays wrote his autobiography, a half century had passed and his list of achievements and awards was prodigious. Yet he said, “This humiliating experience is as vivid in my mind today as if it happened yesterday” and would “remain forever hideously imprinted in my memory” (Mays 1987, 45). White supremacy was the reality of the time and place in which Mays was reared. He did not—could not—fight back when the local doctor assaulted him, because he knew that with the number of white men in overalls nearby, chewing tobacco and drinking, he would not have left that spot alive. He was able to fight back later, using language and the rhetorical tools available to him, to show the effect of the blow on him. The pain and the *force* of the *stunning blow*, the *humiliation*, the fact that there was no *provocation*, in his retroactive reframing, causes white audiences to empathize with his feelings,

though it does not seem to have taken away the humiliation and pain of the memory, even so many years later.

One of the keys to Mays' ability to overcome the violence and humiliation he suffered and the obstacles he continued to face as an African American man appears to be the terministic screen of the African American hero, a screen that he internalized based on the lives of African American heroes such as Douglass, Tubman, and Booker T. Washington, whom he read about in books and heard about in his parents' home. Because of the messages he received, especially at home and at church, he never internalized the negative messages about African American men. Later in life, he worked hard to ensure that his students did not internalize such messages either, or if they had, to replace these images with a new terministic screen, that of the Morehouse Man, which showed them to be hardworking, moral, intelligent, ambitious, and successful. The support of Mays' family and friends, and their high expectations of him, inoculated him against society's attempts to prove black inferiority.

He contrasted his own experience navigating a white-dominated world in a speech given at the University of Albuquerque in 1976, titled "The Place and Function of the Black College in American Higher Education," in which he pointed to the effect of these negative messages on most African American men: "The environment, with its crippling circumscriptions, told me that God made me inferior. In the way Negroes behaved in the presence of white people, cringing and kowtowing, tipping their hats to white folks, saying 'yes sir boss,' told me that I was never meant for great things, never meant to dream dreams, to chase ideas, to reach for the stars and grasp after the moon" (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 1, p. 1). In this speech, he attributes negative terms related to the effects of racism—*crippling*, *inferior*, *cringing*, *kowtowing*, *tipping their hats*—to other African Americans and connects to himself positive terms such as *great*, *dream*, *ideas*,



*reach for the stars, grasp after the moon*, and various terms for vision and ambition. He retained the ability to see these ambitions despite white society's attempts to tell him these things were not—*never*—for him. He was able to retain access to these visions because “I never believed what my ears heard and what my eyes saw” (“The Place and Function of the Black College in American Higher Education,” Mays Papers). In other words, he was able to drown out the din of negative images pressed on him by society and connect instead with the vision of the ambitious black man in his head, the terministic screen fashioned by his parents, his teachers, his community, by African American role models. The Mays family owned only a few books, but those few included biographies of Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and Paul Lawrence Dunbar, and pictures of these men hung on the walls of the Mays home. Those individuals became the young Mays' heroes:

My heroes were and are black. I adore George Washington, but I dearly love Fred Douglass. Douglass is mine. I think Douglass is a greater man than George Washington, though I recognize [Washington's] high place in history, father of his country, first president of our country, great general, but Washington was a rich Virginia farmer and white. Douglass was a slave and black. And yet, he became a free man and became a greater abolitionist than [William Lloyd] Garrison. I admire Harriet Beecher Stowe credited with precipitating the Civil War with her authorship of Uncle Tom's Cabin. But give me Harriet Tubman, who by way of the underground railway carried 300 Negroes to freedom into Canada. Tubman is mine. (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 1-2, p. 2-3)

These heroes showed Mays that African Americans could and did do great things. He connected positive words with black heroes, which counteracted negative images. Words like *heroes, black, love, greater, slave, black, free, freedom*, and *mine* connect blackness with positivity, helping to construct a different terministic screen for his hearers. These black heroes made it possible for Mays to see through the damaging negative mythology of African American inferiority, and to pass his insight on to others.

Mays often referred in speeches to the African American men and women whose heroism inspired him, and not only in talks to African American audiences. Although as a child, he had to

remain silent about poor treatment and racism from white people to keep himself safe, as an adult he was able to speak directly to white audiences and try to educate them. He spoke at length of his black heroes at the predominately white Wofford College in South Carolina. The talk, titled “In Defense of Negro History and the Colleges of the United Negro College Fund” (February 19, 1976), discussed the importance of positive images for all young people: “All people, the world over, need images to inspire its people and especially its young people. This is not narrow mindedness. It is inherent in mankind. Man is a hero worshipper and we must grow heroes or create heroes.” The talk seems aimed at offering his white audience a new terministic screen, a new way of thinking about African Americans. Mays noted that each nationality and ethnic group needs heroes like them, heroes with whom they can identify. Just as “We in the United States marvel at the accomplishments of Jefferson, Franklin, Payne, George Washington, Grant,” African Americans need black heroes. He asks his audience, “So, what Negro’s soul is so dead that he doesn’t leap for joy when we remember Harriet Tubman, Sojourner of Truth, Fred Douglass, and Phyllis Wheatley, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, Claud McKay, James Weldon Johnson and Gwendolyn Brooks, and Mary McLeod Bethune?” He points out the strong connection he feels with these heroes: “They were black and they are mine.” Again, he connects blackness with positivity—*soul, leap, joy, black, mine*—and contrasts it with the dead soul of people who cannot feel joy in black heroes. He concluded by saying, “If the Greeks need images, if the French need images, if the English need images, God knows the black man needs images” (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 8, p. 8). In the margin of the neatly typed Wofford College speech, he scribbled simply, “Blacks need images” (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 8, p. 8).

Mays continued to discuss the importance of positive images and role models for African American young people in a speech he titled, “The Black Man’s Contribution to the Nation,”

which he delivered in Atlanta to the Fund for Renewal, an organization that supported black colleges (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 13, p. 1–12). According to Mays, images are “the things that tell people that they are somebody, that they count, and that they stand for something worthwhile. Every man needs to be able to walk the earth in dignity and sane pride because God made him to be free and at home in the world which he made. . . . It is a matter of life and death” (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 3, p. 5). *Dignity, pride, worthwhile, free*—all terms that Mays uses alongside the concept of blackness to instill a sense of self-worth in his hearers. Mays had used positive images—his own family, his African American heroes—to overcome the harsh realities of growing up an African American man in the South, and his ability to walk in dignity made him a positive image for young African American men. He served as a hero for many young men, as Douglass, Dunbar, and Booker T. Washington had done for him.

Remarkably, though he experienced racial violence in his life, he never appeared to be bitter. He faced discrimination from some white people at his undergraduate institution, Bates College, and at his graduate school, the University of Chicago, but his experiences with other individuals at those institutions led him to the conclusion that categorizing all white people as enemies would be a mistake (Mays 1987, 138). This thematic is borne out by my cluster analysis of these speeches, which reveals a subgroup of terms in the race category that speaks of the work of white allies. These terms, which remind African American audiences that not all whites were antagonistic toward African American liberation and advancement, often overlap with the idealistic term clusters around brotherhood, equality, and democracy (which are examined in the sections that follow), but these are intended specifically to show that some whites had actually helped advance African American liberation.

In the very beginning, there were white abolitionists, and Mays recognized their contributions. He mentioned Garrison often, though he did note many times that while Garrison was important and appreciated, he did not feel as connected to Garrison as he did to Tubman: “Tubman is mine.” He noted the contributions of white Christians in establishing black educational institutions. White United Methodists came South to establish black colleges,<sup>10</sup> and the vast majority of African Americans who served as leaders in their communities were educated in these institutions. Without these educated African American leaders and these institutions, most of which were operated by whites, Mays wondered aloud what might have happened to black people (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 45, p. 6–7).

He mentioned the fact that white families from the north and west moved to the southern part of the United States to teach emancipated blacks at schools like Morehouse (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 45, p. 2). In fact, they sent their children to the same schools at which they were teaching (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 8, p. 5). These white people paid a cost for their commitment to black education, for they were ostracized by most whites in the South (Mays Papers, D: 223–125, 8, p. 1.). He also made a point of telling audiences that when the state of Georgia threatened to withhold funds from its schools if they desegregated, white families in that state let the Governor know that they would be opposed to such a move (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 45, p. 2). Mays tells the whole sordid story: Two African American students from Atlanta, Hamilton Holmes and Charlayne Hunter, were finally admitted to the University of Georgia by orders from Federal Judge William Bootle, who told the University that the court would hear no

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<sup>10</sup> Methodists founded Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina; Clark in Atlanta, Georgia; Rust in Holly Springs, Mississippi; and Dillard in New Orleans, Louisiana. White Presbyterians founded Johnson C. Smith in Charlotte, North Carolina; Barber-Scotia in Concord, North Carolina; and Knoxville College in Tennessee. In 1854, white Presbyterians founded Lincoln in Pennsylvania, the first college in America dedicated to the education of black people. White Congregationalists started Atlanta University, Fisk in Nashville, Tennessee; Talladega in Alabama; Howard University in Washington, DC; and Hampton Institute in Virginia.

more excuses to deny entry to the two students, who were “fully qualified for immediate admission”<sup>11</sup> and “would already have been admitted had it not been for their race and color” (<http://desegregation.uga.edu/history/#>). They had applied to enroll in the fall of 1959 but were not allowed to do so until the spring semester of 1961. When they finally arrived on campus, they were met by a crowd of students chanting, “Two-four-six-eight! We don’t want to integrate!” On the third evening after their arrival, a mob hurled bricks and bottles at Myers Hall (Hunter’s dormitory) before the local police used tear gas to disperse the crowd, and Holmes and Hunter were driven home to Atlanta. The UGA Dean of Students told them that they were being withdrawn from school “in the interest of your personal safety and for the safety and welfare of more than 7,000 other students at the University of Georgia” (University of Georgia, n.d.). More than 400 faculty members signed a resolution demanding that Holmes and Hunter be allowed to return to campus. Only a few days later, a federal court order enabled them to return to campus (University of Georgia, n.d.). In the interim, Governor Ernest Vandiver had created a commission to hold hearings across the state of Georgia asking whether he should allow UGA to be desegregated. According to Mays, “The people gave a resounding yes” Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 45, p. 7). For Mays, the violence of the rioters and the cowardice of the Dean of Students did not—should not—overshadow the positive actions of other whites, including the all-white faculty and the citizens who attended the commission hearings.

It was central to Mays’ thought that all people, black or white, should be judged on an individual basis. According to the handwritten outline of his October 18, 1945 Morehouse chapel talk (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 23, n.p.), Mays believed that to “hate all white people for no

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<sup>11</sup> Holmes had been valedictorian, senior class president, and co-captain of the football team, while Hunter had graduated third in her class, edited the school paper, and had been crowned homecoming queen (University of Georgia n.d.).

reason other than they are white” is a sign of psychological slavery. Mays did not advocate that African Americans should gain domination over whites or exact revenge against them for centuries of mistreatment. He wanted only that he and his people should be treated with dignity and respect.

In fact, he advocated that white people and black people should attend more to their similarities than their differences. He puts forward ideals of brotherhood and equality that reach beyond skin color, ideals that are expressed in another subgroup of terms in the race category, some of which overlap with the religion category. This subgrouping of sixteen terms refers to African Americans as being created in God’s own image and to the moral imperative of men of all colors to live together in peace and harmony.

