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**Pragmatism as Rhetorics of Lived Experience: The Varieties of African  
American Rhetorical Pragmatism, the Pursuit of Rhetorical Agency, and the  
Prospects for a Pragmatic Public**

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**by**

**Clayton L. Terry**

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## **Dedication**

To my precious daughter Kairi, who is in my arms as I write this, and who was born the year I wrote this project. The moments that led to the culmination of this project are memories that will last a lifetime.

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# **Pragmatism as Rhetorics of Lived Experience: The Varieties of African American Rhetorical Pragmatism, the Pursuit of Rhetorical Agency, and the Prospects for a Pragmatic Public**

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**Abstract:** This dissertation offers a reimagined interpretive field for the study of rhetorical pragmatism. Working at the intersections of rhetorical pragmatism, rhetorical agency, African American public intellectualism, and the narrative histories of pragmatism and rhetoric, this project challenges, revises, and advances the scholarly understanding of rhetorical pragmatism in the effort to further attune its commitments to pluralism, lived experience, and meliorism. In so doing, this dissertation begins the work of tracing a rhetorical history of the pragmatist tradition marked by *rhetorics of lived experience*. I argue this pluralistic strain of rhetorical pragmatism has been ignored due to disciplinary dependence on pragmatism's dominant origin story and a reliance on its hegemonic classical figures. Likewise, I argue this strain has been ignored in the rhetorical pragmatism scholarship due to its foundational reliance on classical Greek rhetorical theory for disciplinary certainty and validation. In this dissertation, I examine the rhetorical pragmatist practices of three African American public intellectuals typically considered ancillary to the pragmatist tradition and often considered overlooked by the subfield of pragmatism and rhetoric: Anna Julia Cooper, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Cornel West. The rhetorical history this project traces centers rhetorical practices rather than foundational theories, figures, or philosophical works. Rather than attempting to include this project's case studies within a dominant canon, I instead analyze the various ways these figures deploy rhetorics of lived experience to equip their audiences with various forms of rhetorical agency to ameliorate social suffering and build pragmatic publics.

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## **Introduction: Building a Pragmatic Public**

What does it mean to have a pragmatic public? And why should we want to build one? To answer these questions requires exploring some definitions. First, what *is* a public? Talk about publics or “the public” is commonly taken for granted. Sometimes “the public” is explained as opposite of the private, other times it is a signifier to describe “the people out there.” Sometimes it is the word we use to talk about our collective society in neutral terms, and other times it is mentioned with high regard. When we ask politicians to make decisions for the public or perform their duties as public servants, it usually alludes to the democratic significance of the public and how it should be appreciated—cherished, even. This value of the public is especially accented in democratic nations where the public is granted a voice—a presumed fair shake at having their needs heard and valued. This voice is crucial to how publics are defined, as it indicates the public plays a role in shaping the contours of a society through communicative means. When a term like “public square” is invoked, it is oftentimes assumed that this is a place where people are speaking, usually in some idealized form of civil discussion. Nonetheless, these communicative qualities of the public are frequently associated with the ways the public collectively holds sway in moving a nation or society in certain directions with their words. When discussions or debates over these directions crop up, they are usually associated with public feelings. When terms like “public interest,” “public sentiment,” or “public trust” emerge, they are usually associated with society’s collective emotional leanings. Sometimes these feelings arise through rhetorical means—active calls for change in “public policy,” improvements in “public health,” demands for “public assistance” or funding for “public programs.” When these demands are levied, they are usually directed at the people who hold “public office.” Sometimes these demands are argued on behalf of the “public good.” If the issue is contentious, it sparks a “public debate.” When these debates

intensify, “public speakers” stand up in front of crowds or on television screens or in writing to give their public addresses. At the end of it all, no matter how the public is defined, its fruits typically set and grow through communicative means, reaching its ripest form when rhetorical appeals, strategies, and tools are on the palate.

Yet, there is a full genealogy of the term that is seldom recognized. Ochieng (2016) covers these historical conceptions, detecting three major understandings of the public across time: the public as an “economy of attention,” as a denominator of the “common,” and as a signifier of the “political” (107-122). Ochieng notes there have been other conceptions of the public, such as fictive, performative, socially imagined, or strictly rhetorical publics, but he importantly argues these theorizations “do not pay sufficient attention to the *embeddedness*, *entanglement*, and *embodiment* of publics in ecological, historical and social structures” (111). In other words, publics emerge through the negotiations, tensions—or worse—repressions imposed amid the historical, structural, and social ecologies of the nations they inhabit. As Ochieng writes, “Because persons are embedded, human agency is subject to the vicissitudes of power, change, and luck that enable some discourses to gain uptake while rendering certain speech acts infelicitous” (111). Thus, our everyday notions of “the public” are severely taken for granted, oftentimes ignorantly so, considering democracies have stifled publics from emerging over millennia, crushing the voices and dignity of women, people of color, the poor and downtrodden, the disabled, people who identify as LGBTQ+, the neurodivergent, and more. Does this mean our ideas about the public hold less weight? If the public is held in such high regard and democracies are widely considered the best conditions for these publics to flourish, yet social forces in democracies continue to stamp certain publics from expressing their voices, what does this say about democracy and the public? What does this mean for our notions of the public voice, public agency, and even the public good?

In keeping with our exploration of what “the public” means, Ochieng argues the three major forms the public takes are deeply entangled. As an economy of attention, the public functions as a space where attention is drawn to a particular person, activity, or cause and is ultimately geared toward particular ends (112). As a “common” denominator, the public is hotly contested and revolves around the spaces, beliefs, and knowledge viewed as “common” (114). As a “political” denominator, the public deals with matters of governance (115). Understandings of the “common” or “political” denominators of the public are often complex and contradictory, consistently rendering the public in a state of flux. Many liberal political and social theorists from Jurgen Habermas to John Rawls to Danielle Allen see the stabilization of this flux as the goal for a truly deliberative democracy to take place, with consensus-building being the means from which the public reaches its idealized state of unity. However, as William Connolly (2005) argues, the drive for unity can be morally dangerous, especially when put in terms of national unity, as it “too readily fosters marginalization of vulnerable minorities” (7). It does so because, quite frankly, the ideal of a unified national imaginary is merely that—*imagined* (see: Anderson 1983). And when the monistic ideal of a national imaginary is brought to the public, it often has dualistic effects, usually in the form of one group uniting against another, resulting in harmful consequences ranging from discrimination, inequality, oppression, suffering, war, or genocide. Even when consensus overlaps, segments of the public are inevitably asked to take sacrifices in areas of need where they diverge from consensus, and oftentimes it is the suffering and the oppressed who are asked, pressured, or forced to concede the most, albeit reluctantly or unwillingly. Connolly argues this leaves liberal images of deliberative procedures insufficient, not to mention vulnerable to collapse under “thick and dense” ideas of the highly centered nation (8). These kinds of nationalist responses largely override democratic sensibilities, privileging the prevailing of national

sovereignty over the public flourishing of individuality, justice, equality, or diversity within the nation. No matter the intentions of this view, this territorial unitarianism tends to spawn evil consequences. In response, Connolly offers the development of “a thick network pluralism that exceeds both shallow, secular models of pluralism and the thick idea of the highly centered nation” as a visionary democratic project for public flourishing (8). This “deep pluralism” views publics as multidimensional and argues against the idea that unified consensus is required to promote agendas that aim to reduce inequality (7-9). Instead, a multidimensional, pluralistic view of the public recognizes the diverse array of sites, cultures, and societies involved, all the way down to the neighborhood, family, or individual. This multidimensional view of the public does not stop at a passive acceptance of difference; rather, it aims to inject “inspirational leadership” and “publicity about the suffering generated by the infrastructure of consumption” into various channels to promote and shape ethical, ameliorative possibilities “in relation to urgent *needs* of the day” (9-10, emphasis in original). Thus, a pluralistic view of the public promotes difference and diversity while morally addressing the detrimental effects of pursuing a stabilized public and the evil dualistic consequences of monolithic ideals for the public.

One of the headlining figures of the pluralist worldview is American pragmatist William James. James’s pluralism starts in the thick of things—in the midst of direct human experience—rather than with monistic abstractions or ideals of unity and consensus. As a radical empiricist, James claims no worldview really starts with abstractions. As Connolly writes, “James thinks that every philosophy does in fact start in the middle of things; it takes the cultural bearings already available to it as a point of departure” (2005, 76). Thus, James finds that starting in the middle of human experience is the practical move, for the further one’s philosophy reaches out away from experience, “the more speculative and contestable it becomes” (Connolly 2005, 76). It is also the

moral move, as pluralism “makes sense of fugitive dimensions of human experience left in the shadows by rationalist, monist, and dualistic philosophies” (76). James rejected mind-body dualisms of the Descartes mode, embracing human experience as enmeshed with contingency and interdependence among mind, body, spirit, community, society, and nation. Therefore, James’s pluralism takes human *lived experience* as central to understanding, forming, and interacting with publics. Moreover, the pluralistic worldview “leaves open the possibility of new things coming into being,” which holds ameliorative implications for moral and political life (77). By embracing the political and ethical sensibilities of pluralism, one sees “how suffering could be reduced if you allowed a large variety of faiths [or publics] to flourish in the same territorial regime and to feel the significance of acting upon that possibility” (77). In short, the pluralistic worldview is charged with a commitment to *meliorism*—to improving the human conditions within reach. As a pragmatic thinker, feeler, and public speaker, these three central commitments—*pluralism*, *lived experience*, and *meliorism*—shaped James’s pragmatist philosophy and a host of others involved with this intellectual tradition. The pragmatist strain is not traditionally intellectual in the insular sense of philosophic knowledge. Pragmatists bring thoughts on pluralism, lived experience, and meliorism to the middle of public problems. Contrary to traditional philosophy, pragmatists eschew epistemological questions geared toward intellectual reflection in favor of questions that help facilitate human action that can make an ameliorative difference in the world—with those who are suffering at the forefront of concern—no matter how big or how small the impact may be. This is the sensibility associated with what it means to build a *pragmatic public*.

### **Practicing a Pragmatic Public: Projections for Rhetorical Pragmatism**

The question remains: *how* to build a pragmatic public? By what means? And what can we draw from pragmatism to acquire the tools? This dissertation takes a *rhetorical* approach to

discovering and locating these tools and is dedicated to the advancement of a concept called *rhetorical pragmatism*. Originally coined by Steven Mailloux and advanced extensively by Robert Danisch, rhetorical pragmatism draws philosophical insights from pragmatist philosophy and “uses them as intellectual justification for seeking, developing, and deploying methods and practices for improving social democracy” (Danisch 2015, xii). Danisch advocates a turn from philosophical to rhetorical pragmatism through a “commitment to pursuing communication practices that will build a social democracy capable of generating good decisions about pressing public issues and promoting individual self-development through community life” (xiii). In short, “rhetorical pragmatism turns questions of epistemology or metaphysics into questions about the effects of our communicative practices” (Danisch 2019, 2). Therefore, this line of scholarship strongly emphasizes *rhetorically pragmatist communication practices*. This differs from scholars who study *pragmatist rhetoric*. Writers who fall under this line of scholarship include Scott Stroud and Paul Stob, who study figures such as John Dewey, Bhimrao Ambedkar, and William James as pragmatist philosophers who utilize a range of rhetorical devices such as individualism, stoic rhetoric, conversion rhetoric, and intellectual populism (Stroud 2012, 2016; Stob 2013, 2014). However, there is overlap between pragmatist rhetoric and rhetorical pragmatism scholarship, as Stroud gleans rhetorically pragmatist practices from Dewey and Ambedkar through concepts such as “rhetorical experience,” “reorientation rhetoric,” and “constructive synthesis” (2012, 2013, 2016). Altogether, this group of scholarship comprises the subfield of pragmatism and rhetoric, with one side of the subfield primarily concerned with pragmatist philosophical figures and their rhetorical appeals, and the other side primarily concerned with the rhetorically pragmatist practices we can garner for improving democratic life. This dissertation implements some scholarly approaches from both flanks, but is primarily concerned with the practices of *rhetorical*

*pragmatism*. All in all, this dissertation challenges, revises, and advances the scholarly understandings of rhetorical pragmatism in the effort to further attune its commitments to pluralism, lived experience, and the amelioration of social suffering through rhetorical means. In particular, this dissertation does five overarching things: 1) *reinterprets the concept's rhetorical history*, challenging the dominant origin story and rhetorical foundation it currently stands on for its monistic and dualistic characteristics in favor of pluralistic ones; 2) *revises the commitments of rhetorical pragmatism* to more precisely address how pragmatic appeals to, for, and from lived experience promote democratic pluralism and deepen attunement to the amelioration of social suffering; 3) *features a set of African American public intellectuals and examines their works as a set of case studies* in the effort to pivot rhetorical pragmatism away from a strict focus on pragmatist philosophers and the communication-centric elements of their academic theories and works, and toward a more pluralistic focus on rhetorical pragmatist practices of lived experience in public artifacts; 4) *advances, expands, and enriches rhetorical pragmatism's attention to communicative agency* by placing it in conversation with the rhetorical agency scholarship and offering new avenues for both areas of study regarding lived experience and rhetorical meliorism; and 5) *specifies the function, purpose, and aims of rhetorical pragmatism* by identifying its practices as comprising various *rhetorics of lived experience*—discourses that speak *to, for, and from* lived experience and geared toward energizing audience rhetorical agencies in response to constraining, anti-democratic, and oppressive conditions—ultimately offering tools for building a pragmatic public and promoting visions for ameliorative possibility, deep pluralism, and individual human flourishing.