During the 1945 Founders Day program at Morehouse, Mays told his audience that the college would play an important role in teaching “skills in how to live together in harmony and good will—black men, white men, yellow men, brown men” (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 17, p. 2). Note the terms *together*, *harmony*, and *good will*, which are equated syntactically with the various skin colors: *black*, *white*, *yellow*, *brown*. Later that year, in an article called “The Time is Always Ripe,” he cited Acts 17:26—“God hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth”—to advocate for better race relations (Mays 1945, 15). This quotation uses terms that emphasize shared humanity and shared creation rather than separation by skin color.

He saw nationality as a binding agent, not a dividing agent. He emphasized national identification and shared religion over racial identification. As he wrote in the preface to *Born to Rebel*, “this book is the story of the lifelong quest of a man who desired to be looked upon as a human being and incidentally as a Negro, to be accepted first as an American and secondarily as

a black man” (Mays 1987, viii). Similarly, at an event for the Women’s Division of the United Negro College Fund, Mays said, “In essence the sit down protest is a determination on the part of Negro students in the South to become Negro Americans and not be American Negroes. The Negro is an American first and incidentally, secondarily, and accidentally, a Negro” (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 8, p. 1), in the same way that a white person born in America but with family roots in France or England is an American first and only incidentally French or English. In all these formulations, he urges his audience to subordinate the adjective “Negro” to a more important category of identification—American. In a speech to the YMCA Negro Older Boys’ Conference at Benedict College (February 26, 1926), he exhorted his audience to judge and be judged on merit only:

Young men, you must strive to be an agriculturist, not a Negro agriculturist—just an agriculturist! Strive to be a doctor, not a Negro doctor—just a doctor! Seek to serve your state, not as a Negro, but as a man. Aspire to be great—not among Negroes, but among men! God knows I want to be a great teacher; not a Negro teacher—just a great teacher. I want no racial adjective modifying it. (Mays 1987, 104)

Although he is disavowing the adjective “Negro,” he here connects it with the positive term *great*, and connects it with several respected positions of service: *agriculturist*, *doctor*, *teacher*. His focus on internal merit led him to advocate that while his students should understand the realities of prejudice and racism, they should never let go of the ideal of coexisting in harmony.

This same subgroup of sixteen terms, which refers to African Americans as being created in God’s own image, also comprises words that connect racial equality to democracy, arguing that America’s founding documents acknowledge God as the maker of all human beings. The terms *democracy*, *founding documents*, or *Declaration of Independence* appeared thirty-three times in the random sample of fifty-four texts. For example, Mays frequently quoted the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights,

that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” In this group are terms that point up the hypocrisy of the nation’s founders, including Thomas Jefferson, who penned that lofty prose in the Declaration yet owned slaves. Though the founders professed to be Christians and in favor of democratic freedom, Mays viewed their owning of slaves as *unchristian* and *undemocratic*:

We are living in a society where democracy breaks down first in the area of Negro-white relations. There are still two standards—one for whites and one for blacks. We are living in a world where the Christian religion breaks down first in the area of race. At this point both the church and the school are failures. (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 60, p. 6)

In this group, which also includes terms such as *equal*, *American*, and *justice*, as well as *free*, *peace*, *brotherhood*, *family*, *together*, *harmony*, *truths*, and *love*, Mays argues that race should not divide America, and that all Americans, regardless of race, should live together in harmony and brotherhood.

In 1949, Mays held up ideals of democracy as encompassing both individualism and shared humanity. He told an audience that he still had “the nerve” to say that his aim as an educator was to “develop free men and free women in a democratic society,” and that he favored democracy because the “Christian religion and democracy are the only two systems that make the individual supreme and human personality sacred.” He distinguished these systems (*free*, *democratic*, *individual*, *sacred*) from systems that hold the community above the individual, such as “Fascism and Communism, [in which] the individual is sacrificed to the state” (Mays Papers, D: 223-121, 42, p. 6). Later, he connected these key terms with civilization: “Despite the circumscribed, restricted environment in which we live, the schools must never lose sight of the democratic principle nor of the Christian ideal. If our civilization is to survive it will survive because we take our democracy and Christianity seriously” (Mays Papers, D: 223-121, 42, p. 7).



Note that he aligns *democracy* with *Christianity*, *schools*, and *civilization* itself, arguing that these goods exist despite the limits placed on them (*circumscribed, restricted*).

Mays seemed to believe that it was the marginalized, the disenfranchised, who would indeed inherit the earth. He said in a 1976 speech titled, “Black Man’s Contribution to the Nation” that it was the black man that must tell America its own history, must interpret events accurately for its denizens:

It is the black man’s responsibility to tell the people what America is all about. Interpret to America the meaning of the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the first ten Amendments to the Constitution. Tell America the meaning of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments. Tell America the meaning of Emma Lazarus’ words on the Statue of Liberty, the meaning of the Declaration of Independence, and the meaning of Lincoln’s Gettysburg speech. Tell America the meaning of the NAACP, [and what] Martin Luther King, Jr’s movement was all about. (Mays Papers, D: 223-123, 13, p. 7–8)

He here links terms like responsibility to black and interpret and to the keywords of American democracy (Constitution, Bill of Rights, Amendments, Statue of Liberty, Declaration of Independence, Gettysburg Address), and then goes on to link all those now-equated terms to the NAACP and to Martin Luther King’s civil rights work. He is here showing that civil rights is an extension and a necessary, foundational part of American democracy—a powerful argument in a nation built on slavery. In the same speech, he asks his hearers to themselves reinterpret the words inscribed on the Statue of Liberty (“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free”) to apply to African Americans as well as to the Europeans to whom they were original directed: “As strange and contradictory as it may seem, I thank God for these beautiful words even though the uplifted hand points to Europe, not Africa” (Mays Papers, D: 223-123, 13, p. 2). In this context, Mays is charging his audiences to reinterpret those words, to see them as applying to black Americans as much as they did to white immigrants from other countries. Mays knew there was a much greater chance for African Americans to secure civil rights by holding America accountable to its stated ideals.

Mays told another audience that this tactic was one he borrowed from Douglass, who argued for black people's freedom by showing slavery's "unconsistency [sic] with the historical documents upon which the nation was founded" (Mays Papers, D: 223-123, 13, p. 2). He encouraged African Americans to not only reinterpret America's founding documents but to do the same for the words and actions of civil rights workers, treating them as they do those of the founders, interpreting them for America: "Tell America the meaning of the NAACP, [what] Martin Luther King, Jr's movement for civil rights was all about. Tell America the meaning of Birmingham, Selma, Montgomery, the March on Washington in 1963 where blacks came from Europe, Africa, and from all across the United States" (Mays Papers, D: 223-123, 13, p. 9-12). Here, he equates the actions and speeches of civil rights workers to those of America's founders. He syntactically equates the marches on Birmingham, Selma, Montgomery, and Washington with the Constitution, the Declaration, the Bill of Rights, the Amendments. Just as eighteenth century Europe needed the voices of the founders of America to awaken its morality, Mays argued that "The prophetic voices of black preachers and black scholars were needed and are needed now to prick the conscience of America, hopefully that the ideals expressed in Jefferson's document will become a reality in our time" (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 45, p. 8). As Mays saw it, America's treatment of African Americans was a failure of its own ideals, and in many speeches, he grappled with how slavery and segregation contradicted the nation's founding creed. In several of his speeches, Mays pointed out the contrast between the beginning of President Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg speech ("Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal"—and Lincoln's statement in his Peoria, Illinois, debate with Stephen Douglas, when he said of black men, "We cannot make them equal" (Mays

Papers, D: 223-125, 45, p. 7–9). He talked about the inconsistency of America’s founding and historical documents, which idealized freedom while African men, women, and children were held as slaves and while lynching was “winked at by the state, ignored by the federal government, condoned by the [white] church, accepted as valid in order to keep blacks in their place” (“In Defense of the Black College,” Mays Papers).

Mays often pointed out the disconnect between Jefferson’s words in the Declaration of Independence (“We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness”) and the fact that Jefferson died without freeing his slaves. “But we are glad Jefferson gave the Declaration of Independence,” Mays said, and we hope “the ideals expressed in Jefferson’s document will become a reality in our time” (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 45, p. 8).

He pointed out that many of the symbols of hope for America—the words of its founders, even the Statue of Liberty—were not intended for black people, but that they nevertheless offer hope that African Americans, too, would in time be treated as equal citizens. In one speech, he thanked God for the words of Jefferson, Henry, Lincoln, and others, which served as a source of the hope that African Americans needed to push forward:

None of these great American documents were meant for black people. But as long as America clings to these ideals, chasing them knowing full well that the chase is eternal, I have faith in my country. For after all, this is what America is all about, dreaming that soon we will build a country with liberty and justice for all. (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 8, p. 3)

As with the inscription on the Statue of Liberty, Mays asks his audience to reinterpret these words, which were originally meant only to apply to white people, and to view them as applying to all Americans. He connects the terms *American* with both *black* and *ideals*, with *chase* and *eternal* and *build*, indicating the ongoing work that is to be done in making America a country

that fulfills its ideals. He ends with *faith* and *dreams* that the terms that are cornerstones of American discourse (*liberty and justice for all*) will be applied to all Americans. Mays continued to hold onto this hope, although he knew that the realities of racism were debilitating—even fatal—for many African Americans.

Mays recognized that racism was dangerous for African Americans, although research had not yet begun to examine the physical and genetic stress it caused.<sup>12</sup> In a speech titled “The Negro College Graduate in America” (November 29, 1949), delivered at the Symposium on Higher Education for Negroes at Hunter College in New York, Mays said that he believed there were two major dangers confronting African Americans as a result of racism’s inherent physical brutality and denial of opportunities to thrive: the seduction to join the Communist party or another radical movement, and mental breakdown. He opined that it was “to the everlasting credit of the Negro and the educated Negro leadership” that very few African Americans became Communists. He believed that a decision to become a Communist signaled that one had given up hope that America could one day live up to its ideals, and he thought that what African Americans needed desperately was hope (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 63, p. 6–8).

The second danger, though, was more insidious. Mays believed the bone-deep discouragement of never-ending racism could cause people’s minds to crack. He discussed a “brilliant” young man who had earned a PhD from a great university. According to faculty members in his department, the university had not seen a better mind in a quarter of a century.

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<sup>12</sup> This dissertation examines only the emotional, psychological, and social effects of racism on African Americans, but recent research indicates that there is a measurable physical effect as well. Racial trauma seems to be passed down epigenetically, harming health outcomes down many generations, even when other factors such as poverty are controlled for. Researchers speculate that the constant low-level stress of systemic racism overloads the body’s systems and changes gene expressions. See, for example, Paradies et al., 2015, “Racism as a Determinant of Health: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis,” *PLoS One* 10, no. 9: e0138511, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3328094/> and Camara et al., 2011, “Multiple Pathways Linking Racism to Health Outcomes,” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 8, no. 1: 143–157, doi:10.1017/S1742058X11000178.

Despite this high praise, he was not offered a professorship. It was clear that only his race was preventing him from being hired. This experience led to “constant brooding over the limitations he faced as a Negro,” which produced a breakdown that landed him in a mental institution for more than a decade (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 63, p. 8). He spoke of another “gifted” African American who moved to a foreign country to escape racism. Unable to remain separated from his home country, he returned, only to become more and more disillusioned and disappointed by the continuing restrictions he faced on account of race. He, too, had a breakdown, and he died at a relatively young age (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 63, p. 8).

Though Mays knew of many such incidents, he retained his optimism—his positive internal terministic screen—and continually held out hope to his audiences. For example, Mays concluded “The Negro College Graduate in America” by arguing that America’s “democracy, our religious heritage, [and] science” all tended toward producing freedom for all:

I began this address by saying that 15 years from tonight such a topic as this one will be superfluous and that our great grandchildren will be amazed that we even discussed it. I make this prediction because America is a democracy and not a totalitarian power; each American is “endowed by his Creator with certain inalienable rights and that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Our government is committed to protect these rights. I make this prediction because we cling to certain religious ideals. We are not an atheistic, materialistic people sacrificing the individual for the perpetuation of a totalitarian state. I make the prophecy again because we accept the findings of science that the people of the earth are potentially equal. Thus democracy, our religious heritage, science. On these three I make my prophecy. (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 63, p. 6)

Here again, we see terms like *democracy*, *protect*, *ideals*, *individual*, *prophecy*, *science*, and *equal* opposed to negative terms such as *totalitarian*, *atheistic*, and *materialistic*. Unfortunately, as chapter 2 has shown, Mays’ optimism was perhaps premature, for many of the problems plaguing American society in the twentieth century still remain. But for Mays, “faith in God, faith in our democracy, faith in the Christian religion, and faith in the Negro’s ability to achieve” were intertwined with one another (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 55, p. 6).

As this discussion of Mays' attitudes toward race in America has shown, Mays was very aware of the inequity African Americans faced in most areas of life. But rather than displaying bitterness and a desire to exact revenge on the whites who had worked for centuries to harm his people, Mays instead exhibited an appreciation of the nation's ideals and eternal faith in God's grace. He seemed still to hew to the ideals he had expressed approximately a decade earlier, in his Bates speech: "Let us who love America and her institutions, let us who love justice better than injustice, let us who love democracy rather than autocracy, let us who see the right as God gives us to see the right, fight for a safe solution of the race problem" (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 1, p. 4). Mays remained steadfast throughout his life in the hope for change in America, believing until the end that "the vast majority of the American people wish for the Negro the rights and privileges accorded to other Americans" (Mays Papers, D: 223-121, 39, p. 2).

## **Religion**

Mays believed that this vision of American reconciliation must come about because, according to him, the founding documents were based on Christian principles: "This country was founded on the Christian faith which was the foundation upon which it was built. The Declaration of Independence is a religious document," he says. He points out that the Declaration is simply a record of rights that have been bestowed on every human being by God ("it is clearly stated that one gets his status not from government but from God"), and that the function of government is to protect these God-given rights for all citizens (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 13, p. 1-2).

As we have seen, his faith in God was intertwined with his faith in democracy, and this is reflected in the modified cluster analysis results in the area of religion. For this reason, I include many of the terms relating to democracy in both the race grouping (examined in the previous

section) and in the religion grouping. Mays acknowledged his faith in God, whether explicitly or indirectly, in virtually every speech he delivered. The terms that appeared most often in these groupings were, in order of frequency, God, Lord, or Creator (39 times), and Jesus or Christ (8 times); Christian, Christianity, church, religion, faith, or morality (37 times); and democracy, founding documents, or Declaration of Independence (33 times).

Mays' views on race and racism, and his optimism and hopefulness, were also strongly influenced by his Christian faith. One important Biblical insight that framed much of Mays' work and that grounded many of his motivational rhetorical techniques was that God is no "respector of persons": he often said that God does not relate to his children on the basis of their race, gender, or other factors. This simple statement, which Mays had heard his minister preach in his childhood, was part of what enabled him to develop ambitions beyond the constraints that were placed on African American children in South Carolina at the turn of the twentieth century.

The reference is easily found: Peter is said to have uttered it in Acts 10:34 and Paul says it in Romans 2:9. James says something similar in the second chapter of his letters, right after reminding the followers of Christ to "love thy neighbor as thyself" (verse 8). He reminds his readers that it is sinful to show favoritism, or to "have respect to persons" (verse 9). This simple truth appears to be foundational to Mays' worldview. It certainly influenced his beliefs about how to foster racial harmony and African American progress, as discussed in the previous section. Mays said on several occasions that men and women of many races needed to work together to bring about progress. He was proud of his race—"So let black people be proud of their blackness, proud of their African blood, walk the earth with dignity and pride, apologizing to nobody"—but his pride was not arrogant or antagonistic. It was based on his recognition that "we, too, are sons of the living God":

All men are brothers because God is father of all. If God is the common father and if all men are brothers, then it inevitably follows that the human family is one family. It belongs together. The destiny of each individual is tied up with the destiny of all men that inherit the globe. Human life is so closely bound up with the life of God that one cannot injure the life of man without injuring the life of God. The life of each individual, therefore, is of intrinsic worth and value. If God is holy and sacred and if man is born in God's image, the life of each human being must also be sacred. We must believe that all men are brothers; that God is the father of all or he is the father of none; that the life of every child is sacred or the life of no child is sacred. If we cannot believe these things about God, Jesus, and man and act on them, there is little hope for us in this atomic age. What we believe, therefore, is important; we are what we believe; and what we believe we do. (Mays 1951)

This quotation shows Mays' belief in the interconnection of all people with one another and with God. He links terms that have to do with family and connection (*father, brothers, family, human family, together*) with words that relate to each individual human (*destiny, individual*) and words that imply connection (*belongs, tied up with*). The sense of shared purpose, of shared community, and of brotherhood articulated in this passage seems to have underpinned his attitude toward racism in America, and his lack of bitterness (as described in the previous section). He believed that each individual person had a part to play in this great reconciliation, no matter how small or meek or unimportant they seemed. Mays often quoted Jeremiah 1:5, in which God tells the prophet Jeremiah, who did not believe himself to be old enough to carry out one of God's assignments, "Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou cometh forth out of the womb I sanctified thee and ordained thee a prophet unto the nations" (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 2, p. 1-2). Mays believed that even young people had a part to play in bringing to fruition his abiding faith that African Americans would one day be accepted as full citizens and would have access to all the opportunity that America had to offer, and this belief underpinned his educational mission.

This notion of being called to service was important to Mays. In the fifty-four speeches—particularly those delivered at the installations of the presidents of other historically black



colleges and universities—he used the term at least ten times. When Mays spoke at the installation of Dr. Samuel Cook as president of Dillard University in New Orleans (April 3, 1976), he addressed Cook directly, charging him to work toward a better world with his new power: “you have been called by the trustees and God to take a great institution and make it better, a better institution and make it the best. . . . I charge you, Mr. President, to serve Dillard as if God Almighty sent you into the world at this particular point in time to build a greater Dillard” (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 3, p. 1–2). Mays made a similar comment at the installation of Charles E. Taylor as president of Wilberforce University in Cincinnati (March 18, 1977), in a speech titled “The Black College and the Development of the Mind.” He told the audience that Taylor must have been called to this position and said to the audience, “Doctor Taylor will serve Wilberforce as if God called him into the world at this precise moment in time to serve Wilberforce” (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 41, p. 1–7). As these statements show, Mays believed men and women can be called to positions of leadership and service in the same way that Jeremiah was called by God to speak as a prophet, and he believed that those who are called have an obligation to work as diligently as their hearts, minds, souls, and strength will permit to achieve all that God intended for them. There is no evidence that Mays believe the students were called, but he certainly believed those who served them were to act as if they were called.

Mays believed greatness was to be found in service and in humility, not in self-aggrandizement and individual success. It is clear from previous discussions of clustered terms that individualism is valued primarily in opposition to totalitarianism, Fascism, and Communism, not in terms of individual material success. Mays believed that only by following the will of God and striving to serve God’s people with excellence could one achieve greatness. During a speech to the Southern Conference of Black Mayors in Atlanta, Georgia (April 10, 1976), Mays recited

to the audience the classic statement that “Some men are born great, some achieve greatness, and others have greatness thrust upon them,” but he disagreed with the conclusion, instead suggesting that true greatness is achieved by responding to the call of God and addressing the needs of humankind (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 14, p. 4). He charged Cook to instill this same belief in the students at Dillard:

Encourage them to be more concerned with serving the people than serving themselves. The role of the Dillard physician must be not primarily to make money but to serve mankind, to keep the living alive and to ease pain and suffering. A physician’s happiness, if it is to be found, will be discovered not in the car he rides in, as indispensable as a car is, but to extend the life of the person to serve his or her children and the people. A physician’s happiness must not be in the fact that he owns Rolls-Royces, Lincolns and Cadillacs, but that he sees people living who would have been dead were it not for his skilled surgery. A lawyer must make a living, but the lawyer’s job is to bring justice to the indicted. The teacher who loves his job will teach beyond the paycheck. The minister must be more concerned about the needs of the people than he is about annual gifts the congregation gives him. (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 14, p. 1–2)

Note the repetition of the term *serve* (and variations) in the opening of this passage. He moves from the general notion of direct service to ideas of indirect service (the doctor’s service multiplies as the patient he saved performs his own acts of service). Mays sets in opposition to service various material terms (*money, car, Rolls-Royces, Lincolns, Cadillacs*) and then moves back to more abstract ideals (*living, justice, needs of the people*).

This notion of service to the community rather than for personal gain is also central to his entire attitude about education, as the section that follows this one will show. Mays emphasized the obligation that the privilege of a higher education imposed, insisting that one’s own betterment must also benefit one’s people. As he says above, each person has a duty to use their talents and successes to support their brethren and do good in the world, not to work for their own individual gain.

Terms related to achievement or striving (*achievement, reach, dissatisfaction, hard work, effort*) and their opposing terms (*satisfaction, mediocrity, stagnation, death*) are extremely

common in both Mays' discussions of religion and his work on education (as the next section will show). The oppositions he set up between these two subgroups of terms are clear in a speech delivered at Reverend E. L. Fowler's Program, (Chicago, Illinois, October 10, 1976), where Mays said of himself, "I seek to achieve the best, not the average, not mediocrity, not the second best, but the best. I cannot always do this and in many cases I fail miserably, but I must try" (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 29, p. 1). Note how he connects himself to *achieve* and *best*. These terms are not opposed to *fail* and *try*, but are instead linked to them. The opposing terms here are *average*, *mediocrity*, and *second best*. These achievement terms show up in many speeches—they appear thirty-seven times in my sample of fifty-four speeches. For example, Mays referred to his own striving as an "insatiable desire" (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 29, p. 1). In his speech at the Dillard presidential installation, he said to Cook, simply, "You can never afford to settle for mediocrity" (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 14, p. 1–2). Mays told Cook that his job was to "take a great institution and make it better, a better institution and make it the best" (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 14, p. 1–2). The undertaking of such an effort with such an end is what Mays called "striving."