### **Toward a Pragmatic Rhetorical History**

One of the first goals of this project is to revise the historical purview of rhetorical pragmatism, introducing a rhetorical history of pragmatism drawn from a series of discursive practices of lived experience. Pragmatism has been viewed through a variety of historical narratives, and its stories are as pluralistic as its commitments and worldviews. A recent essay by Larry A. Hickman covers these narrative histories nicely, breaking them up into five categories: the “eclipse” narrative, the “anti-eclipse” narrative, the “professionalism” narrative, the “political” narrative, and the “monistic” narrative (2022, 11). Hickman does a worthwhile job of charting what these stories entail, and makes a compelling argument regarding the philosophically and politically complex multidimensionality of pragmatism’s history, so I will not outline them here. But it is important to note that Hickman leaves one story out: the “rhetorical” narrative. Scholars who study pragmatism’s intersections with rhetoric and communication have either implied this rhetorical narrative or attempted to chart historical linkages between ancient Athenian sophistry and pragmatism (Mailloux 1995; Simonson 2001; Danisch 2007; Danisch 2015; Danisch 2019). This is a vitally important set of scholarship—especially regarding this project’s exploration of how to build a pragmatic public—because it utilizes these linkages between pragmatism and rhetoric to mine the rhetorical tools percolating from pragmatism that hold social democratic utility and value. However, these scholars have not explicitly charted a “rhetorical” history of pragmatism, meaning they have not studied the history of pragmatism “as a series of rhetorical problems, situations that call for public persuasion to advance a cause or overcome an impasse” (Zarefsky 1998, 30). Danisch’s (2015) project on rhetorical pragmatism’s prospects for social democracy comes close to this type of scholarship, arguing “the middle of the twentieth century should be seen as a pivotal moment at which the transition from philosophical pragmatism to rhetorical pragmatism becomes possible through the extension of first-generation pragmatism’s



search for practical methods” (xiv). However, Danisch’s project recognizes pragmatism as coming from two major branches—the philosophical and rhetorical—and offers an “alternative intellectual history of American pragmatism” that recognizes communication as the pivot point between the two branches (xv). Danisch locates the rhetorical branch as “more faithful to the project of first-generation pragmatism,” recommending “practices, methods and modes of action for improving contemporary democratic cultures, and will subordinate philosophy to rhetoric by reimagining appropriate ways for pragmatist scholarship and social research to advance” (xv). In other words, Danisch’s history of pragmatism is a dualistic one, with rhetorical pragmatism operating as the better option for building a social democracy. Based on the previous discussion in this chapter over pluralism, monism, dualism, and publics, one could see the potential problems with Danisch’s dualistic approach. However, this dissertation advances the rhetorical pragmatist project, using Danisch’s work as a springboard for a richer and more pluralistic rhetorical history of rhetorical pragmatism, without resorting to dualisms regarding philosophy and rhetoric. Instead, this dissertation takes a pluralistic approach to how these stories are told, pinpoints the rhetorical narrative as worthy of explication and future study in rhetorical pragmatism scholarship and for building pragmatic publics, and works to demonstrate the pluralism within the rhetorical narrative itself. Similar to Hickman’s coverage of pragmatism’s historical narratives, Deborah Whitehead (2015) importantly notes about their interpretations:

pragmatism [is] a tradition composed of contested narratives that are not just multiple and conflicting but also historically and politically situated. In this sense, the pragmatist tradition can be viewed as a site of struggle over which stories are told about it, who gets to participate in telling them, and which interpretation and evaluation of versions of

pragmatism are constructed and employed as resources for our theory and practice (136-137).

Whitehead advocates a more “pragmatic” treatment of pragmatism that is non-essentialist, anti-foundationalist, and does not presuppose any “capital T” Tradition undergirding pragmatism in the form of dominant origin stories or hegemonic narratives (137). My methodology for this project aligns with Whitehead’s approach by taking a pragmatic approach to the rhetorical history of pragmatism, while maintaining a pluralistic and multidimensional view of what this rhetorical history entails. Although I agree with Danisch that the value of pragmatism lies in its rhetorical efficacy and its tools for improving democracy, I disagree that a dualistic battle between philosophers and rhetoricians is the dominant story scholars of rhetorical pragmatism should draw from. Moreover, the methodology of this dissertation treats the rhetorical tradition as pluralistic as well, rather than as grounded in the foundations of a classical Greek origin story. As I will cover, the current rhetorical pragmatism scholarship relies on classical Greek rhetorical foundations for scholarly justification. By tracing a pluralistic rhetorical history of pragmatism that takes a pluralistic view of rhetorical traditions, this dissertation discovers a richer history of rhetorical pragmatism drawn from a diverse set of rhetorical devices of lived experience, therefore uncovering a more fruitful set of tools for building a pragmatic public.

### **Challenging, Revising, and Advancing the Rhetorical Pragmatism Scholarship**

Danisch’s rhetorical pragmatism project offers vitally important contributions for the meaning and significance of building a social democracy and calls for “the constraints of philosophy to be removed” in order for this to be achieved, “so that pragmatism can fully engage in the project of building a social democracy” (2015, xix). One of this dissertation’s first efforts to revise and advance rhetorical pragmatism is to bring attention to “pragmatic publics” rather than

“social democracy.” One reason for this is because social democracy is loosely defined, but deeper problems lie in its proposed development. Danisch’s conception of pragmatism’s rhetorical and democratic value for building social democracy is decidedly unpragmatic, calling for the removal of one view of pragmatism in place of another in monistic fashion as if rhetorical pragmatism demands a unitary territory. When doing so, his descriptions of philosophy and rhetoric are narrow and singular. For instance, when referring to rhetoric, its historical formation is habitually referred to as *the* rhetorical tradition. Deeper attention to Danisch’s story of rhetorical pragmatism will be covered in the next chapter, but of importance here is his that when he refers to the rhetorical tradition, he refers distinctly to the ancient Greek tradition that begins with the sophists and runs through Aristotle. For example, when making his early arguments for a rhetorical over philosophical pragmatism, he turns his attention to ancient Greek rhetorical theory, arguing “pragmatism puts [the] same set of questions before us” as the ancient sophists, privileging speech acts, symbols, argumentative choices, language use, and their associations with public decision-making, political leadership, deliberation, and social circumstances (xx). For Danisch, rhetorical pragmatism can be found in the classical Greek rhetorical theories and practices presented in one’s philosophical work, and for him, this includes figures Richard McKeon, Hugh Dalziel Duncan, and Kenneth Burke. My dissertation takes up an alternative view and historical account of rhetorical pragmatism—of where it can be found, and how its tools are offered to audiences in the effort to build pragmatic publics. By offering an alternative to Danisch’s conception, this project advances his desired pivot from philosophical to rhetorical pragmatism, but through a different method; rather than examining pragmatist philosophical works and uncovering their rhetorical centrality—thus pinpointing some pragmatist figures and works as rhetorical and casting aside ones that are too philosophical—this project detects and presents full-fledged historical examples

of rhetorical pragmatism *in practice*, uncovering how they deliver tools to public audiences for building a pragmatic public. In doing so, this project recognizes an alternative history of rhetorical pragmatism marked by various discursive *practices* rather than a hagiography of pragmatist figures or foundational set of works.

### **The Significance of Rhetorical Agency and its Pragmatic Implications**

An important advancement this dissertation makes to Danisch's project involves his examination of "communicative agency." Danisch spends much time covering how certain pragmatists such as Jane Addams crafted structures allowing for communicative agency, but what is this rhetorical act exactly? Stacy Sowards, one of the premier scholars of the practice and function of "rhetorical agency," defines it as a process in which "the agent embraces enabling mechanisms, such as collective and collaborative efforts for social organizing and elements that facilitate the constitution of identity from past and present dispositions, while resisting rhetorically constructed social conventions that limit or foreclose rhetorical options" (2019, 49). Thus, in line with what Ochieng explains regarding publics, rhetorical agency is a process in which individuals embrace avenues for rhetorical action in negotiation with the tensions, constraints, or navigating circumstances of the social ecologies they inhabit. Therefore, current scholarship on rhetorical agency circumvents the "magical voluntarism" associated with idealist understandings of human agency (Gunn & Cloud 2010). Thus far, the scholarship on rhetorical agency primarily focuses on how rhetors use specific communicative means for negotiating or achieving rhetorical agency in response to their immediate material or social conditions. This scholarship importantly covers the ways in which expressions of rhetorical agency function as identification processes, ultimately bringing people together in collective, creative, inventive, and resistive collaboration with one another (Holling 2000; Campbell 2005; Enck-Wanzer 2006; Sowards 2010; Sowards 2019). What

has yet to be discovered, and what this dissertation covers in detail, are the ways in which public rhetors deploy rhetorics of lived experience to energize rhetorical agency in their audiences, therefore equipping them with the rhetorical tools to make ameliorative impacts in their daily lives. Beyond rhetorical agency's function as a collaborative process of identification and cooperation, or as something fostered through sites or structures, this project traces the ways in which rhetors pragmatically equip audiences with the rhetorical tools and sensibilities to instantiate and conduct rhetorical agency in their own lives. This, I argue, is a central feature of a revamped and advanced rhetorical pragmatism.

### **African American Public Intellectualism and the Democratization of Rhetorical Agency**

Danisch argues that a fruitful place to begin examining rhetorical pragmatism is with the “communication practices used by leaders in an effort to foster coordination, collaboration, and cooperation” (2015, 250). As mentioned earlier, Connolly echoes this view, claiming inspirational leadership dedicated to the public concerns of those who are suffering is vital for spurring ameliorative possibilities and fostering multidimensional diversity. Ochieng—in his own endorsement of a pluralistic, multidimensional view of the public—importantly focuses on the rhetorical role of the public intellectual in shaping publics and being shaped *by* publics, thus revealing the rhetorical role of the public intellectual as an influential figure who makes their deep contributions through an acute awareness of various publics (2016 112, 121). In this dissertation, I examine a set of African American public intellectuals who, through their navigations with various publics, were able to deploy lived experience as a rhetorical tool for opening discursive space and inspiring their audiences to insert their voices in democratic life. In this process, these intellectuals aim to foster rhetorical coordination in their audiences in relation to the conditions

that shape them, ultimately offering avenues for audiences to shape their own pragmatic publics as rhetorical agents.