He felt that striving must be part of the human condition. For example, at the 100th Anniversary celebration of the Dexter Avenue church, Mays said, "there is no end to our striving. . . . this striving is the very nature of man. Maybe man is a dissatisfied being, and this is good. A satisfied man is a sad spectacle to behold. I pity the church that is satisfied with its past record" (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 56, p. 5). Note here that he links normally positive terms with normally negative ones—*satisfied* with *sad*, *dissatisfied* with *good*. At Trinity Baptist Church in Los Angeles (November 20, 1977), he continued this line of thought, arguing that "if a teacher is satisfied with his teaching, he will never teach better, if the minister is satisfied with his last

sermon, he will never preach a better one, or if a surgeon is satisfied with his operating skills, he will never improve. God intends for man to grow, and it is this internal striving that enables growth” (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 55, p. 2). At Dexter Avenue, he continued, “Man was made not to rest, not to look to the end of the road, but he was made to look forward to some worthwhile work” (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 56, p. 9).

Mays was troubled by students who attended college without a burning desire to achieve, so he argued that “the first function of an institution of learning is to create in the student a desire to achieve something noble, something worthwhile, by helping him to develop his mind to the ultimate” (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 60, p. 2). This was an understandable view of one who was nineteen years old before he was able to attend school more than four months out of the year.

Mays’ religious views on the importance of striving also fueled his commitment to providing high-quality education, for Mays believed in the concept of original sin, and he was convinced that no person could be truly good without great effort. His passion for education grew out of his vision of “a fundamental selfishness or defect in human nature,” which he also referred to as the original sin (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 34, p. 5–7). Mays saw education as the best antidote for this congenital weakness of spirit, which he described in the same speech explaining why human beings need education:

I have seldom, if ever, known a nation, however religious, seen a race, however democratic in its pronouncement, known an individual, however Christian in his confession, who would not take advantage of the ignorant, the weak and the cowardly. Whether nation or individual, the weak will be exploited, the ignorant will be cheated, the lazy and the idol will be trodden upon, the coward will be kept running and the jittery will be kept bouncing. The poor do not have an equal chance to bargain with the rich. The ignorant man starts out handicapped when confronted with the man who knows. The coward is licked as soon as he faces the fearless. This is the nature of man—not as I would like for it to be but as it is. (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 34, p. 5–7)

Mays connects *nature*—human nature—with negative traits (*take advantage, ignorant, weak, cowardly, exploited, cheated, lazy, idol, handicapped*). Although Mays believed in the power of

religion to transform mankind, Mays felt that everyone must understand the weakness of human nature, for it is knowledge of this weakness that inspires people to work hard and overcome their failings.

Mays thus believed that education would help students avoid the consequences of their ignorance, weakness, and cowardice. He also believed that education alone was not enough—that students (especially African American students) needed religion to help them navigate the vicissitudes of life. Mays explained why in his January 18, 1941 speech titled “The Negro Student Needs Religion” (Mays Papers D: 223-119, 3, p. 1–2).<sup>13</sup>

These students are urged to consider as valid only that which can be weighed, measured and tested. They hear much about the scientific method. They are told that truth is that which can be reduced to mathematical formulae and statistical analysis. A few able professors, brilliant in their respective fields but untrained in religion and lacking in religious experience, go out of their way to take a crack at the church and religion. A few of them tell Negro students that all religion is compensatory and that it serves as an opiate for the people. They are encouraged to ridicule and laugh at the religion of their fathers. They are told that Christianity has failed. The present World War, the economic confusion of our time, and the political chaos of man are being effectively used to prove that Christianity is helpless. Confused, bewildered and disillusioned, they are likely to become cynical, hostile toward religion and ultra-critical of the church. They are likely to throw out as useless the one thing that can save them from despair. (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 3, p. 1–2)

Mays notes here that we are taught to value only the empirical (*weighed, measured, tested, scientific method, mathematical formulae, and statistical analysis*) and he links these empirical terms to the term *brilliant*. But *brilliant* is also linked to *lacking, take a crack, compensatory, opiate, ridicule, laugh, failed*. And this cluster of negative terms is linked to the next set of terms, which articulate the effects on the world and on students of this linked chain of terms from

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<sup>13</sup> This speech was apparently based on an article in the *Journal of Negro Education*, as the speech manuscript has an asterisk with a note at the bottom of the page: “Condensed, with new introduction and title, from *Journal of Negro Education*, July 1940.” The original article was titled “The Religious Life and Needs of Negro Students,” and it was published in 1940 in the *Journal of Negro Education* IX (Summer): 332–343. Accessed at <http://www.journalnegroed.org/1940summertbc.pdf>

empiricism to brilliance to failure: *confusion, chaos, helpless, bewildered, disillusioned, cynical, hostile, ultra-critical, despair*. Cluster analysis indicates the effects of these academic dismissals of religion on students.

The effects are especially bad for African American students, who Mays points out are most likely to need the comfort and purpose and hope that religious faith can provide, because “the road of the Negro student is hard—harder by far than the road which is to be traveled by the white student. [The African American student] has the normal handicaps of a human being plus those imposed upon him because of his race” (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 3, p. 1–2). He therefore encouraged African American students to defend their religious beliefs, and to retain them alongside their study in academic subjects.

He also argues in the same speech that African American students need to stay grounded in their churches, arguing that “Negro students need to develop a critical but fair appreciation for the Negro church despite its shortcomings.” Although he agreed with some of the students’ criticisms of the black church, he felt that they did not fully appreciate that, except for a few businesses, “the Negro church is the most completely-owned institution in the Negro race.” According to Mays, the church provides an opportunity for African Americans to develop and exercise leadership skills, furnishes a place for people to relax after having dealt with various pressures during the week, encourages education and nurtures business, bridges the gap between the social classes in the African American race, and has transcended race by opening its door to all people regardless of color. Its ministers have persistently offered African Americans new terministic screens, telling parishioners that they were made in God’s image and that they were as good as any human being God has made. Mays believed, then, that “it is the student’s responsibility to help make it [the church] more efficient by criticizing it constructively from the

inside rather than hurling epithets at it from the outside” (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 3, p. 1–2).

He argued that the church would help students develop their characters, their inner discipline and conscience, and help turn good men into great men:

Negro students, all students, need authority and this authority is to be found in religion. . . an individual, if he is to be a personality that counts, must keep forever the lines of his destiny in his own hands. And that means some kind of inner authority. At certain points, he or she must defy the mores, refuse to be used, whether by men or systems, and decide within himself or herself that there are some things which he will not do. Ethics and morals may be relative terms. But if the student is to count, he must build up for himself a system of ethics which for him is final authority. (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 3, p. 1–2)

Note the connection of terms here: *students* are connected to *authority*, and *authority* is connected to *religion*. *Individual* is connected to *destiny* and to *inner authority*, and to many terms of self-decision: *defy*, *refuse*, *decide*, *ethics*, *morals*, and finally back again to *authority*. Although the sense of this passage examines the church’s authority over young people, the progression of the clustered terms indicates instead the individual development of inner authority, of moral self-determination—precisely the outcome Mays wanted from students’ involvement with the church.

Just as the issue of race served as a lens through which Mays made sense of his world, so did religion, which for him was foundational. These are the first two topics that he addressed most consistently in his writing and speeches. The third central topic of Mays’ thought was education.

## **Education**

The third significant area of focus in Mays’ writings and speeches was education, which cluster analysis revealed to be by far his largest priority: when categorizing terms from the fifty-four selected speeches, 148 terms were determined to be focused on education. Of those, the largest grouping was the thirty-seven terms that referred to achievement (discussed briefly in terms of “striving” in the previous section). That number grew to forty-five when I added the

instances that referred to Morehouse in particular. The centrality of achievement and its opposite terms is condensed in a line from Mays' speech titled "The Function of a College": "the first function of an institution of higher learning is to create in the student a desire to achieve something noble, something worthwhile, by helping him to develop his mind to the ultimate" (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 60, p. 2). He continued by arguing that higher education should arouse the student and make him or her dissatisfied with satisfaction and mediocrity. The god term in this speech is easily identified as *achieve*, and Mays' term that most powerfully opposes it is *satisfaction*. According to Mays, the word *satisfaction* is taken from two Latin words meaning *enough done* (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 56, p. 7-8). This is clearly an opposing term to Mays' notion of *achievement* or to *striving*, one of the good terms that supplements achievement, and one which Mays labels as being "the very nature of man" (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 56, p. 8). Mays also very often opposed to *achievement* the terms *mediocre*, *ordinary*, and even *death*—terms that are often equated with *satisfaction*, as when, in "Education for What?" he argued that "when satisfaction comes, a man ceases to grow; he stagnates and dies" (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 34, p. 2).

Though Mays was force-fed a heavy diet of white supremacy—"Few men in my time have experienced more indignities in Negro-white relations than I"—he had the benefit of receiving affirming messages from his mother, his teachers, and others, and he knew the importance of other people's high expectations and support. Both of his parents had been born into slavery, but his mother always told him that he was as good as anybody (Mays 1987, 1). She supplemented her affirmations by ensuring that Mays had many strong African American role models, filling the house with pictures, books, and pamphlets that profiled African American heroes. Mays' parents bought this material from door-to-door salesmen, although they



themselves could not read (Mays 1987, 3). As Mays discussed in speeches about his black heroes (see Race section for this discussion), the books in the Mays house included the Bible, a dictionary, school textbooks, newspapers, and picture books about Frederick Douglass, Crispus Attucks, Booker T. Washington, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, and other notable African Americans (Mays 1987, 20). Because of his exposure to this reading material at home, Mays knew more than any other children in his class when he started school. He realized during his first day of school that, at age six, he was the only one who could say the alphabet, count to one hundred, and read. As a result, he was lavishly praised by his teacher. Teachers' praise and high expectations of him continued to motivate Mays throughout his school days (Mays 1987, 11).

However, his academic journey was not easy. As he wrote in *Born to Rebel*, he did not graduate from college until he was twenty-six years old. Mays was nineteen before he had an opportunity to attend school more than four months of the year, yet he was proud to tell an audience that he graduated high school at twenty-one years old as valedictorian of his class. He finished high school at the high school department of South Carolina State College in Orangeburg, South Carolina. He then graduated with honors from Bates College in 1926 (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 16, p. 1).<sup>14</sup> At Bates, he won the Declamation Prize during his sophomore year, was captain of the debate team, and earned Phi Beta Kappa honors. Between finishing high school at South Carolina State and matriculating at Bates as a sophomore, he spent his freshman year at Virginia Union, a historically black college in Richmond. After he graduated from Bates, he earned a PhD from the University of Chicago.

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<sup>14</sup> In this speech, he said he graduated from high school at the age of twenty-one, but in another speech that year, given in Albuquerque, New Mexico, he said he graduated from high school at age twenty-two ("The Place and Function of the Black College in American Higher Education," Mays Papers).