The three public intellectuals of analytical focus in this dissertation are Anna Julia Cooper, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Cornel West. There are two major reasons for this. First, each of these figures have been categorized as pragmatists or considered ancillary or overlooked figures in the pragmatist tradition for various reasons, making their vacillating associations with pragmatism ripe for identifying a pluralistic strain of rhetorics of lived experience without reducing rhetorical pragmatism to unitary territorialism through a monolithic genealogy or essentializing set of foundational figures. Secondly, of importance to this dissertation's advancements is a strain of African American public intellectualism Joy James (1997) recognizes as geared toward "democratizing agency" and emphasizing the 'transformative agency' of everyday Black folks (45, 129). This strain of African American rhetoric and public intellectualism has been largely neglected in favor of Du Bois's "Talented Tenth" model and its corresponding rhetoric. Du Bois famously advocated for a "Talented Tenth" of elite Black public intellectuals as race leaders to advance justice, equality, and education for African Americans. As James notes, most conceptions of Black leadership and agency have mainly been attributed to male elites (85). As will be covered in the following chapters, much of the rhetorical scholarship on these matters follows suit, and even when Black feminist figures are highlighted, the focus of their rhetoric remains with their appeals to white, male, or wider audiences through rhetorics of respectability. However, as James writes, Du Bois's focus on Black agency and social change evolved over the years, and his later writings shifted from elitist orientations to Black agency and progress to a project geared toward democratizing agency. James calls this Du Bois's "unmasked legacy"—his dedication to the agency of Black nonelites (33). James includes a host of Black public intellectuals over time who

have carried the legacy of this approach, especially Black feminists like Anna Julia Cooper and Ella Baker. As James argues, this legacy—and its Black feminist figures in particular—“reflect, democratize, and radicalize an agency that transcends the limitations of the Talented Tenth” (189). In its dedication to the democratic agency of grassroots workers, activists, and those at the center of social struggle, this strain of African American public intellectualism emphasizes the transformative agency of everyday Black folks, including “women working in churches, schools, neighborhoods, farm fields, and factories, seeking democratic power, liberation, and sustenance” (97). As this dissertation demonstrates, this sensibility may have been nascent in Du Bois’s work as early as his writings in *The Souls of Black Folk*, certainly appeared years before his early works in Cooper’s *A Voice From the South: By a Black Woman From the South*, and appears in our contemporary moment in West’s *Democracy Matters*. This strain is important to analyze from a rhetorical purview, and is especially important for this dissertation’s advanced understanding of rhetorical agency as something not only shared between rhetor and audience as the current scholarship explains, but also as democratized in a way that equips audiences with various types of transformative rhetorical agency geared toward utilizing discursive means for achieving social change and ameliorating social suffering.

### **Tracing the Rhetorical Narrative of Pragmatism’s History**

This project takes up the task of advancing the rhetorical pragmatist scholarship by charting a rhetorical history of how pragmatic publics have been strived for through rhetorics of lived experience—rhetorics speaking to, for, and from lived experience and geared toward energizing rhetorical agency in audiences and providing avenues for them to use their voices in society for ameliorative change. Although this rhetorical history assuredly features a variety of traditions and rhetorics of lived experience beyond the scope of this dissertation, the history of focus in this

project features a strain of African American public intellectuals who—in visionary pursuit of ameliorative possibility, deep pluralism, and individual flourishing for their audiences—sought to energize expressions of democratically empowered, affective, and critical voices in response to constraining, anti-democratic, and oppressive conditions. As inspirational leaders dedicated to the public concerns of those who are suffering, the public intellectuals covered in this dissertation provide avenues for the dejected and downtrodden to make a difference in the world. As I will argue, this is where we find their rhetorical pragmatisms, but this does not mean rhetorical pragmatism is the only discursive attribute these figures exhibit in the works I analyze. As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, much of these figures’ rhetorically pragmatist appeals overlap with devices drawn from varying rhetorical traditions, such as the Black feminist rhetorical tradition and the Black prophetic tradition. This project detects the unique rhetorical pragmatist qualities in these appeals, attending to how rhetorics of lived experience from these traditions are deployed for the purposes of energizing rhetorical agency in others. Moreover, I am certainly not arguing these figures should be labeled “Pragmatists” in a genealogical, foundational, monolithic or factional sense. Du Bois, Cooper, and West each have their own traditions that they either identified with or launched through their work, so supplanting these traditions with the pragmatist label would be unfair and inaccurate. Rather, this project traces the rhetorical pragmatism in their public intellectual work to not only make better sense of what rhetorical pragmatism entails, but also to show how these figures each uniquely used lived experience as a rhetorical device—oftentimes through the rhetoric of their own identified traditions—to spur rhetorical agency in their audiences, opening discursive avenues amid conditional constraints and energizing others to use their voices for ameliorative change. Whereas other rhetorical approaches to lived experience may likely emphasize its function as a device for collective identification or action with a rhetor, this



project takes this approach a step further, focusing on lived experience as a tool for empowering, energizing, and fortifying rhetorical agencies in audience members to use their voices for ameliorative purposes.

Thus, this dissertation examines pragmatism as a rhetorical history of lived experience, rather than as an intellectual genealogy with headlining grandfathers and a family tree. Danisch's project offers an alternative intellectual history in respect to Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club*, and this project aims to advance his project by similarly taking "context and history into consideration" (xvi). However, the historical approach of this project interrogates the hegemonic origin stories rhetorical pragmatism currently stands on with the goal of promoting a pluralistic and multidimensional view of rhetorical pragmatism. Moreover, this project aims to shift the purview of rhetorical pragmatism, leaving behind the idea that the scholarship is in the midst of a pivot from philosophical to rhetorical pragmatism. This project turns fully to the rhetorical pragmatist arena Danisch strives for—not by claiming rhetoric as superior and officially rendering philosophy subservient to pragmatism—but by tracking an untraveled narrative history of pragmatism *as a historical set of rhetorical practices*. In other words, this project traces a rhetorical history of pragmatism marked by a pluralistic set of rhetorical events and responses to socio-rhetorical problems across time. In pragmatic fashion, I do not claim this should be *the* monolithic story of pragmatism. It is one of many yet to be told.

### **In Defense of the Rhetorical Narrative: Pragmatism as Rhetorics of Lived Experience**

Figures in the following chapters have been covered either as pragmatists or as ancillary pragmatist figures, despite some making their public rhetorical impacts before the classical pragmatists joined forces. How can this be? I argue we can better understand these types of questions through the view of pragmatism as historically and pluralistically rhetorical, rather than

through the dualistic lens of a rhetorical versus philosophical pragmatist history. Thus, this project marks the first close consideration of a rhetorical narrative amid pragmatism's pluralistic stories. To begin making the argument on behalf of the rhetorical narrative, this project traces the work of three public intellectual figures and charts their deployments of pragmatism as distinct *rhetorics of lived experience*. In unique ways, each of the figures covered in this dissertation deploy rhetorics of lived experience in the pursuit of energizing rhetorical agency in their audiences to build pragmatic publics. Chapter 1 prefaces these analyses by interrogating the ways in which both the rhetorical tradition and pragmatist tradition have been foundationally treated and how the rhetorical pragmatism scholarship currently follows suit. This chapter offers prospects for a rhetorical history of pragmatism, unveiling a strain of pragmatism marked by rhetorics of lived experience. Chapter 2 initiates the examination of this project's case studies, starting with Anna Julia Cooper and her rhetorical Black feminist visionary pragmatism. In this chapter, I cover the ways Cooper deploys embodied discourse and pragmatic metaphors to equip her Black female audience with the discursive tools and empowered rhetorical agency to confront their social conditions and express their embodied voices. Danisch argues we need to emphasize more fully the understanding of rhetoric as an embodied practice (2015, 225), and this chapter directly advances this notion for the study of rhetorical pragmatism. In chapter 3, I analyze the rhetorical pragmatism of W.E.B. Du Bois, uncovering the ways in which he deploys stories of lived experience for the purpose of energizing his Black audience's possibilities for realizing their spiritual rhetorical agencies, ultimately revealing the capacities of their voices as affective instruments for building a pragmatic public. This chapter holds implications for rhetorical studies at the intersections of narrative, spirituality, affect, and the speech object. Chapter 4 covers the rhetoric of a more contemporary public intellectual, Cornel West. This chapter covers the ways

West deploys traditions as rhetorics of lived experience with the aim of cultivating critical rhetors in democratic life. This chapter identifies West's rhetorical prophetic pragmatism as a public intellectual rhetoric of lived experience that aims to convert audience's orientations of nihilism and despair by equipping them with the prophetic rhetorical agency to confront and critique their sociopolitical problems. The conclusion chapter of this dissertation covers the implications of this project's revision and advancement of rhetorical pragmatism scholarship, particularly regarding: the rhetorical role of lived experience and its attunement to democratic pluralism and the amelioration of social suffering; the reinterpretation of the scholarship's rhetorical history and its reoriented focus on rhetorical practices; the expansion and enrichment of the role of rhetorical agency in the rhetorical pragmatism scholarship and beyond; how deeper attention to African American public intellectual rhetoric informs the rhetorical agency and rhetorical pragmatism scholarship and vice-versa; the function of rhetorical pragmatism for building pragmatic publics; how appeals to lived experience that promote monism, dualism, or the neglect of social suffering can be critiqued moving forward; the importance of studying rhetorical pragmatism as an inspirational tool for rhetorical education; the importance of studying rhetorical pragmatism beyond academic and public intellectual settings; and how the multidimensionality of rhetorical pragmatism can be fostered moving forward.

Danisch argues that what rhetorical pragmatism needs most is a handbook of rhetorical practices—akin to the *technē* compiled by the sophists—for adequate citizenship practices in a social democracy. My dissertation applies a pragmatic view for rhetorical pragmatism, specifically regarding commitments to results, consequences, and pluralism. Rather than relying on technical foundations or first principles, this dissertation's rhetorical history of pragmatism as rhetorics of lived experience reaps rhetorical tools for building a pragmatic public—not from a technical

handbook or theoretical schema proposing a set of hypothetical practices—but from rhetorical practice itself. To be specific, this dissertation delves in the middle of a history of public intellectual figures and examines how they deploy rhetorics of lived experience tailored to equip audiences with the rhetorical agencies to make ameliorative differences in their lives. Through an examination of these case studies, this dissertation uncovers a variety of rhetorics of lived experience, ranging from embodied discourse and pragmatic metaphors, stories of lived experience, and traditions of lived experience. In sum, this dissertation is a story of how pragmatic publics are strived for, the lived experiences deployed in shaping them, and the practitioners who have inspired readers and listeners to use their own voices as tools to build them. By examining these practices, practitioners, and discursive vehicles for inspired rhetorical agency, rhetorical scholars can further examine how rhetors in public intellectual spaces and beyond strive to build pragmatic publics in our past, present, and future times.

## **Chapter 1: Dominant Stories and Hegemonic Traditions: Rhetorical Pragmatism's Quest for Certainty and the Turn to a Pluralistic Rhetorical History**

Narratives of rhetorical scholarship's intellectual history have been limited in scope, established to suit normative formations of citizenship, entrenched in biases toward issues of indigeneity, race, gender, and sexual orientation, and dominated by norms headlined by a history of exclusion (Chavez 2015). As Na'puti (2019) notes, "typical genealogies of Rhetorical Studies retrace dominant and embedded histories, narratives, and authors" driven by "colonialism's continuing impacts on our field" (496). Rhetoric's dominant historical narrative has been overwhelmingly white, male, colonial, and elitist, led primarily by a unitary origin story that begins with the sophists' encounters with Plato and runs through the "great speeches" by Western politicians and other powerful American public speakers. Chavez argues that, as rhetorical scholars, we should reframe our traditional engagements with our disciplinary history and its canon by zooming in on the dominant narratives of the field and destabilizing the ground they stand on, moving beyond emphases of marginality and inclusion and instead shifting our focus to alternative ontologies and epistemologies (166, 170). Since Chavez's call, a number of scholars have worked to destabilize dominant rhetorical genealogies and center specific indigenous, racial, feminist, queer, borderland, international, and anticolonial rhetorical histories (Flores 2016; Hester & Squires 2018; Corrigan 2019; Na'puti 2019; VanHaitsma 2019; Na'puti 2020; Mukherjee 2020; Angel, Butterworth, & Gomez 2021; Johnson 2021). This emerging body of work animates a plurality of intellectual histories previously undervalued, undermined, and untapped in rhetorical scholarship.