Beginning early in his presidency at Morehouse, Mays was often invited to deliver remarks at the installation of other African American college presidents. He took advantage of several such occasions to discuss his “philosophy of education.” For example, at the installation of Samuel Hay at Stillman College in Tuscaloosa (October 28, 1949), he delivered an address titled, “The Function of a College,” in which he listed four things that he believed education should do for students. According to Mays, “The first function of an institution of learning is to create in the student a desire to achieve something noble, something worthwhile,” and this, he said, could only be achieved “by teaching the student to use his mind.” (He associates learning with positive terms such as *desire*, *achieve*, *noble*, *worthwhile*—terms that all come back to *mind*.) Its second function is “to arouse the student, to make the student restless and dissatisfied with mediocre, ordinary performance. Satisfaction means stagnation and death,” he said. (He repeated in numerous speeches this conception of *stagnation*, which ties in with the notion of “striving” discussed in the previous section of this chapter. Note the grouping of opposing terms—*arouse*, *restless*, *dissatisfied*, *mediocre*, *ordinary*, *satisfaction*, *stagnation*, *death*—all negative terms that are used here in a positive manner to describe motivations, spurs to achievement.) Third, he said the college should endeavor to prepare its students for citizenship. Although democratic principles were being violated in the area of race relations, Mays said, African American colleges should never abandon those principles nor the Christian ideal: “If our civilization is to survive, it will survive because we take our democracy and Christianity seriously,” he said. (Again he connects *civilization* with *democracy* and *Christianity*.) Finally, he believed that the aim of all education was to train men and women for social responsibility. His belief that all men and women have a commitment to serve others was grounded in his fervent

belief that one only has good fortune “by the grace of God” (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 60, p. 1–8).

In service of that first function—“creating in the student the desire to achieve something noble and excellent”—Mays encouraged teachers to inspire students to use their minds to the fullest extent to achieve excellence in whatever job they assume, whether medicine or farming. Mays felt that students were too often not strivers. He said bluntly that it disturbed him that too few students of that generation “have a burning desire to achieve all that they could possibly achieve with the mindset that God has given them” (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 60, p. 3.). According to Mays, this lack of desire in students placed a great responsibility on professors to identify talent and stimulate the students’ desire to achieve something noble and excellent. Intellect was not enough, Mays said, for to develop the mind without developing character and integrity was like giving a shotgun to a fool (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 60, p. 3.).

He had shared these views on the role of education in developing men of character and influencing positive social change a few years earlier at the February 19, 1945, Founders Day program at Morehouse:

One of the fundamental defects in the world today is the fact that man’s intellect has been developed to a point beyond his integrity and beyond his ability to be good. The conflicts between nation and nation, the hatred between race and race, and the ill will between man and man are not exclusively intellectual issues. They are equally ethical and moral. It will not be sufficient for Morehouse College, or any college for that matter, to produce clever graduates . . . but rather honest men, men who can be trusted both in public and private life—men who are sensitive to the wrongs, the sufferings, and the injustices of society and who are willing to accept responsibility for correcting the ills. (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 17, p. 1)

Note that (similarly to the analysis of the terms in “The Negro Student Needs Religion”) Mays connects *defect* to *intellect*, opposing both to *integrity* and *ability to be good*. The cluster analysis indicates that Mays felt strongly that developing the mind without developing the moral character was dangerous, both for the individual and for society. Mays addresses the importance

of developing all aspects of the self in another speech at Morehouse (March 11, 1956), in which Mays discussed his notion of “The Four Square Man” (Mays Papers, D: 223-120, 37, p. 3–4). In this speech, he implored Morehouse students to treat their bodies like the temple of God, to train their minds to be able to tackle seemingly intractable social and economic problems, to live as moral beings, and to give religion its proper place in their lives. Though not dismissive of science and technology, he placed it after these four priorities and asked whether technological advances were resulting in improvements in the quality of people’s lives:

This last generation in particular, has given major emphasis to the natural sciences and we have turned out physicists, chemists, engineers, in superabundance. Industrially, materially, we are at the apex of power and wealth. [But] Have our morals improved? Our checking accounts are larger, our wages and salaries are advanced, our purchases are more abundant and costly, but are we more generous, more charitable? (Mays Papers, D: 223-120, 37, p. 3–4)

Here, he opposes terms like sciences, physicists, chemists, engineers, industrially, materially, apex, power, wealth, purchases, abundant, and costly against morals and improved, generous and charitable, implying that these two sets of qualities counterbalance one another—that one can be developed at the expense of the other. It is to be noted, however, that in this passage the material terms far outnumber the abstract moral terms, which perhaps indicates some ambivalence on Mays’ part. In the same speech, he quoted Edmund Sinnott, director of the Sheffield Scientific School at Yale University, as saying, “If we train [man] to master material things without enlarging his spirit, he is but half a man. The greatest peril now is from one-sided, partly-educated men. Only whole men can save the world today” (Mays Papers, D: 223-120, 37, p. 6). A couple of years later, in the 1950 Founders Day program, Mays returned to this theme, arguing that “our greatest need in education and religion is to improve the human product.” Note here that he uses the language of capital to refer to human beings, connecting human to product—an odd choice for one speaking against the seductions of the material world. He noted the advances

in technology and material life, but said, “I doubt if we have made as much progress in that area of human relations [improving the human being].” According to Mays, the mission of Morehouse was “to do something about it. For if we cannot make men better, our education availeth for naught” (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 37, n.p.).

The question of education’s purpose was always present to Mays. He titled his Stillman speech “The Function of a College,” but in the numerous times he reprised it—at least eleven—he titled it variously, “Education—To What End?” and “Education for What?”<sup>15</sup> In this speech, he listed education’s benefits: it trains the mind to think clearly and constructively, enriches life, enables a man to defend himself against the corrupt, equips man to serve others, sharpens insights to see man’s potential, makes man sensitive to others’ needs, and creates discontent which creates that healthy striving that Mays so prized.

Most of these benefits of education are benefits to the individual, but he discussed another reason that is clearly a benefit to society, based in a sense of social responsibility. Mays articulated this benefit as follows: “For if one has a better mind than his fellows, more wealth than his fellows, is more favorably circumstanced than his fellows, has a better opportunity to develop than his fellows, he is obligated to use his skills in the interest of the common good” (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 34, p. 8). In this passage, Mays first examines the individual gifts (*better mind, more wealth, favorably circumstanced, better opportunity*) that can be developed by education, and then connects these individual gifts to obligation: he links the term *obligated* to *skills, interest, and common good*. This could be thought of as a “talented tenth” approach.

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<sup>15</sup> According to the notes handwritten on the file folder that contained this speech, Mays delivered it on the following dates: May 25, 1953; February 21, 1973 [Alabama State University, Montgomery, AL]; March 4, 1973; May 9, 1973; June 10, 1973; March 21, 1976; April 2, 1976; June 6, 1976; September 19, 1976; April 20, 1977; and May 14, 1978. For the 1973 version, see D: 223-119, 34, p. 4–14. For other versions of this speech, see D: 223-135, 37, p. 2B, 3, 4; D: 223-135, 37, p. 12–13; D: 223-119, 34, p. 8–10; and D: 223-119, 34, p. 12. For the version titled “Education—To What End?” see D: 223-135, 37, p. 2B.

Recall that in the Religion section, I offered evidence that Mays highly valued the use of one's talents to serve one's community. This position also plays out in his discussion of education, which he saw as a tool not to help individuals raise themselves above others but to enable individuals to help raise others along with them—especially those who are less fortunate. Mays believed that the most talented individuals must use their gifts to serve “the common good” because “trained minds are rare—only a small percentage of the total population of the world are trained minds. And to whom much is given, much is required” (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 34, p. 8–10). Mays knew that one cannot choose the quality of one's mind. People fortunate enough to be brilliant are so by the gift of God, and that gift should be used for the glory of God and in service to humankind (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 34, p. 8–10). According to Mays, “Education should make one sensitive to the needs of the world” (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 34, p. 8).

To effectively turn out graduates who use their talents to benefit others, Mays argued that colleges and universities should learn as much as possible about the character and dispositions of their applicants. He said at Virginia Union Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 55, p.9), “The end of education should not be to ‘provide the student with skills,’ as important as skills are. . . . The end of education should be to improve life and make men better. The end is not to make a mathematician, but to make a good man who is a mathematician” (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 55, p. 9). This sentiment is similar in structure, but opposed in logic, to Mays' many claims that African Americans should prioritize other identity categories over race (“strive to be an agriculturist, not a Negro agriculturist—just an agriculturist! Strive to be a doctor, not a Negro doctor—just a doctor!” [Mays 1987, 104]). Here, the *good man* category is prioritized over the secondary category of mathematician. Mays continued to espouse this philosophy throughout his career, consistently writing and telling audiences that “the aim of education should be to glorify

God and to serve mankind” (Mays Papers, D: 223-121, 30, p. 2B). He was clear in his belief that the college should focus on character and integrity as seriously as it focuses on intellectual training, for only then would those fortunate enough to gain access to a college education be able to carry out the mission of lifting their entire people. When Mays said at the Morehouse Founders Day program in 1945 that the very purpose of the college was to “develop good men” who would be “ethical and moral,” his definition included a commitment to service (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 19, p. 2).

He reminded his audiences that it is only as a community that people rise, for every individual has strengths and every individual has weaknesses: “Persons are superior in only one or a few areas. The most brilliant person is inferior to somebody in something” (Mays 1964). Again, note the connection of *brilliant* to *inferior* here. Mays often connected the term *brilliant* to negative terms. Mays knew the value of community, and urged his audiences to work together to accomplish great things. He articulated his vision of education most neatly in a speech titled “Howard University: Retrospect and Prospect,” which he delivered at Howard University on June 9, 1967:

In the future, Howard will be challenged to create and design programs to close the gaps between the college and university men and the dropouts and the unskilled, those who live in the ghettos and slums, poorly housed, ill-clad, living on substandard salaries or no salaries at all. Howard will be challenged to take the gown to the town and the slums and bring the town and the slums to the university campus. This will take will, a creativity, an imagination which we may not now have, but it must be done if Howard University is to serve all classes of people in the decades ahead. . . . Howard in the second century should train its graduates to know that we are all a part of mankind and that no man is good enough, no man a strong enough, and no man is wise enough to think that he is better than another man and thus justified in setting himself apart from the man farthest down for if one man has more intellect than another, is richer than another, it may be luck or fate. We are all what we are largely by accident or God’s grace. (Mays Papers, D: 223-123, 32, p. 11)

Here, he connects college and university men to *dropouts* and *unskilled* (which are connected to *ghettos*, *slums*, *poorly housed*, *ill-clad*, *substandard*). This set of connections is then itself

connected to *will, creativity, imagination, and mankind*. The graduate is warned by his negative connections to be *good, strong, wise, better* to not feel justified in setting himself apart. And the passage ends with *luck, fate, accident, grace*. The terms show the importance of community connection and shared work and goals, and remind graduates that at the end we are all subject to luck, fate, accident, grace, no matter our individual talents. This speech thus moves readers through a tightly linked set of Mays' educational values: the importance of service and of social justice, the obligation of the lucky or talented to lift up others, the centrality of hard work and striving, the sense of the brotherhood of all, and the reminder that all things we have are ours only by the grace of God.

These are high expectations, but Mays always had high expectations. That was one of his methods for bringing out the best in people. He motivated his students and himself by setting high, difficult (but not impossible), clearly articulated expectations. These expectations are bound up with the notion of striving, discussed in the Religion section. Mays expected students to develop their talents for the good of the community by working hard. Mays himself was a relentlessly hard worker, and he expected the same of others. As Mays said, a key reason he worked so hard to succeed is that his family and friends had high expectations for him when he was a child, and others continued to place great expectations upon him as his life and career progressed:

All the years of my life the "people" have driven me on: my unschooled and unlettered mother, who encouraged me; and the teachers in the one-room, four-month school in rural South Carolina who predicted that I would do well in life. I said to myself, "I cannot let these people down." When the unlettered people in my country church clapped their hands and stamped their feet when I said my piece on children's day, prophesying that I would go far in the world, I felt obligated "not to let the home people down."