As Na'puti notes, "We cannot deny the colonial legacies and white influences that have anchored our discipline, and we all have a responsibility to address our field's embedded

Whiteness” (2019, 498). Scholars like Na’puti argue rhetorical studies writ large needs to recast its dominant genealogy and forge alternative pathways to help change the course of the field. By launching these genealogical pathways, the field can begin to account for its historic pitfalls in matters of representation disparity, non-Western exclusion, and Black and indigenous erasure (496). Moreover, uncovering neglected, concealed, and suppressed intellectual histories holds the potential for a richer, more expansive, and more diverse discipline. However, as Chavez warns us, limiting these histories to citizenship narratives or inclusionary efforts could be counterproductive moves. By simply studying the ways in which marginalized groups or figures promulgate for equal citizenship in nation-states, we undermine the ways in which the rhetorical work of uncovering neglected intellectual histories—and the rhetoric of the figures therein—function to destabilize the exclusionary history Rhetorical Studies currently stands on. Instead, we can work to reveal “a rhetorical world that sees agency, power, and the political in different terms altogether” (Chavez 2015, 170). By recovering and posing alternative rhetorical histories comprising alternative epistemologies and diverse philosophical commitments, we can reorient the field in transformative ways that value diversity, pluralism, and lived experience.

As scholars uncover suppressed histories and approaches—offering up alternative visions of Rhetorical Studies and how rhetoric itself operates—specific areas of the field are receiving attention in these efforts. Although an important portion of this scholarship began with Chavez’s call—and far beforehand with work by feminist rhetorical scholars like Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Barbara Biesecker—momentum escalated more recently in the wake of two major rhetorical situations in 2019. The first, George Floyd’s murder and the ensuing uprisings and demonstrations for Black Lives—demanding racial justice, structural change in the criminal justice system, and accountability for police brutality and white supremacy—led Rhetoric and Communication

Studies more broadly to confront itself on issues of whiteness and diversity. The Fall 2019 issue of the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* (QJS), for example, led with a #RhetoricSoWhite hashtag and directly addressed rhetorical studies' historically "overwhelming whiteness, both embodied and intellectually" (Wanzer-Serrano, 467). This is where Na'puti's piece is featured, and it is also where one of the first scholarly responses to a second major rhetorical situation was written. This regarded Martin J. Medhurst's fallout with the National Communication Association (NCA) and *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* (of which he served as the founding editor) following his comments in 2019 valuing merit over diversity in the NCA Distinguished Scholars process. This led to a wave of protest and Medhurst's eventual resignation, bringing *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* (RPA) to a hiatus. Two years later, RPA released its rebooted journal with a renewed vision of public address. The Spring-Summer 2021 issue sets out to reorient the journal's "intellectual priorities [to] emphasize diversity and inclusion as explicit goals of the journal, prioritize new methods of engaging both public address and public affairs, and create opportunities for those who have been kept out of the journal to publish innovative work within it" (Corrigan and Stuckey 2021, 7). This emerging agenda begins with an essay by Andre Johnson "that reimagines the history of the discipline, considering inventional resources that stretch the boundaries of the field" (8). Johnson's history is a distinctively Black history—a "sanctified" reimagining of the field drawing from Carter G. Woodson's 1925 *Negro Orators and Their Orations*. As Johnson explains, Woodson's text was published the same year as Herbert Wichelns's *A Literary Criticism of Oratory*, but Wichelns's piece has been regarded as a landmark text in rhetorical criticism and rhetorical studies more broadly, while Woodson's has been entirely ignored. Johnson makes a compelling case for "another origin story" for rhetorical studies with Woodson as a launching point, marking a distinct canon of African American public address linked to a rich tradition of

Black orators, intellectuals, and historians (Johnson 2021, 41). Like Chavez and Na'puti, Johnson is not interested in fitting this rich history within the confines of Rhetorical Studies' hegemonic historical narrative beginning with Wichelns and running through Ernest Wraga, Edwin Black, and others. Instead, by recovering a neglected and suppressed rhetorical origin story, Johnson offers an alternative genealogy, destabilizing what we know as "the" history of rhetorical studies and thus opening a pathway for an expanded intellectual history.

This is a pivotal moment in rhetorical studies, and work done by scholars like Johnson mark pathways toward a truly pluralistic set of rhetorical histories grounded in commitments to diversity and pluralism. If rhetorical scholarship is going to truly value diversity moving forward, the field's monistic intellectual history will likely need to transform into a pluralistic set of histories. This means recognizing future scholarship would be mistaken to assume a singular rhetorical history as the discipline's telos. This monistic history usually entails classical Greek foundations, beginning with Plato's run-ins with the sophists and ensuing rhetorical theorizing by Isocrates, Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, Augustine, and eventually Kenneth Burke. As Stroud (2019) notes, rhetoric's history "has always been diverse and has always had to bridge over differences in the act of persuasion; our contemporary history of rhetoric and its traditions must mirror this diversity in its scholarly practices" (2019, 124). Not only does this mean recognizing the diversity of rhetorical histories and traditions, but it also means recognizing the diversity within the history of rhetoric's subfields as well. For example, whereas Johnson engages public address scholarship, Stroud uses comparative rhetoric as a lens for valuing diversity. From political rhetoric to religious rhetoric, popular culture rhetoric to narrative rhetoric, and the philosophy of rhetoric to public intellectual rhetoric (to name a few), Rhetorical Studies has a long way to go in demonstrating its commitments to pluralism and diversity in its scholarship.



Thus, an endeavor of this dissertation is to contribute to this developing line of recovery work. In tandem with this vision is the hope that rhetorical scholarship like Johnson's and others may stand "as an example of how we might reimagine the field in terms of other kinds of histories, including, for example, those from Indigenous sources and from the Global South" (Corrigan and Stuckey 2019, 9). Inspired by this example and the ongoing development of innovative visions for rhetorical scholarship, this dissertation project recovers an alternative rhetorical history of the American pragmatist tradition. In particular, this project contributes a reimagined interpretive field for rhetorical pragmatism, underscoring and centering a rhetorical history that has previously gone ignored. This selective history is characterized by what I identify as *rhetorics of lived experience*. As I will cover in this dissertation, I argue that this strain of rhetorical pragmatism has been ignored due to disciplinary dependence on pragmatism's dominant origin story and a reliance on its hegemonic classical figures. Moreover, the study of rhetorical pragmatism has also foundationally relied on classical Greek rhetorical theory for disciplinary certainty and validation. In this dissertation, I examine rhetorics of lived experience by a range of African American public intellectuals typically considered ancillary to the pragmatist tradition, and often considered "overlooked" by the subfield of pragmatism and rhetoric. The history I chart is not a philosophical one tied to the leaders of an intellectual canon, but a *rhetorical* one that traces a specific strain of rhetoric that I argue exemplifies the pragmatist principles of lived experience, pluralism, and meliorism in its discursive practices. Some of the figures in this project's rhetorical history have been covered by scholars elsewhere, but their roles in the pragmatist story have been relegated to the type of inclusionary efforts Chavez warns us about. This dominant story places figures like Anna Julia Cooper, W.E.B Du Bois, and Cornel West in the pragmatist story for their intellectual links to figures like William James and John Dewey. Thus, they are left inextricably linked to the

monolithic narrative of what is known as “The Metaphysical Club” and the foundational philosophical figures that constitute this story’s origins. However, as this dissertation covers, there is not one singular origin story of pragmatism, and pragmatism’s *rhetorical* history is also remarkably pluralistic in its various rhetorics of lived experience.

### **Rhetorical Pragmatism: The Task Before Us**

But why pragmatism? Why now? And why bother with this alternative rhetorical history if we can trace the principles of lived experience in pragmatism’s dominant intellectual history? One reason lies in what John Dewey called “the quest for certainty.” Dewey was concerned with the ways in which people deal with uncertainty by reducing interpretations of events, society, or the world into a single hierarchy of value or monistic set of truths. In this time of rapid change and uncertainty in rhetorical scholarship and American society in general, it is imperative that academic work does not slip into monolithic solutions or essentialist explanations for how to approach our intellectual and sociopolitical problems. Otherwise, rhetorical scholarship runs the risk of essentializing its history, or worse, perpetuating a colonial mythos that continues excluding marginalized intellectual and rhetorical traditions. During the Gilded Age and Progressive Era of James’s and Dewey’s time, America was undergoing heavy sociopolitical uncertainty and rapid scientific change—much like today’s era of Trumpist politics, racial uprisings, mass shootings, and COVID-19. Pragmatist philosophy played an important social role in shaping public responses to uncertainties in the Progressive Era, and figures like James and Dewey played significant public intellectual roles in channeling feelings of uncertainty into feelings of pragmatic action and social change (Stob 2013; Stroud 2013; Terry 2022, upcoming). I argue pragmatism holds the potential to play an important role in response to our contemporary uncertainties and can play an even greater *rhetorical* role due to the discursive value it holds as a distinctively social discourse.

Pragmatism's radical experimentalism provides responses to specifically social environments of diversity, difference, uncertainty, and flux. As Hickman (2009) mentions, pragmatism's "true experimentalism" communicates across difference and operates amid diversity in response to the concrete social challenges of an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world (3).

For the study of pragmatist rhetoric to meet the contemporary moment, its overlooked pluralistic histories should be uncovered, recognized, and analyzed as unique rhetorical strains of significance. Robert Danisch's edited compilation of essays, *Recovering Overlooked Pragmatists in Communication: Extending the Living Conversation about Pragmatism and Rhetoric* (2019), begins this necessary sort of recovery work by offering an alternative intellectual history of rhetorical pragmatism. In this project, rhetorical pragmatism and the recovered figures that make up the shift towards it—Bhimrao Ambedkar, Hu Shi, Ralph Ellison, Alice Dewey, Jane Addams and others—represent a "pivot away from thinking in terms of academic, professional philosophy and toward how we might improve our socio-political circumstances" (9). However, as noted in the previous chapter, the study of rhetorical pragmatism and its intellectual history center ancient Greek rhetorical theory as the facilitator between pragmatism and the rhetorical tradition. Thus, the study of pragmatism and rhetoric remains a subfield tied to the classical Greek rhetorical tradition, rendering "overlooked" pragmatists as ancillary figures tied to a dominant rhetorical origin story that is not their own. The goal of this dissertation is to chart an alternative history of rhetorical pragmatism that uncovers a distinct set of rhetorical pragmatist appeals, tools, and sensibilities—rather than rhetorical theory derived from the Greek sophists or Aristotle—as the underpinnings of a strain of pragmatism marked by rhetorics of lived experience.

I argue recovering this alternative rhetorical history recovers a set of undervalued, undermined, and understudied historical and contemporary functions of rhetorical pragmatism.