Note that he connects his *people* (mother, teachers) with being *driven* and with *encouragement*, and he connects these terms with terms that render the effect of their expectations on him—



obligation, a sense that he cannot let people down. He reiterated the importance of other people's expectations of him in other. For example, on June 5, 1976, while accepting an award, he told his audience why he was compelled to work so hard. He said that when he was a boy in South Carolina, he would overhear adults saying that he was smart, that he would make something of himself. He committed himself to working hard to prove them right, to never let them down. He told the audience that the award they were giving him felt like that boyhood experience: by presenting the award to him, according to Mays, they were saying, "we have confidence in you. We are expecting more. Don't let us down, even at [your] age." Therefore, he said, "I have been and am now my own hard task master. I must satisfy myself that what has been done, I have given it the best that I had under the circumstances" (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 17, p. 2). He sought to give his students and audiences that same experience. Just as his family's and teachers' high expectations had inspired and challenged him to exceed them, he held high expectations for his students in hopes that they, too, would take up the challenge through hard work.

I have discussed Mays' view of satisfaction as equivalent to death previously, in the section on striving. According to Mays, his "philosophy of life" was to never be satisfied. He told students at South Carolina State this philosophy early in his speaking career ("Summary of the Commencement Address," Mays Papers), and he was still discussing it at age eighty-two:

I plead guilty to the charge that I am a perfectionist. I seek to achieve the best, not the average, not mediocrity, not the second best, but the best. I cannot always do this and in many instances I fail miserably, but I must try. This insatiable desire to attain the best, to always reach for the moon and grasp after Mars, keeps me alive. (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 29, p. 1)

Mays connects *perfectionist* with *best* and opposes it to *average*, *mediocrity*, *second best*—terms that then connect to *fail miserably*. Mays then immediately goes back to the language of striving: *try*, *insatiable*, *best*, *reach*, and *grasp*. The motion of these terms—from attempt to failure and almost immediately back to attempt again—bears out the sense of this passage, the inevitability

of striving for Mays. This notion of endless striving was one that he wished his students to adhere to also. He suggested that they compete with men and women who had gone before them, with those of their generation, and even with those yet unborn: he said that a farmer's goal should be to "raise potatoes as good as those the farmers will raise a thousand years from now" (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 32, p. 4–5). He exhorted students to accept no limits, to achieve beyond the confines of racism and Jim Crow.

Mays also told students that they should also accept no excuses—he reminded them that segregated and inferior schools could not prevent them from mastering Shakespeare, and he acknowledged that in a racist society, African Americans must be even more prepared than the white men against whom he competes. As he told the Women's Division of the UNCF in 1950:

It must be a cardinal principle in all of the UNCF colleges that as the walls of segregation and discrimination continue to crumble, as they surely will, the Negro student must become increasingly better prepared to meet the competition of an unsegregated society. We may explain with the eloquence of Demosthenes, the logic of Socrates, and the fluency of Cicero why the handicaps of more than three centuries make it impossible for the Negro youth to measure up with white youth in every particular. It may all be true and it may be convincingly said; but, if the Negro is not qualified, he cannot expect the job. This is the emphasis that must be made in every UNCF college. [The] handicaps of the past cannot be used as credentials to unlock closed doors in education, industry, government, and other phases of American life. (Mays Papers, D: 223-121, 39, p. 3)

No excuses would be accepted, not even those born of truth. Note the shifting terms: from *walls, segregation, discrimination* to *crumble*; from the *Negro student* to *prepared, competition, unsegregated*, then briefly to *handicaps* and *impossible, measure up* and *white youth*. *Negro* is then connected to *qualified, expect, job*. Then back to *handicaps, credentials, unlock, closed, and doors*. The passage ends on *American life*. These shifting connections show both the barriers facing African American students and Mays' belief in their ability to overcome them, to end at that shared unsegregated American life that Mays saw as the eminently possible end goal of the civil rights movement. But the negative terms are nearly equal to the positive terms here.

How does Mays believe that students should succeed against these odds? In the same speech, he said,

The only way for the Negro student to overcome the handicaps of the past and to be able to compete in the open market, he must be willing to work extremely hard and make tremendous sacrifices through sweat, blood, and tears in order to make up for the disabilities imposed upon him in a segregated society. For he who starts behind in the great race of life must forever remain behind or run faster than the man in front. Complaining, excuses and bitterness will not help. (Mays Papers, D: 223-121, 39, p. 3)

Here again, *Negro student* is connected to *handicaps* and *past*, but also to *compete*, *open*, *work*, *sacrifices*, *sweat*, *blood*, *tears*—terms that are necessitated by the situation: *disabilities*, *imposed*, *segregated society*, *behind*. The student's only option is to work harder (*run faster*). Mays cautions against *complaining*, *excuses*, *bitterness* in the face of these obstacles.

Of course, Mays himself lived by this precept, as his discussions of perfectionism and striving show. He demonstrated hard work in the way he conducted his life, and he encouraged other educators to set a similar example—to inspire hard work among their students by serving as role models of effort. He told Stillman's faculty and newly installed president that “the students must see in the teachers the qualities which they want their students to possess. If the teachers have no desire to achieve further, if the teachers are satisfied with ordinary, mediocre performance, so will the students [be]” (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 60, p. 3). Students can only learn what they see modeled: The faculty and president would stimulate the students' desire to achieve by exhibiting quality in the classroom and exemplifying quality in the administration building.

It all comes down to high expectations. They had motivated Mays, and he believed that they would motivate his students. *Expectations* is a key term in many of his writings and speeches on education. For example, in “The President's Charge to the Class of 1961” (a graduation speech given at Morehouse on June 1, 1961), Mays says, “There is an air of

*expectancy* at Morehouse College. It is *expected* that the student who enters here will do well. It is also *expected* that once a man bears the insignia of a Morehouse graduate he will do exceptionally well. We *expect* nothing less” (emphasis added; Mays Papers, D: 223-120, 72). In his “Charge to the Class of 1962” (June 1, 1965), he said something similar: “We expect you to do well whatever you touch and to make a creditable, honorable mark in the world. From now on, you bear the stamp of Morehouse” (Mays Papers, D: 223-120, 72). In these passages, Mays connected *expectation* to *Morehouse* and to achievement terms (*exceptionally well, well, creditable, honorable*), then back to *Morehouse* once again. Mays deliberately deployed the language of high expectations as he exhorted his students to make Morehouse, him, and each other proud.

At Morehouse’s 1957 Founders Day celebration, Mays discussed Morehouse’s “five abiding values” that marked the college’s first ninety years. According to Mays, Morehouse encouraged the student to think “logically, constructively and discriminatingly”; to develop the very highest character, training men to be “dependable, reliable, trustworthy, honest, true”; to believe in God as “the ultimate authority in our lives”; to be “concerned for the welfare of the community”; and not to accept any limitations—to understand that “a better tomorrow” needed to be “partly molded by them” (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 60, p. 1–4). These terms—all positive, seeming to sum up the terms and themes that have been examined in this chapter’s analysis—are all connected, in his mind, to Morehouse itself, and its methods of teaching the whole student, of encouraging achievement and ambition in talented students who were at risk of being ignored and undeveloped by racist white society. To achieve these goals, Mays knew that he needed to inspire and motivate his students to achieve the great success their communities needed. He knew that “Negro students . . . needed to be encouraged and inspired to aim high and to reach for

the ‘unattainable goals.’ Any speech or informal discussion brought terrific response when it broadened their horizons, assured them that they were ‘somebody,’ and held out hope for the future” (Jelks 2012, 76) When he had worked as Negro student secretary for the national YMCA prior to returning to Chicago for his doctoral work, he directed conferences at Kings Mountain, North Carolina, that attracted the “ablest” African American and white leaders in the country to speak to African American students on religious, social, economic, and racial issues (Mays 1987, 125–126). The goal was to prepare carefully selected African American college students to understand the important issues that men, women, and children of their race faced and to be equipped to address those issues from whatever contexts in which they found themselves. Mays learned from this that students succeeded best when they were told that they could aspire, and that they could succeed, and when that aspiration and success were modeled for them by African Americans who had done exactly that—men like Mays himself.

### **Summary**

Cluster analysis of the terms Mays used and the testimony of his former students indicate that Mays’ rhetorical tactics influenced the students’ thoughts and actions. He told his students that God had blessed them with talent and that they could be as good as anybody—the same assurances from his mother and his minister that had inspired him to work hard to be successful. He instilled pride in his students by teaching them about African Americans who had overcome the legacy of slavery and the strictures of segregation and discrimination and had become successful.<sup>16</sup> He told them that, as individuals who were blessed to have the opportunity to attend

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<sup>16</sup> Many of these role models were former Morehouse students. Mays’ success is immeasurable, but a rough estimation of it is provided by the success of the men and women he influenced over his career, especially the men who attended Morehouse during his presidency. In the fields of politics and government, three alumni of the Mays era have been elected to the United States Congress—Major Owens ’56 of New York, Earl Hilliard ’64 of Alabama, and Sanford Bishop ’68 of Georgia—and Maynard Jackson ’56 was the first African American elected mayor of Atlanta. Herman Cain ’67 pursued the Republican nomination for President of the United States. Louis W. Sullivan ’54 served as Secretary of the US Department of health and Human Services in the administration of President

college, they were obligated to use their gifts to uplift the race. He encouraged the students to work hard in pursuit of excellence, while he himself worked exceedingly hard in the pursuit thereof. He modeled personal grace and exhibited a spirit of reconciliation toward whites while the nation was contradicting its own Christian and democratic ideals in its treatment of its African American citizens.

Mays said on February 18, 1972, in a speech titled “The Uniqueness of Morehouse,” that “Morehouse men have been taught to believe in their ability to accomplish, to be proud of their black heritage, work hard in the belief that despite many crippling circumscriptions, they could make their way in the South and in the nation and thus make the country a better place for all of us.” He also said, “Few colleges, if any, have done so much with so little and so few. As I travel throughout the United States—from Florida to Seattle, from Los Angeles to Maine—people often refer to the contribution Morehouse men are making in their respective communities” (Mays Papers, D: 223-124, 10, p. 4–5). Mays valued grateful comments from his former students. He has said, “I appreciate it when I meet people across this nation who tell me that my life has been an inspiration to them; when I meet Morehouse men everywhere who tell me what

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George H. W. Bush and David Satcher '63 served as US Surgeon General in the William Jefferson Clinton Administration. Several Morehouse alumni—Horace Ward '49, Northern District of Georgia; Joseph Farris '51, Ninth Circuit, US Court of Appeals; Odell Horton '51, Western District of Tennessee; and Reginald C. Lindsay '67, Seventh Circuit, US Court of—have served on the federal bench; and at least three—George W. Haley '49, Ambassador to Gambia; Julius Coles '64, (US Agency for International Development Mission Director to Senegal and Swaziland; and Howard E. Jeter '70, Ambassador to Nigeria and Botswana—have served their country as diplomats. Remarkably, six Mays protégés became college presidents: Hugh M. Gloster Sr. '31, Morehouse, 1967–1987; Samuel Dubois Cook '48, Dillard University, 1974–1997; Walter E. Massey '58, Morehouse College, 1995–2007, Director, National Science Foundation, Dean, Brown University, Provost, University of California System); Leroy Keith Jr. '61, Morehouse, 1987–1994; Michael L. Lomax '68, Dillard, 1997–2004; and Robert M. Franklin '75, Interdenominational Theological Seminary, 1997–2002, and Morehouse College, 2007–2012. Other notable Mays era alumni include Robert E. Johnson '48, former editor and publisher of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines and senior *Ebony* and *Jet* editor and historian Lerone Bennett, Jr. '49. Mays' most prominent protégé and Morehouse's alumnus is undoubtedly Martin Luther King Jr. '48.

my Tuesday morning talks meant to them during their four years at Morehouse” (Mays Papers, D: 223-125, 29, p. 2).