Pragmatism's connections with European philosophy have been well documented in both philosophical and rhetorical intellectual circles, and stories of its deviations from European thought typically begin with its divergences from Cartesian dualism and Hegelian and Kantian idealism (Kuklick 2001). Pragmatism's stark attention to lived experience, social interdependence, pluralism, and difference are usually portrayed as disputes with European philosophy by European-American academic thinkers amid a post-"wilderness" American frontier and Darwinian scientific revolution, but I argue this genealogy ignores crucial elements of the lived experiences pragmatism claims to value, is inadequate for addressing contemporary problems of injustice, and is equally inadequate for attending to a full-fledged focus on rhetorical pragmatism. By uncovering an alternative history of rhetorical pragmatism marked by rhetorics of lived experience, this project poses contemporary implications for pragmatist rhetoric beyond the confines of a subfield guided by classical Greek rhetorical theory and a hegemonic pragmatist origin story. In other words, uncovering pragmatism's rhetorical history means uncovering distinct rhetorics of lived experience espoused from a plurality of positionalities in America, at the borderlands, and internationally. I argue what rhetorical pragmatism scholarship needs in order to match its commitments to lived experience and pluralism is a recovery of rhetorical practices that can be traced as distinct rhetorics of lived experience, rather than as ancient Greek rhetorics spoken by figures considered pragmatist intellectuals. Thus, in the schema I lay out in this dissertation, rhetorical pragmatism is not exclusive to figures who are dubbed "pragmatist" intellectuals. I argue this holds implications for studying and practicing rhetorical pragmatism as not just a phenomenon tied to classical philosophical figures and genealogies, but as a phenomenon that can be studied across time, cultures, societies, individuals, and historical situations. If rhetorical scholars are indeed committed to diversity, and if rhetorical pragmatist scholars are indeed committed to

pluralism, then a diverse and pluralistic set of rhetorics and histories should be ripe for study. However, this is not how the story of pragmatism is typically told.

### **Pragmatism's Dominant Origin Story: The Metaphysical Club**

There are many narrative branches of the pragmatist story, but perhaps the most well-known account of pragmatism's historical narrative is told in Louis Menand's Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Metaphysical Club* (2001). In this book, the origins of American pragmatist philosophy begin with the societal aftermath of the Civil War and intellectual influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson. In this story, Oliver Wendell Holmes, William James, Charles S. Peirce, and John Dewey—as “the first modern thinkers in the United States”—provided “alternative visions of American life in the decades following the Civil War” (xi). In doing so, these classical pragmatists designed a social philosophy meant to help “put Americans into a better relation with the conditions of modern life” (xi). In this story, pragmatism is an entirely post-Civil War phenomena, and its core commitments and principles grow out of the need to respond to social uncertainty, rapid scientific and technological growth, and the political and economic contours of the Gilded Age. Thus, these early modern pragmatist thinkers are depicted as proponents of *ideas* rather than ideologies. For them, ideologies are too dogmatic, and dogmatic ideals are the crux of what created the conditions for the Civil War and the traumas associated with it. They believed instead that ideas are tools, not ideals in the abstract waiting to be discovered. People *use* ideas to cope with their immediate circumstances. This means that ideas are inherently *social*, “do not develop according to some inner logic of their own,” and “are entirely dependent, like germs, on their human carriers and the environment” (xi). It is a philosophy of adaptability, influenced by Charles Darwin, “that helped people cope with life in a heterogenous, industrialized, mass-market society, a society in which older human bonds of custom and community seemed to have become

attenuated, and to have been replaced by more impersonal networks of obligation and authority” (xii). Hence, pragmatism at its roots is a deeply humanist philosophy attuned to human interaction and the plurality of experiences that make up community relationships and democratic conduct. It makes sense, then, that pragmatism’s origins come at a time of social crisis—of uncertainty about the quality of human relationships in a post-Civil War world marked by unstable social relations and community engagement, of increasing industrialization and centralized economic power, and of rising institutional power in which technological and scientific expertise is growing further away from the grasps of ordinary people.

It is also no surprise, then, that pragmatism’s dominant narrative depicts the social philosophy as belonging to a disestablishmentarian impulse. Emerson is the character of inspiration in this scene of the story, a towering figure who famously attacked American institutions and preached the power of the individual. As Anderson (2019) notes, “pragmatism did not appear from nowhere; it bears the marks of American Transcendentalism and later nineteenth-century idealism” (20). Emerson’s social critique placed the interdependency of individuals at the center, accentuating humanistic powers over institutional ones. As Cornel West argues, “Emerson not only prefigures the dominant themes of American pragmatism but, more important, enacts an intellectual style of cultural criticism that permits and encourages American pragmatists to swerve from mainstream European philosophy” (1989, 9). Thus, pragmatism’s origins are influenced by an amalgamation of American cultural crises, Emersonian cultural criticism, and lastly, Darwinian scientific theory. Perhaps the most influential Darwinian insight for pragmatists was that “variations are much more important than the similarities” (Menand 2001, 122). Thus, it is a way of thinking that sees the world through difference and change rather than viewing it as fixed and uniform. In this paradigm, the world is pluralistic and characterized by particularities and

differences rather than similarities and systematic, all-encompassing metaphysical structures. Pragmatists like Charles Peirce inherited this way of thinking in their philosophy, positing that “reality doesn’t stand still long enough to be accurately mirrored,” and so “knowledge must therefore be social” (200). Thus, the language of essences and general fixed categories does not align with Darwinian theory or pragmatism; instead, interactions and relations take center stage, and the sequences, functions, and transitions of life become more apt descriptions of the world than hierarchies, first principles, and purposes fixed in advance. These elements lead pragmatism directly away from European philosophy, especially the systematic, dualistic, or idealistic iterations espoused by Hegel, Descartes, and Kant. The social and scientific roots of this break from European idealism allowed American philosophy to grow into an intellectual movement dealing with the problems of its geographic habitat—a humanistic form of cultural critique characterized by relational thinking and human beings’ complex interactions with cultural, social, political, and religious institutions. However, this early, post-Civil War, Emersonian, and Darwinian inspired brand of thought did not have a name at this point of its story. It was not until after the vaunted “Metaphysical Club” meetings took place did ‘pragmatism’ brandish its name to the world.

As Menand admits, the “genealogy of pragmatism [may] contain more legend than history” (2001, xv). With William James as its central storyteller in the early years of its prevailing narrative, this is not wholly surprising. James was one of the most vibrant members of the Metaphysical Club and can be accredited as one of the vital members of its continued gatherings and dialogues. In a letter by his brother Henry, William is described as a founding member of the club, and his gregarious, social nature for bouncing off others’ ideas perfectly suited the ambiance and purpose of the meetings (204-205). This was before pragmatism was ever coined as a

philosophy, but it emitted an unmistakably pragmatic quality—especially in its wittily conceived name in defiance against metaphysical structures. However, this Metaphysical Club was only ever mentioned by name in Henry’s letter and once by Charles Peirce, leaving this folktale-like story linked to a largely unknown figure. But the club did meet regularly, and it also included members Chauncey Wright, John Fiske, Francis Ellingwood Abbot, Nicholas St. John Green, and Joseph Bangs Wagner. The success of the group’s meetings hinged upon interaction and the habit of bouncing off one another’s ideas, and key focuses of conversation included an emphasis on the insistence on knowledge as “an active means of making the world into the kind of world we want it to be” rather than “a passive mirroring of the world,” as well as the significance of acting on belief and the power of human beings to change the world for the better—otherwise known as the pragmatic commitment to *meliorism* (Menand 2001, 201-234). Pragmatic meliorism stems from an attention to *process* and *outcomes*. In other words, the interactions we have with others and the world are *processes*, and the ways in which we demarcate truth, morality, or justice in these interaction processes eventually boils down to the results or *outcomes* that come to fruition. Thus, principles become provisional rather than primary, and the purpose of mind is not to mirror reality but to improve human conditions and cultivate orientations toward human interaction in melioristic ways. These ideas eventually had strong influences on American law, and ultimately make pragmatism amenable to dealing with human problems and facilitating efforts for social change.

The relationship between James and Peirce is pivotal in the mainstream story of pragmatist thought. Although they were close friends, Peirce never reached the public notoriety James eventually achieved in his career. In fact, Peirce was known for falling on hard times, was not prolifically accomplished and left many of his works unfinished, and was actually puzzled by James’s social nature. But James considered him a dear friend and was highly drawn to his unique



conception of the term “pragmatism.” Peirce actually drew this term from Green’s thought that all beliefs are of purposive character, as well as from Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* and his elucidation of “pragmatic belief” (Menand 2001, 227). Kant describes pragmatic belief as a kind of betting on one’s convictions based on the contingencies, evidence, and means at hand. Although he lists pragmatic belief as one of many types of belief, “Peirce thought it was the only kind of belief. In a world that never repeats itself with exactitude, *all* believing is betting” (227). James took up this notion wholeheartedly, and it eventually formed his renowned “Will to Believe” principle and lecture. James regarded beliefs as rules for action, and was adamant in spreading this message to popular audiences “in what he regarded as an excessively scientific and materialistic age” (353). James and other pragmatists were concerned that philosophy was not keeping up with the transformational qualities of science, and James was equally concerned about scientific dogma and the outright eschewal of belief. James wanted to make sure that belief, agency, and change remained fixtures of democratic discussion, and that philosophy and science both played melioristic roles in these areas.

The Metaphysical Club meetings were short-lived—James was recruited by Harvard during its reform efforts later that same year—but Peirce lived on through James’s commitment to pragmatic belief and his eventual public lectures on pragmatism. Being far less gregarious than James, Peirce preferred the term “pragmaticism,” mainly because it was an unattractive term less likely to catch on as a doctrinal ideology. But James wanted to honor Peirce, and within a few years after his 1898 lecture “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results” at the University of California, Berkeley, ‘pragmatism’ became a full-fledged philosophical movement. Thus, the legend of pragmatism typically begins with its Metaphysical Club Origins and congeals in James’s popularization of the term at the turn of the century. Further, James’s pragmatic commitment to

pluralism plays a significant role in the intellectual movement's philosophical and narrative development. James ultimately took a metaphysical approach to pluralism, arguing the universe itself is plural and multidimensional, loosely and provisionally interconnected, and marked by difference rather than inherent similarities. Thus, for James and pragmatists of his ilk, "there is no one vocabulary, no one discourse, that covers every case, and the idea that it might be the discourse that covers every case is one of the oldest dreams of philosophy" (Menand 2001, 378-329). Thus, not only is pluralism a philosophical commitment for pragmatists, but it is also a *rhetorical* one that recognizes worldviews, philosophical commitments, and social orientations as discursively consequential and contested. James's lectures and writings on the pluralistic universe were met with dismissal and even disdain from the Oxford philosophers and establishment intellectuals of the time, but they did inspire some influential thinkers engaged with the idea of *cultural pluralism*.

One such figure was W.E.B. Du Bois—one of the towering intellectuals of the early twentieth century and a student of James's at Harvard. Du Bois was a philosopher and a sociologist, and he was also a sociopolitical intellectual who, along with Anna Julia Cooper, sparked the modern movement of Black intellectualism in America. His magnum opus, *The Souls of Black Folk*, features similarities to some of James's multidimensional ideas on selfhood, and it has been highlighted that James's ideas had a direct influence on Du Bois's renowned "double-consciousness" conception (Campbell 1992). In this story, Du Bois takes his idea of selfhood a step further than James's multidimensionality, and grounds it in the particulars of lived experience for Black folks navigating a white-dominated world. Du Bois's conception of double-consciousness—and his philosophical and social orientation more broadly—conceives the world as marked with difference and interdependence. Double-consciousness famously describes the experience of having to constantly view oneself through the lens of others, and for the Black

American experience, this renders a double-aimed struggle in navigating the social contours of a nation-state that ascribes Black identity and citizenship through a white-dominated lens. For Du Bois, “self-conception is a function of how others see you. Identity is not biological and static; it is social and relational” (Menand 2001, 396). Du Bois was able to parlay his idea of double-consciousness in *Souls* into an aspirational democratic vision for equality and democratic cooperation in a reimagined pluralistic polity (Rogers 2012, 191, 198). According to this dominant pragmatist history, although the phrase “cultural pluralism” did not appear in print until 1924, Du Bois had already been operating under this worldview, merging embodied experience into his philosophical and social thought in a deeply pragmatic sense as a Black intellectual in post-Reconstruction America. This is also reflected in Cornel West’s genealogy of pragmatism, as he dubs Du Bois the “Jamesian Organic Intellectual” (1989, 138-150). For West, Du Bois’s pragmatism emanates from his Jamesian attention to agency. Thus, Du Bois’s place in the traditional pragmatist story is through extension of James’s will-to-believe meliorism, but from a distinct Black cultural politic that “sees black agency at work” and is “grounded in the detection of human creative powers at the level of everyday life” (144). Du Bois’s pragmatism gives sight to “the blindnesses and silences in American pragmatist reflections on individuality and democracy,” as well as the considerations of “racism as contributing greatly to the impediments for both individuality and democracy” (146-147). In this story, Du Bois expands the American pragmatist tradition by providing the social, political, and experiential layers it otherwise lacks—illuminating the agentic democratic powers of subjugated individuals and framing cultural pluralism as a site for political reimagination.

Thus, as West and some rhetorical and communication scholars claim, pragmatism is a diverse and heterogenous tradition (West, 5; Simonson, ed. Perry 2001). Like Menand, West traces

the origins of pragmatism to Emerson, follows its lineage through the classical pragmatists, and locates its inspirations through diverse figures whose work fill pragmatism's gaps in cultural criticism, addressing sociopolitical power, and considering the immediate experiences of subjugated peoples. In other words, Emerson, James, and Dewey remain pragmatism's headlining figures, and the likes of Du Bois, Alain Locke, and even West himself take the pragmatist mantle as revisers and enhancers of the tradition. Communication scholars have largely taken this same approach to the tradition. For example, Peter Simonson's "Varieties of Pragmatism and Communication: Visions and Revisions from Peirce to Peters" in *American Pragmatism and Communication Research* (2001, ed. Perry) separates the pragmatist tradition into three main categories: the classical articulators (Peirce, James, Dewey, and Mead), important defenders not typically viewed as pragmatists (Addams, Santayana, Locke, and Du Bois), and 20th century revivalists (Fish, Rorty, and West) (2). As is common with the dominant story of pragmatist philosophy, cultural diversity is not a central feature of pragmatist communication until the likes of Locke and Du Bois become inspired by James's work on agency, individuality, meliorism, and pluralism. It remains a post-Civil War, anti-Cartesian philosophy inspired by Darwin and grounded in the body-mind experience as it is lived. In Simonson's genealogy, the centrality of communication takes off at the Chicago school under Dewey and Mead (5-10). After it progresses through the work of Du Bois and Locke, then Lippman and Santayana, then Addams and C. Wright Mills, the revivalists once again centralize communication and engagements with European thought.

### **The Story of Pragmatism and Communication: Rhetorical Pragmatism's Quest for Certainty**

Like the story of pragmatist philosophy, the story of pragmatism and communication relies on a dominant homogenous origin story despite honoring the heterogeneity of the tradition's figures and thought. For example, Gregory J. Shepherd's chapter in the aforementioned volume provides an "argumentative retelling" of the story of pragmatism and communication, but does so by claiming William James's struggles with suicide in 1869-1870 as the origin for "an ontology of communication" in the tradition (2001, 241-242). Famously, James's conception of "The Will to Believe" derives from his struggles with depression and suicide, and he ultimately comes out of his depression with a worldview based in human capacities for change (meliorism) and the agency to believe in human progress despite the evidence or conditions saying otherwise. For Shepherd, James's story represents pragmatism's original encounter with the tragic, and marks a shift to the centrality of communication through the feeling of hope. Thus, pragmatism "is the story of a resistance movement—of humans employing the hope of communication against the manifest tragedies of complete isolation and total uncertainty" (253). Despite Shepherd offering an "argumentative retelling" of pragmatism, his retelling nonetheless relies on a dominant Metaphysical Club foundational figure for its scholarly grounding. As Shepherd notes and as I covered in the previous chapter, there is a plurality of narratives one could draw from and call a pragmatist story. Yet, this alternative retelling and the bulk of alternative narratives brought forth in the pragmatism and communication scholarship largely rely on dominant origin stories and foundational figures—even when overlooked or ancillary figures draw attention—despite anti-foundationalism purportedly being one of pragmatism's headlining principles. The leading historical narratives that bind pragmatism and communication are ostensibly questionable in terms of pluralism and practical value, and instead reveal a quest for certainty that pragmatists would typically reject.

A good example of this quest for certainty lies in the scholarship on rhetorical pragmatism. Steven Mailloux is the first to coin this term, sparking a line of research on the relationship between pragmatism and rhetoric. Mailloux bridges this relationship by promoting the historical linkages between sophistry and pragmatism. He begins with the connections between James, Dewey, F.C.S Schiller and Protagorean sophistry (1995, 1-14). Then, Mailloux outlines a history of rhetorical pragmatism that begins with these figures and is adopted, enhanced, and evolved through neopragmatists like Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish. In this story, pragmatists undergo similar experiences to the Greek sophists, enduring critiques from the philosophical establishment and accusations of sophistic corruption, anti-foundational manipulation, and apolitical nihilism (14-20). Mailloux counteracts these criticisms by maintaining, “with its tropes of dialogue and conversation, with its arguments for rhetorical exchange, with its narratives of interpretive debates as the only way to establish truth, sophistic rhetorical pragmatism can promote and be promoted by democratic forms of political organization” (22). Although Mailloux stresses rhetorical pragmatism’s anti-foundationalism, noting the “wide range of range of ideological standings [that] are given pragmatist thought [and] elaborated in the political sphere,” as well as promotes a strategic emphasis on rhetoric rather than a reactive or doctrinal emphasis in response to traditional philosophy’s essentialist theories (20-21), he nonetheless relies on a kinship between pragmatism and sophistry to support pragmatism’s standing in the field of rhetoric. Although both pragmatism and sophistic rhetoric oppose foundationalist orientations toward politics, society, or thought, in many ways, the rhetorical pragmatism scholarship relies on sophistry as its rhetorical foundation. Hence, rhetorical pragmatism’s quest for certainty as a subfield of rhetoric and communication scholarship hinges upon its historical relationship with sophistic figures and their rhetorical theories, causing the dominant story of rhetorical pragmatism to run through the sophists and other

rhetorical theorists from Greek antiquity. Rhetorical pragmatism has since leaned on the sophists and Aristotle to support its historical narrative and its place in the field of rhetorical studies.

Robert Danisch advances the scholarship on rhetorical pragmatism and deepens its ancient Greek origins in his book, *Pragmatism, Democracy, and the Necessity of Rhetoric* (2007). In this text, Danisch argues “that pragmatism opens the possibility for a search for contemporary, American rhetorics, with roots in classical rhetorical theory but with the determination to respond to contemporary irresolutions” (2). Moreover, he says, “classical rhetoric can be a helpful and fitting resource for rethinking, reshaping, and extending the variety of contemporary pragmatisms,” and pragmatism can be useful for enhancing rhetoric’s varied roles in human affairs (2-3). According to Danisch, pragmatism “shares an orientation to the world” with classical Greek rhetoric—particularly sophistic and Aristotelean rhetorical theory (3). Examples include James’s and Dewey’s rejections of traditional philosophy’s speculative concerns, their pursuit for a philosophy of action, the implied associations they make between philosophy and rhetoric, their rhetorical situation as akin to the conditions of classical Athens, their focus on concrete communication practices rather than abstract ideals, and the practical and cultural approaches to philosophy exhibited by figures such as Addams, Locke, and Oliver Wendell Holmes (3). Danisch heavily relies on pragmatism’s dominant Metaphysical Club origin story to lay out pragmatism’s function as an orientation to the world, distilling its commitments to pluralism, humanism, community, individual experience, and uncertainty as exclusively rendered from this dominant narrative. To make these commitments significant to rhetorical scholarship, Danisch introduces the importance of classical rhetoric to argue for a shared theoretical orientation, and thus a “shared outlook on the human predicament and the search for practical methods to cope with that predicament” (12-13). He makes a compelling case for pragmatism’s role in facilitating rhetorical

processes, adding richness to pragmatism's rhetorical value and potency behind the discourse that makes pragmatism an intellectual movement. He also provides clear corollaries between pragmatist principles and the practice of rhetoric in arguing that they both "judge decisions and actions by their consequences" (13). In the end, pragmatism is always searching for practical methods—rhetoric happens to be an effective one—and Danisch argues pragmatism implies the necessity of rhetoric as an effective tool in democratic affairs. However, "the warrant for this claim" is pragmatism's kinship with classical rhetoric (14). Thus, rhetorical pragmatism becomes a Greek-infused American phenomena that shares the same orientations toward the world as Aristotle, Isocrates, and Protagoras.

This undermines the lived experiences of figures such as Du Bois and Locke and the rhetoric they espouse. In fact, Danisch addresses this by noting the limits of using classical rhetoric to delineate rhetorical pragmatism, highlighting the vast differences between pragmatist thinkers and the historical moment of ancient Athens (2007, 15-16). But Danisch insists that pragmatism provides an important resource for contemporary American rhetorics, and proceeds to test the consequences of his argument on the grounds that pragmatism's practical value is akin to classical rhetoric. In doing so, he links James with Aristotle to formulate a pragmatist philosophy of rhetoric, Dewey to Isocrates and Cicero in providing artful American rhetoric, Addams to Protagoras in fleshing out pragmatic forms of deliberative rhetoric, Holmes to Thrasymachus in presenting his pragmatic legal rhetoric, and Locke to Aristotle and Isocrates to explicate his epideictic rhetoric. Danisch wants his readers to interpret these linkages as "intellectual history," but admits that this intellectual history is limited to both pragmatism's and rhetoric's dominant intellectual histories (142). He calls the sophists, Aristotle, and other Greek rhetorical figures "mainstream [figures] with which any rhetorical theorist must contend" (142). More importantly, he insists a move "from



notions of pragmatism and rhetoric in the singular to pragmatisms and rhetorics of the plural” (142). Danisch’s pragmatist commitment to pluralism sparks a push away from the dependence on classical rhetoric to support pragmatism’s rhetorical ‘cash-value.’ As a beginning, Danisch’s work “is open to and accepts revision, extension, and interpretation” (152). His subsequent projects have pursued this endeavor, and this dissertation does the same.

Danisch’s second book, *Building a Social Democracy: The Promise of Rhetorical Pragmatism* (2015), sets out to stake rhetorical pragmatism’s ground in the scholarship and fully flesh out its distinctions from philosophical pragmatism. He argues the stakes of this distinction involves “whether I want to simply give an account of the world or whether I want to change it. Change is the outcome of rhetorical practice not philosophical reflection” (xx). In this sense, “how we choose to use symbols and language to deal with uncertainty, contingency and plurality and to constitute social relationships matters more than what I know or how I know” (xx). However, when constituting pragmatism’s symbols and language formation, Danisch frequently turns to the classical Greek tradition in ancient Athenian democracy—headlined by the sophists, Aristotle, and Isocrates—as a barometer for its democratic rhetorical *techne*. Although he claims pragmatism holds its own set of communication practices separate from the Greek tradition, he nonetheless characterizes American pragmatism’s mode of rhetorical citizenship as “indebted” to the classical Greek tradition (166, 228), and criticizes Cornel West’s decision to choose Socrates over the Sophists as an oppositional move to rhetorical pragmatism (101-102). This means that, despite the heterogeneity and diverse representation of its figures, rhetorical pragmatism’s lineage remains confined to classical Greek origins, just as philosophical pragmatism’s origins hail from the Metaphysical Club meetings.