The conditions of his upbringing inspired within him a hope “that someday I would be able to do something about a situation that had shadowed my early years and had killed the spirit of all too many of my people” (Mays 1987, 49). Having developed the first African American mayor of Atlanta, members of Congress, pastors of great churches, college presidents, successful businessmen, and so many more, he certainly accomplished that goal, and his life’s work is an excellent example to those who desire to prepare young African American men for success.

## CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

In chapter 1 of this dissertation, I described the problem of African American male underachievement, comparing their grades and graduation rates with those of non-African American students and with young African American women. I suggested that academic success is a fairly reliable predictor of future career success, and that this achievement gap is therefore a serious problem. I examined the negative images of African American men in popular culture and described how these contribute to the achievement gap. In chapter 2, without relieving young men from responsibility for their own levels of achievement, I offered context for this achievement gap. I described in detail the impediments that have been placed in the way of African Americans, most of whom are descendants of a people who were denied the opportunity of education for three centuries and who were, after Emancipation, systematically denied access to adequate schooling and other resources—all historical facts that impact African American men's educational success. In chapter 3, having provided that context, I surveyed and analyzed the oeuvre of Benjamin Mays, president of Morehouse College for many years and a famously successful educator of black men. I examined hundreds of Mays' speeches and writings to ascertain the rhetorical strategies he employed at Morehouse. In this conclusion, I offer applications of this material that work toward solving the problem of African American male underachievement.

I have developed a clear understanding of the rhetorical strategies Mays employed to help a generation of Morehouse men succeed, and I aim to present these strategies to educators,



parents, teachers, administrators, or anyone else who is involved in young African American men's lives.

I have used Burke's method of cluster-agon analysis to understand how Mays inspired and prepared African American men for success. I found that Mays created a terministic screen that can be called, for the sake of simplicity, the Morehouse Man. His construction of this image influenced the terministic screens through which his students viewed the world and their places in it. The broad applicability of Mays' construction is central to the intervention I make into the discussion about improving academic performance for young African American men. In this conclusion, I make an argument about how to understand and apply Mays' rhetorical strategies.

Argument is a fundamental part of criticism if criticism is to be *useful*, says Wayne Brockriede. This type of applied argument should include five characteristics: (1) an inferential leap from existing beliefs to the adoption of a new belief or the reinforcement of an old one; (2) a perceived rationale to justify that leap; (3) a choice among two or more competing claims; (4) a regulation of uncertainty in relation to the selected claim—since someone has made an inferential leap, certainly can be neither zero nor total; and (5) a willingness to risk a confrontation of that claim with one's peers. However, these five characteristics are not intended to be a checklist. They are interrelated aspects of the concept of argument (Brockriede 1976, 165-166). In this conclusion, I focus on producing in my readers an inferential leap in belief and the acceptance of a rationale for adopting this new belief.

### **The Problem**

The key area in which I hope to cause an inferential leap is in the belief about how necessary it is to serve the most talented young African American men and how best to do it. I work with some of the most talented African American male college students in the country, and

it has been my personal observation that while talented students from other racial groups are sought out for opportunities for personal growth, talented young black men are often left out of these opportunities, by both blacks and whites. High-achieving African American male students tend to be ignored, relegated to inappropriate remedial programs, or left aside in favor of African American men who are considered to have greater need. This occurs while many of their talented white peers are sought out for honors programs, special camps, coveted internships, lucrative merit scholarships, collaboration with other successful students, the mentorship of leaders in their fields of interest, and programs that will prepare them for graduate school, lucrative jobs, and civic leadership. In other words, the most talented young African American men are often overlooked for opportunities that would enable them to grow and excel while those with whom they compete are receiving substantial support. The majority of teacher and mentor attention and support that is not directed to talented white students is reserved for the least successful African American students. Therefore, African American students garner attention not through achievement but through the perception of need.

This *need* standard is not new. Du Bois encountered the same attitude as he worked to build Atlanta University into an effective force. He wrote in 1930,

There are a great many people who wish to help good causes in the world, who wish us well, and who with equal frankness decline to contribute to our work. They say plainly, "we are not interested in giving black boys college training. We think that the class of Negroes who have reached the plane where they can profit by such higher training have also reached the plane where they do not need outside aid. Such people, white or black, can be left to themselves to make their own way in the world." They say, "we are interested in the submerged classes of those poor people who are struggling up out of the depths. Such people we want to help, but, on the other hand, while theoretically we would be glad to help all people to a broader vision, yet on account of limited ability we are obliged to confine ourselves to cases of pressing necessity; therefore, we cannot give to Negro college work." (Du Bois 2001, 50)

I implore educators to rethink this need standard. I do not propose to reduce the support given to the neediest students, but to encourage teachers and administrators to also support high

achievers—young African American men who are working hard in pursuit of academic and personal success. I encourage interested individuals to rethink the “they will be fine” approach. Instead, I offer Mays’ philosophy—and Du Bois’—which says the best way to uplift the African American community is to invest in the development of the community’s most talented young people. After all, it is the most talented young people will have the most opportunities open to them. It is important to inspire and prepare them to pursue careers in medicine because their people need health care; to succeed in business because their products and services will be useful to their communities; and to be teachers who will give young people the foundations they need to live fruitful and fulfilling lives.

### **Mays’ Strategies**

Mays knew well the circumscriptions that black men faced, for he had lived them. He also believed his ability to rise from poverty to success resulted from his access to education. As a result, he believed African American men who had the ability to gain an education should be strongly encouraged to do so. He also believed that once these men were enrolled in academic programs at any level, especially college, they should be allowed no excuses for not working as hard as possible and successfully completing their programs. And finally, he believed that once these young men achieved success, they were morally obligated to use their talents and education to invest in their communities and pull others up behind them.

Mays believed strongly in the importance of teachers to students’ motivation. He defined what he meant by motivation in a speech he delivered at a U. S. Department of Labor conference in March 1963, titled “Motivation of College Students” (Mays Papers, D: 223-122, 22, p. 1, 3). In this speech, he also seems to speak directly to the people to whom I am speaking with this dissertation. He defined motivation as “that which stimulates and inspires a student to strive for

mastery or excellence in his academic work and to develop to the fullest whatever capacity he has . . . mental . . . physical, spiritual, and social.” And Mays was clear about the source of such motivation.

I believe the greatest single source of motivation is the teacher. There can be no substitute for competent teachers who are masters of the subject they teach, who strive to keep abreast with the new developments in their disciplines, teach not only for the purpose of making a living, as important as that is, but who also teach because they love their jobs and the subjects they teach. There should be a kind of a compulsion, an urge that compels them to teach. Unless teachers themselves are seekers after excellence and who themselves are motivated to become better and better teachers, it is exceedingly difficult for them to motivate their students to strive for excellence in performance. (Mays Papers, D: 223-122, 22, p. 1, 3)

Mays here speaks to educators, urging them to engage in the hard work and striving that they expect from their students, and to think of teaching as their service to their communities. He reminds teachers that their work is a not only a profession but a vocation, and exhorts them to model for their students the behaviors they wish to see their students exhibit. Teaching is a talented tenth endeavor.

Mays also reminds teachers to have the highest expectations for their students and to create a vivid image in students’ minds of themselves meeting those expectations and achieving: “Perhaps the most important stimulus to motivation is the assurance on the part of the student that what he aspires to be he can become. . . . The recognition of the fact that one can become what he aspires to be is one of the greatest motivating factors known to man. This fact gives the incentive to work hard and to strive for excellence” (Mays Papers, D: 223-122, 22, p. 1, 3). This is why Mays often recited the achievements of recently-graduated Morehouse students who were thriving in graduate school.

Mays had good reason to believe teachers were the greatest source of motivation—his own experience. He spoke often, both in his autobiography and in speeches, about how his first teacher motivated him. Impressed with his ability to read a bit when he started school, the

teacher pronounced him to be smart, and it was this, according to Mays, that set him on a path to success.

There were several qualities Mays exhibited that represent keys to effectiveness in preparing young men. One was empathy. Educators must affiliate with the students with whom they work by demonstrating that they understand what the students are going through. In fact, it is critical for professors, advisors, and others to show young men that they understand the extraordinary effort required for many African American men to succeed in college if they have been poorly prepared in substandard schools, may have health issues, are the first in their families to attend college, and may lack outside encouragement—obstacles that may seem to the students to be especially insurmountable when they are surrounded by students who attended top-notch preparatory schools, benefited from tutors who helped them achieve top grades, and are pushed to exceed by families who have been educated for decades or even centuries. The conditions of that African American man’s education have been influenced by racial realities, just as those of his white classmates have.

The African American student’s family may be headed by a single mother because of criminal justice policies that cause many African American men to be incarcerated for crimes that would not have landed their white counterparts in jail.<sup>17</sup> He may have attended poor schools because of the neighborhood in which he grew up—a neighborhood in which the family lives because patterns of discrimination make securing mortgages difficult, and the single mother may not be able to afford to live elsewhere,<sup>18</sup> or because “no vacancies” signs appear when African

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Alexander 2010 and Blackmon 2009.

<sup>18</sup> When African Americans are homeowners, they are likely to own in less economically desirable neighborhoods and pay less favorable mortgage rates than whites. The National Fair Housing Alliance found that creditworthy white homebuyers were typically directed to prime lenders while African Americans were systematically directed to subprime lenders, who offered higher rates and had predatory foreclosure practices (Brown et al. 2003, 14).

Americans approach more desirable neighborhoods. The schools may have underperformed because of the best teachers were assigned to schools in whiter neighborhoods and the schools were underfunded—a practice that has plagued black schools for as long as black children have attended school. The young man may have health issues, possibly untreated, that negatively impact his ability to study and learn because many African Americans lack access to health care.<sup>19</sup> During the Mays era, African Americans were fighting against clearly defined legal discrimination, with legal recourse. Today, discrimination is less overt but no less poisonous. It damages every area of life— such as housing, employment, education, and so empathy is no less required.

Showing empathy while demanding the greatest effort is a balancing act that few are able to master. Most either stifle effort by requiring less than the students are capable of or they push students with so little understanding of the realities of students' lives that students either quit or break.