The second work of note that moves toward developing, extending, and reinterpreting pragmatism's rhetorical value is *Recovering Overlooked Pragmatists in Communication* (2019). As Danisch mentions in the first chapter of this volume, "Rhetorical pragmatism will not, and cannot, look exactly like ancient Greek rhetorical theory and practice" (10). Thus, this volume "offers an alternative intellectual history of American pragmatism, one that reclaims a series of intellectual figures whose work can push neo-pragmatism beyond its philosophical limitations" (3). In many ways, this endeavor is vital for the continued study of pragmatism and its intersections with rhetorical scholarship. The figures featured in this volume contribute to a revised rhetorical pragmatist canon that is more diverse and closer attuned to the lived experiences that underwrite the discursive contours of a heterogonous intellectual movement. For Danisch, the upshot of a revised pragmatist canon is an intellectualism "fully engage[d] in the project of building an improved democratic culture. This is the consequence of making a rhetorical turn and putting rhetorical considerations before philosophical ones" (9). In other words, the importance of revising the canon of pragmatist rhetoricians is to finish the task of moving away from epistemological questions and toward rhetorical ones in the effort to provide tools for improving democracy. Professional philosophy's epistemological norms have resulted in "less attention paid to the practical socio-political projects of the moment; professional academic life is separated from the tasks of democratic life. America's greatest intellectual contribution to the world of ideas has not been used to improve American democracy" (9). A turn to rhetorical pragmatism removes the constraints of philosophical pragmatism proposed by its classical twentieth century figures. Instead of *explaining* democratic ways of life, rhetorical pragmatism moves toward a focus on "direct, practical engagement with democratic culture" and the rhetorical practices we use to "live it well"

(17). Danisch claims that the figures in this volume exemplify and contribute to a necessary shift in pragmatism's rhetorical turn.

I agree with Danisch that including a more diverse array figures in the pragmatist canon contributes to this important rhetorical turn and that these figures can provide imperative rhetorical tools in the enrichment of democratic life for everyday people. However, some significant problems persist in this present development project. First, despite the plurality of rhetorical pragmatisms that have been brought forth in the scholarship, their rhetorical worth remains limited to inclusionary roles that force classical Greek rhetorical origins, theories, and practices onto the direct experiences of rhetors who do not draw their rhetorical experiences, inspirations, or tools from the same tradition. If the main purpose of including diverse pragmatist figures is to propel a rhetorical turn, why must we constantly turn back to classical Greece to support their merit? Danisch's introductory chapter in *Overlooked Pragmatists* makes the same recurring mistake of undertaking rhetorical pragmatism's quest for disciplinary certainty, linking pragmatism to rhetorical education in ancient Greece to solidify pragmatism's place in the history of rhetorical and communication scholarship (2019, 11-16). I argue this quest for disciplinary certainty risks being assimilationist, undercutting the pragmatist principle of pluralism and what should be a clear commitment of rhetorical pragmatism: that rhetorical theories, practices, and traditions are inextricably linked to *lived experience*. Of course, rhetorical theorizing as scholars know it originates from ancient Greece, but pragmatists value lived experiences, discursive tools, and embodied rhetorics at a higher premium than first principles, monolithic theories, or essentialist historical foundations. Scholars who study pragmatism's role as a subfield of rhetorical and communication studies have been keen to expose seldom tapped reservoirs for pluralism and overlooked figures, as well as offer argumentative retellings and revised canons. However, a

staunch attachment to hegemonic origin stories in the quest for disciplinary certainty has caused the unique embodied rhetorics and rhetorical traditions of diverse figures to go neglected and suppressed in rhetorical pragmatism's canon. The rhetorical experiences, resources, and melioristic tools for social democratic change from diverse sources have been relegated to supplements for a Greek-infused, Eurocentric canon tied to an American intellectual frontier. Thus, the pragmatist commitment to lived experience has been excluded from the installation, study, and development of rhetorical pragmatism. Therefore, overlooked varieties of pragmatism such as African-American pragmatism, Black feminist visionary pragmatism, and prophetic pragmatism have been faintly covered, dismissed, or largely neglected from discussion in rhetorical and communication scholarship.

This dissertation aims to advance a push away from rhetorical pragmatism's dependence on the classical Greek tradition as a launching point, therefore answering Danisch's call to revise, reinterpret, and reimagine rhetorical pragmatism's intellectual history. All in all, the following chapters craft an alternative rhetorical history of pragmatism by adding a richer, deeper layer to rhetorical pragmatism's pluralistic histories. The case studies that follow uncover untapped rhetorics of lived experience—highlighted by appeals to embodiment, interiority, spirituality, affect, and tradition—and underscore their rhetorical value for an alternative strain of rhetorical pragmatism untethered to Metaphysical Club origins and classical Greek rhetorical theory and practice. Ultimately, I argue this is an important strain of rhetorical pragmatism that is not reliant on foundational intellectual or rhetorical figures—it is a rhetorical strain of lived experience that takes pluralistic forms through the public intellectuals and rhetors who espouse its qualities and appeals.

### **Public Intellectualism and Rhetorics of Lived Experience**

Unlike Mackin (1990), who, in one of the earliest pieces on the intersections between pragmatism and rhetoric, approaches philosophy as a “genre of discourse” that is “rhetorical in its effects” (292), I approach the African American public intellectuals featured in this project as agents of rhetorical pragmatist orientations, tools, and expressions. In other words, this project does not approach them as pragmatist philosophers operating within broad “philosophical situations” producing works “that [conceptualize] and [provide] direction for solving longstanding and pervasive problems and are then successful in helping change the habits and practices of a public” (Crick 2006, 138). Yes, each of the figures covered in this dissertation can be considered philosophers who use rhetoric in their philosophies to provide direction for longstanding problems and spur changes in public conduct, but approaching these intellectuals in this manner and from a pragmatist perspective would only pigeonhole them as pragmatist philosophers using rhetorical appeals, and would not provide avenues for the revision and advancement of rhetorical pragmatism. Thus, I approach these public intellectuals as rhetors of lived experience “who engage with and are engaged by nonacademic publics” (Mailloux 2006, 144). I am not discounting that these intellectuals engage with academic publics with rhetorical effect, but I am focused on the ways in which these intellectuals pivot away from the concerns of professional philosophy and toward rhetorical concerns of lived experience in democratic life. This approach sacrifices the immense depth of these thinkers’ ranges of thought in the philosophical sense and instead focuses on the rhetorics of lived experience in their public intellectual work. Therefore, I examine these figures’ works as situated in a rhetorical history rather than an intellectual one.

There are a few justifications for this rhetorical narrative approach in respect to pragmatism’s other historical narratives. The first deals with the “eclipse” narrative of classical pragmatism and the role this story plays in the context of rhetorical pragmatism. To explain, part

of pragmatism's story is its post-World War II disappearance from most professional philosophy departments. Descriptions of this eclipse vary from "either the advantages (real or perceived) of logical positivism and Oxford style linguistic analysis, or the failure of prominent pragmatists to inspire a succeeding generation of scholars," or even political reasons such as the Cold War and the McCarthy Era (Capps 2003, 61; Menand 2001). However, James A. Good (2003) rebuffs the idea that there was a pragmatist eclipse at all, calling this notion "misleading" and claiming, "pragmatism did not experience a quantitative decline in the postwar period" (80-81). Instead, pragmatism transformed into what it was intended to become—a social philosophy functioning in public life in response to public problems rather than an abstract form of inquiry trapped in philosophy departments: "Classical pragmatism's status within twentieth-century American philosophy departments was doomed from the start because it is based on a conception of philosophy that is fundamentally at odds with the way it has been pursued within the confines of the ivory tower" (81). This is increasingly fascinating when paired with Scott L. Pratt's (2002) interpretation of pragmatism's history. Pratt charts an Indigenous origin story of American pragmatism, tracing the pragmatist principles of interaction, pluralism, community, and growth back to contacts between specific Indigenous American tribes and early European immigrants. According to Pratt, through cross-cultural human interaction, experience, and eventual resistance, Indigenous American philosophical principles found their way into the minds, experiences, and actions of prominent early European-American anti-colonial resistance figures such as Roger Williams, and eventually emerged in the works of Benjamin Franklin, Cadwallader Colden, Lydia Maria Child, and others long before the Metaphysical Club meetings, and well before William James coined the term "pragmatism" in honor of his friend Charles Peirce. Instead, in Pratt's story, pragmatism's core principles can be found in the central commitments found in 1600s Narragansett

practices of hospitality across difference, the philosophy and resistance practices of the Delaware and its Native Prophetic Movement in the 1700s, and the 1800s Chippewa logics of place and home and their influence on ensuing American thought. These alternative histories outlined by Pratt and Good illuminate the ways in which pragmatism has socially persisted outside the halls of academic institutions both before and after the height of classical pragmatism's professional success. In turn, this paves a way for thinking about pragmatism as a social phenomenon that has always vacillated between academic professional contexts and nonacademic public contexts. This opens a door for thinking about pragmatism as a rhetorical phenomenon that has always dealt with social concerns of lived experience, and thus operates as such through various public channels.

The second reason for this dissertation's focus on the rhetorical narrative draws back to the problems with operating exclusively from dominant narratives, origins, and foundational figures. A traditional approach to pragmatist rhetoric would take the dominant pragmatist story at face value and analyze this project's figures under the umbrella of classical pragmatism and the classical Greek rhetorical influences James and Dewey had on Du Bois and West. I argue there is a diverse set of characteristics, orientations, and appeals left to be discovered through the overlooked figures others have tried to fit within both pragmatism's and rhetoric's hegemonic canons. Rather than promoting the notion that "the pragmatic rhetorician [should continue] the project of Aristotle on a larger scale" and take him "as a starting point for further investigation" (Mackin 1990, 292), this project takes rhetorical pragmatist practices as a point of departure and charts the diverse ways in which rhetorics of lived experience are expressed across time, culture, place, and exigence. I examine these distinct rhetorics through the figures who espouse them by applying a reimagined methodological approach to what Menand calls a "pragmatic account of

pragmatism's emergence" (371). This entails not simply looking at intellectual origins, but at the rhetorical practices and consequences of public intellectual discourse.

Lastly, I argue lived experiences for rhetors and audiences in nonacademic contexts holds more rhetorical implications for democratic affairs than academic discourses in philosophical situations do. Stob (2008) detects this potency in Kenneth Burke's Jamesian language of experience in "Terministic Screens," noting James's and Burke's shared concern "for how language and experience interpenetrate and develop together in a fluid, organic, ever-unfolding environment," emphasizing "the way experience and language move together, with attention flowing into different channels based on the terms we employ," and "highlighting our place in an ever-unfolding, constantly shifting, blooming, buzzing confusion" (148). For Stob and his Jamesian/Burkean interpretation of experiential language, the quality of our symbols hold the power to shape the quality and character of our conduct. In turn, the quality of our experiences are extensions of the quality of our symbols systems (137). Stroud (2012) identifies a similar function in what he calls "rhetorical experience," with particular attention to audience outcomes: "Texts put auditors through certain experiences, and good rhetors are good at predicting what discursive means will create what kinds of auditor experiences" (264). Thus, rhetorical experience "places emphasis on the *experience* of the subjects attending to their utterances," can be used "to cultivate certain feelings/affects or cognitive states in a receptive auditor," and "changes orientations by creating the conditions that instantiate a new orientation while experiencing the rhetorical text" (264-266). An example of this emerges in Pratt's retelling of pragmatist history, in which Delaware prophet Neolin deploys rhetorical experience in the form of a map for Chief Pontiac. One could infer Pratt's telling as a rhetorical one, since Neolin uses rhetorical experience to depict a logic of place and elicit a spiritual experience from Pontiac in relation to his tribal homeland. As the story



goes, Pontiac translates this rhetorical experience into anti-colonial resistance and justification for war against British intruders. As will be analyzed in the following chapters, the figures I feature demonstrate unique *rhetorics of lived experience* in response to rhetorical situations of their own.