Affiliation may be produced in multiple ways, but it projects both the collective and individual modes of attachment. Affiliation “produces, mediates, and sustains emotional connection” (Blair, Dickinson, and Ott 2010, 16). Individual connections between teachers and students or mentors and protégés are critical. Those relationships are strengthened even more by the affiliations of students to a larger organization. My recommendations include efforts to attach the students to a formal or informal organization that is meaningful and fulfilling to the students,

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<sup>19</sup> For example, in the predominantly black area of South Central Los Angeles, the rate of primary care physicians to residents is 1 to 12,993. A few neighborhoods away, in the wealthy and almost all-white community of Bel Air, the ratio is 1 to 214. These figures come from Ed Mendoza, an assistant director in the Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development, who presented testimony to the California Senate Committee on Health and Human Services on March 31, 1997 (Brown et al. 2003, 14).

fostering a connection that causes the student to work hard to fulfill its expectations in order to remain in good standing. Mays created this at Morehouse.

Another important factor in Mays' successful work with young men was his optimism. I am not exactly sure what the root of his optimism was, but I surmise it was born of his Christian faith and the support of parents who had been born into slavery but, emancipated, could see a brighter future ahead. His parents and his preacher both told him that he was "as good as anybody" and his first teacher called him "smart" and predicted that he would be successful. As a youngster, he recited the fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew from memory at a Children's Day program at church. When he finished, "people applauded loud and long, women waved their handkerchiefs, and as in a dream, I saw the whole house standing. From that day on, I was a marked boy. I shall never forget this experience. The minister and the people had put their mouth on me. They expected me to be different, not to do the things that all the boys did. I felt and I feel now that I cannot let the people down" (Mays Papers D: 223-125, 1, p. 2). The expectations of his family and friends engendered in him a desire, a commitment to excellence, a state of being that he called "striving."

Mays believed striving was part of the human condition, that man should see the problems that exist around him and have a desire to do something to alleviate them. It is that state of being that enables growth and leads man toward achievement. Mays rehearsed many of the societal problems in his speeches and urged young people to use their abilities to address them. He told his audiences that striving should be a perpetual state, that the successful resolution of a problem should never be a reason for satisfaction because other problems continue to exist.

Mays' optimism survived the violence to which he was subjected as a young man and the circumscriptions that restricted his freedom and the freedom of his African American contemporaries. This optimism—such as Mays' sense that the racial problems plaguing the United States could and would be solved—enabled to set high expectations, both explicitly and implicitly, for others' achievement. One of his former students, Samuel DuBois Cook, who became president of Dillard University, said in Mays' funeral eulogy in 1984, "I sometimes thought it was easier to please God than Dr. Mays" (Rovaris 2005, 145). These high expectations were intimately connected to Mays' high valuation of hard work, as Cook also pointed out: "Dr. Mays was a hard taskmaster. His standards for himself and others were inordinately high, lofty, and demanding. Truly they could never be satisfied—thank God. He kept us stretching, striving, aspiring, and always looking up" (Rovaris 2005, 145). Mays' own hard work was a stronger expression of high expectations than any words could have been. Mays' relentless work ethic carried over to how he educated his students. He understood the barriers that stood in their way, but he tolerated no excuses. He preached passionately against satisfaction, and constantly reminded his students that they should always be striving for more and better.

Mays' optimism was central to his philosophy. When people dwell on the negative, they sometimes paralyze themselves and make it impossible to make progress. As an application of this principle, he stressed to his students that it was not foolhardy to believe what they read in the scriptures and in America's founding documents instead of being demoralized by the injustices they experienced or witnessed. The fact that he shared this type of optimism to his students almost certainly contributed to students' success in college and beyond.

Based on Mays' example, I recommend that educators endeavor to infect their students with a sense of optimism. Beyond demonstrating it, one way to do that is by teaching them about



African American men and women who have overcome significant obstacles to achieve success. Likely for this reason, Mays was a big proponent of black colleges. He argued that Harvard could not have produced a Martin Luther King Jr. because Harvard would not have taught him about the successes of his ancestors as sustenance for his own drive to succeed (Mays Papers D: 223-125, 13, p. 8–9). I do not recommend that all African American students attend historically black colleges and universities, but I do strongly recommend that they should integrate the study of black history into their education, whether in formal courses or in self-study. Additionally, African American men should be fed a heavy dose of stories about individuals who overcame obstacles to achieve success in some field. These success stories should not be limited to those of other African Americans, however, because the lessons of individual achievement by members of all races and both genders apply universally. Mays spoke of many well-known individuals who had overcome handicaps and disadvantages to achieve excellence. He pointed out that President Franklin D. Roosevelt was paralyzed, Helen Keller was deaf and dumb, and Elizabeth Browning was an invalid, but they developed their minds and became “immortal.” Even segregation could not keep African Americans from achieving, he argued. “There can be no restrictions to the development of your mind. Jim Crow schools cannot keep you from mastering Shakespeare.” He told students that they could not—should not—be “circumscribed” by discriminatory laws and customs (Mays Papers, D: 223-119, 32, p. 5).

It is important for educators to demand excellence and reward achievement, especially in the explicit context of the students’ reality of being African American men—meaning, the teachers should demand and expect high achievement because they know that African American men are as capable of achieving the task at hand as anyone else. Students often describe the insult they feel when their display of excellence on an assignment at the beginning of a semester

is met with surprise by professors. Demanding excellence and rewarding high achievement is an effective way of helping young African American men counteract the negative images of African Americans' capabilities that permeate American culture. While some leaders temper their expectations of African American men and are careful in their demands—mistakenly, in my view—high expectations and hard work appear to be factors in the success of many Morehouse students and alumni. Low expectations patronize students and do them no favors in the long run. By reminding his students that their mere presence in college was an indication that they had keen minds, and that ownership of such minds brought a requirement of achievement, he provided expectations that Morehouse men were compelled to meet.

In my work, I exhort my scholars to pursue extraordinary success for reasons that are bigger than themselves. I believe leaders should communicate and normalize the expectation that achievement leads not only to personal success but to the capacity to be of service to one's community. A commitment to service should be built into programs and leaders should aim to incorporate this expectation into the terministic screen of the successful man. Service should not be treated as an item on a checklist of graduation requirements but should be built into every element of the program to which the student affiliates. As I said earlier, this affiliation should cause the student to pursue high achievement as a condition of affiliation. Likewise, service. Given his personal journey from South Carolina farm to University of Chicago PhD, Mays valued education as the great vehicle for personal advancement, yet he said that education was useless if it was only a strategy for individual advancement. According to Mays, "the aim of education should be to glorify God and to serve mankind" (Mays Papers, D: 223-121, 30, p. 2B). He believed young people should be educated so that they could be of greater service to others. I

also believe the commitment to service provides a much greater incentive to work hard than self-centered motivation can.

As Blair, Dickinson, and Ott point out, rhetoric extends “well beyond speech” (Blair, Dickinson, and Ott 2010, 3). In the course of my research, it became clear that Mays embodied the image of the Morehouse Man that he constructed. In fact, part of the way he constructed the image is by his own actions. His biographers quoted Morehouse alumni who appeared to remember his poise and style as much as the words he spoke. The image, shared by an alumnus, of the dark-skinned man wearing a gray pinstripe suit to accentuate his physical stature is a powerful indication of the way the students *experienced* Mays. Not only did he set a shining example of hard work, humility, and character, but he also modeled for his students how someone could conquer all the many obstacles in his way to rise from poverty to national success and acclaim. Leaders lead most effectively by example.

Educators should use the notion of the terministic screen to help students form vivid mental images of themselves operating in the world as successful, achieving, serving individuals. Then the students can aspire to those images rather than any of the images the culture projects through the various media. In addition to possessing certain desirable attributes, the Morehouse Man was part of a family of men who stood for something and supported each other. Membership in that family was a strong incentive for men to succeed at Morehouse and make a difference in their communities thereafter. The same kind of affiliations can benefit many others.

### **Summary**

According to Blair, Dickinson, and Ott, rhetoric is “the study of discourses, events, objects, and practices that attends to their character as meaningful, legible, partisan, and consequential.” They also say a distinguishing characteristic of rhetoric is that it “organizes itself

around the relationship of discourses, events, objects, and practices to ideas about what it means to be ‘public’” (2–3). By “public,” they mean discourses, events, objects, and practices that are not directed to specialized audiences, such as those that would listen to a discussion of a particular medical procedure, or personal audiences, such as those that would have a limited familial interest, but those that have broad applicability (5). Mays’ speeches certainly should be considered public since they were delivered to a wide range of audiences on topics that were of general interest to a broad cross-section of people. In like manner, this dissertation is “public” because it addresses a topic—the achievement or relative underachievement of African American male college students—that is discussed broadly. As discussed, African American students typically show up at kindergarten not having been read, or even exposed to, as many books as their white counterparts (Duursma, Raikes, and Pan 2008). A dozen years later, African American men graduate from high school at lower rates than every other demographic group, including African American women (Schott Foundation 2010). Those who do persist through twelfth grade tend to graduate with lower grades and lower standardized test scores (McWhorter 2000, 73–76). A still smaller group of African American men begin postsecondary education, where their success rates are less than half of those for African American women (US Department of Education, 2010). By this point, a faulty educational foundation has been established, and this predicts difficulties in several areas of their lives.

The “legible” nature of Mays’ work is indicated by the fact that his many decades of speeches and writings can be read and understood in context (4). The speeches and writings were “timely, of the moment, specific, and addressed to—or constitutive of—particular audiences in particular circumstances.” This dissertation has presented the various audiences to which he spoke and wrote, the various topics he addressed, and the contexts in which he communicated.

His work was done during the period in which the country was largely segregated and the fight for African American civil rights was of paramount concern, and his messages were—and are—understood in that context.

By “consequential,” Blair, Dickinson, and Ott mean discourses, events, objects, and practices that have the ability to “exert effect.” Texts that are consequential produce “effects that exceed or run counter to goals” and have “social value or utility” (5). While Mays’ goals were to inspire students to work hard or even comport themselves according to a certain standard, his speeches and writings had far greater effect, such as influencing the terministic screens that his students carried through life. This dissertation is “consequential” because it intervenes in the discussion about academic performance by African American male students and offers through Mays’ example strategies for improving student outcomes.

The “partisan” nature of the critique is embedded in this intervention itself. Mays took a side in the debate, arguing, for example, that while many people rehearse the vestiges of slavery and the continuing presence of discrimination as explanations for low levels of achievement by African American men, those African American men who had the intellectual gifts and the opportunities to attend college were morally obligated to work as hard as they could to earn their degrees, to enter into successful careers, and to use their positions in the world to serve the “common man.” Mays knew the hypocrisy that existed in America from the country’s beginning days, when founders such as Thomas Jefferson said it was self-evident that all men were created equal and endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, yet owned slaves. He recognized that this hypocrisy continued into his own day, when some Christians claimed Biblical justification for segregation. Yet he continued to hold fast to his Christian faith, believing that no relief would come to his people without God’s grace, and he

clung to his faith in America, believing progress for African Americans would come when the country was made to live up to its ideals. These positions were not universal, but they defined Mays and contributed to his ability to make a difference in the lives of so many others. His views, expressed in the twentieth century, need also to be reckoned with in the twenty-first.

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