This project's focus on pragmatism as a rhetorics of lived experience differs from a Jamesian conception of experiential language because it is not only concerned with how the languages of our experience shape the quality and character of our conduct and thus become extensions of our symbol systems. Rhetorics of lived experience are forceful expressions of experience *as they are lived* by individuals and their identities, in their groups and their cultures, in their embodiments and interiorities, in their societies and structures, and in their exigencies and constraints. As the following chapters will cover, rhetorics of lived experience emerge as embodied, interior, spiritual, political, intersectional, and oftentimes a few of these at once. In its expression, this discourse speaks *from* lived experience in the effort to speak *to* and *for* lived experience. It aims to energize, shift, or reorient experiences for public audiences, to empower the lived experiences being oppressed by certain societal, cultural, political, or structural constraints, and to offer avenues for personal and social amelioration via rhetorical tools, approaches, agencies, and sensibilities of lived experience. It is rhetorically pragmatist in its amenability to the multidimensionality of lived experience as it emerges through discourse. In sum, this strain of discourse is attuned to the lived experiences of rhetorical agents, audiences, and the contours of lived experience in sociopolitical and historical contexts, cultural interactions, structural constraints, and the discursive qualities therein. It is not beholden to classical Greek rhetorical theory because it does not theorize about discourse or rhetorical strategies in advance; its rhetorical expressions emerge from the outcomes of—and aims for—lived experience. Moreover, it is not beholden to classical pragmatist philosophy because it is not tied to the origins of a professional

philosophy. All in all, the case studies in the following chapters facilitate my argument for rhetorics of lived experience as the focus for uncovering rhetorical pragmatist practices, for tracing pragmatism's rhetorical narrative, and for revising and advancing the rhetorical pragmatist scholarship's attunement to pluralism, meliorism, and lived experience.

### **Prospects for Rhetorical Pragmatism**

Overall, I argue that to overhaul the discipline in ways the authors at the beginning of this chapter mention, we need to take a pluralistic approach to rhetorical studies and the subfields within it. To fully reimagine the discipline, each of rhetoric's subfields need to be reinterpreted as well. In line with Chavez, this does not mean we engage in inclusionary projects for inclusion's sake, sleuthing exclusionary subfields for the chance to insert inclusionary narratives. Instead, inherent assumptions over interpreted traditions, principles, values, and the like need to be reinvestigated, challenged, and revised. Much like Johnson's project in regard to Wichelns, we need to ask the deep-rooted questions as to whether the rhetorical traditions we are engaging (or not engaging) hold transformative potentials that have gone overlooked. As Mailloux (2005) notes, the choice is not over "*whether* we will have the rhetorical tradition as canon and history but only about *how* we will have it, with what content, in what configuration, through which criteria, for what purposes" (184). In response to the field's current moment, this means investigating deep-seated intellectual commitments and genealogies in rhetorical studies' myriad of subfields and areas of study. This is this dissertation's aim for the rhetorical pragmatist scholarship, detecting rhetorics of lived experience as an interpretive field for pragmatism's rhetorical history. The first case study of this project—Anna Julia Cooper and her magnum opus work, *A Voice From the South: By a Black Woman from the South*—serves as an exemplary figure of this dissertation's goals. As the following chapter will demonstrate, Cooper rhetorically resisted cultures of

justification and professionalism through embodied rhetorics of lived experience. One of her overarching goals was to destabilize the foundational epistemologies mainstream philosophy stood upon in order to open space for the role of lived experience. This endeavor paved the way for a contemporary area of scholarship called Black feminist visionary pragmatism. In the following chapter, I analyze Cooper's *rhetorical Black feminist visionary pragmatism* as comprising embodied discourse and pragmatic metaphors in the pursuit of empowering her Black female audience's rhetorical agencies through the discursive power of their embodied voices. Thus, Cooper not only philosophically battled cultures of justification in the academic realm, but also took her message to the social realm to resist the cultures of justification stifling Black female agency in public life. This is the site of her rhetorical pragmatism, and a close analysis of her appeals holds significant implications for the revision and advancement of rhetorical pragmatist scholarship.

## **Chapter 2: Anna Julia Cooper's Rhetorical Black Feminist Visionary Pragmatism: Pragmatic Metaphor and Embodied Voice as Vehicles for Empowered Rhetorical Agency**

Four years before William James spoke about the significance of belief to the Ivy League philosophy clubs of the American Northeast, Anna Julia Cooper wrote “The Gain from a Belief” in the last chapter of her book, *A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman from the South* (1892). Much can be said about the similarities between these two figures’ works, and much can also be said about the similarities between their defenses of belief, despite Cooper’s “Gain” being published years before James’s renowned “The Will to Believe” lecture. Black feminist philosopher V. Denise James has notably engaged these works alongside each other, observing that, “Like James, Cooper asserts that what one can gain from faith is action, but for different purposes” (2013, 43). As she notes, Cooper’s defense of belief comes from a distinct standpoint and experience than that of William James’s. Cooper’s lived experience as a Black woman in the post-Reconstruction South occurred during a time in which white supremacy reconstituted itself in the form of Jim and Jane Crow, and to the extent that the public was occupied with any form of liberation, it was mainly concerned with suffrage for Black men and white women and what it meant for the South relative to the larger polity. Meanwhile, mainstream social categories and conditions failed to encompass, give voice to, or merely *describe* the lived experiences of Black women. *A Voice from the South*—widely considered Cooper’s magnum opus—served as a response to this late nineteenth century exigence, “was the first of its kind from someone with her background,” and was brought forth with the purpose of encouraging audiences to “take seriously the standpoint of black women in the political clamor” (James 2013, 32). Thus, Cooper’s overall aim as an educator, author, public intellectual, and orator was to draw upon her own lived experience to create a discursive space for Black women in American political and cultural life,

thereby initiating “an experiential understanding of [Black female] consciousness that views action, growth, and continuous progress as mediating forces between black women and the American nation-state” (Phipps 2018, 51; Lemert 1998, 19). *Voice* springs from her embodied orientation toward American political, cultural, and academic life as a Black woman, and showcases the significance of the exigencies, particulars, insights, and rhetoric of lived experience. Of note in this landmark text—and of emphasis in this chapter—are the ways in which Cooper speaks *to*, *from*, and *for* the lived experiences of Black women in *Voice* through embodied discourse, pragmatic metaphors, and appeals to empowered rhetorical agency.

Born in Raleigh, North Carolina in 1858, Cooper began her formal education at the age of nine and eventually earned a BA from Oberlin College in 1884, an MA for college teaching in 1887, and a PhD from the Sorbonne in Paris, France in 1925. Throughout her life, Cooper personally considered herself more of a scholar and educator than a public figure. She lived to be 106 and two-thirds of her life were spent as a teacher and scholar. She spent that time committed to multiple facets of education, including teaching, curriculum formulation, funding, and community service (Grant, Brown, and Brown 2016, 30-71). Education was paramount for Cooper, and her dedication as an educator informed her activism for Black people and specifically Black women. As Shirley Wilson Logan (1999) outlines, “By the time she was awarded the degree of doctor of philosophy from the University of Paris at the age of sixty-six, she had served as principal of the M Street High School and as chief administrator of the Frelinghuysen Group of Schools for Employed Colored Persons, commonly known as Frelinghuysen University” (115). Impressively, she had published her most renowned life work, *A Voice from the South*, over thirty years earlier at only thirty-three years old. *Voice* is a collection of essays and speeches written between 1886 and 1892 covering subjects of democracy, women’s rights, and racial progress

regarding matters of segregation, religion, education, philosophy, and literary criticism. Working at the intersections of race, class, and gender, Cooper actively challenges patriarchal orientations and leadership roles in *Voice*, highlighting a predominantly male-driven race problem in America on the one hand, and advocating for the centrality of Black women in the struggle for racial uplift on the other. Just as Cooper's commitment to education informed her activism, "*A Voice from the South* arose from a moral and religious depth that inspired her work not only as a public intellectual but also as an activist" (Lemert 1998, 7). This orientation fueled Cooper's rhetorical advocacy, dovetailing into a style of oratory "that speaks to and for the people who are marginalized" (Grant, Brown, and Brown 2016, 44). Thus, Cooper's public intellectualism works at the intersections of social theory and human action, rendering a form of public intellectualism attuned to the epistemological and political significance of social location, moral action, and lived experience.

Despite her role as a leading Black feminist public intellectual of her time, Cooper is largely "a neglected figure, far less well known than such distinguished contemporaries as Frances Harper, Ida B. Wells, and Mary Church Terrell" (Washington 2007, 249). Moreover, Cooper is significantly neglected by rhetorical scholars, despite her towering role as a public intellectual and public speaker who gave addresses at venues such as the World's Congress of Representative Women in 1893 and the 1900 Pan African Congress Conference in London. Reasons for this disregard are partly due to Cooper seeing herself as an educator first and foremost rather than as a public figure. She dedicated her life to the "education of neglected people," serving as a principal and teacher at Dunbar High School in Washington D.C. for several years, and she also "started a night school for working people who could not attend college during the day" (249-250). However, the historical neglect of Cooper's public intellectual work goes further than her personal orientations to direct community education. Rather, much of the "intellectual discourse of black

women of the 1890s, and particularly Cooper's embryonic black feminist analysis, was ignored because it was by and about women and therefore thought not to be as significantly about the race as writing by and about men" (250). As will be discussed later in this chapter, this male-dominated approach to philosophy and public intellectualism has historically rendered Black feminist intellectualism largely subordinate and silent in respect to traditional philosophy's institutional norms and culture of justification. But more importantly for rhetorical scholars is that Cooper is still not considered a towering rhetorical figure, despite the ways she rhetorically carried the legacies of African-American political thought and prophetic politics, spoke to mass audiences on the role of morally empowered women in the fight for racial progress, and made forerunning impacts on contemporary Black feminist philosophy, intersectional theory, and activist intellectual practices.

Although Cooper would consider her public intellectualism and rhetorical affairs ancillary to her role as an educator, Cooper's rhetorical imprint remains imperative to examine as a vehicle for her groundbreaking Black feminist vanguardism before Black feminism was ever recognized as a term. Cooper has been recognized as one of the early leading Black feminists—if not the preeminent Black feminist—long before the term was ever coined. Moreover, as a perennially influential rhetorical text, *A Voice from the South* has impacted a tradition and legacy of Black feminist scholarship. It has been described as "the most precise, forceful, well-argued statement of Black feminist thought to come out of the nineteenth century" (Washington 1988, xxvii), and has influenced a host of Black feminist scholars, public intellectuals, and activists for over a century. *Voice* serves as a towering contribution to varying Black feminist intellectual projects, and meanwhile, Anna Julia Cooper's historical, philosophical, and rhetorical contributions to various branches of Black feminist theory and practice have been largely ignored by rhetorical scholars

interested in African-American public intellectualism or Black feminist rhetorical practices. Moreover, rhetorical pragmatist scholars have failed to even consider examining the rhetorical contours of one important branch in particular: *Black feminist visionary pragmatism*.

There are many ways in which Cooper can be analyzed as a pragmatist philosopher, and much has been done in this regard in formulating the subfield of philosophy called Black feminist visionary pragmatism. Black feminist visionary pragmatism is considered an academic, cultural, and activist project “that attempt[s] to take a practical view of social amelioration, while positing a vision of a radically changed, more just society” (D. James 2013, 33). As Black feminist visionary pragmatist scholar Denise James writes, “Although Cooper wrote nearly a century before the term ‘visionary pragmatism’ first appeared in print, her view of belief and social progress throughout *A Voice from the South* is compatible with the concept” (James 2013, 34). Cooper is the main figure—and *Voice* the main text—from which some of this scholarship draws its principles and philosophical orientations, and the ‘visionary’ side of this visionary pragmatism holds roots in Cooper’s vision for the future of Black women in American public consciousness and communication. Denise James argues that scholarship on Cooper from a pragmatist perspective may enrich the study of pragmatism via the study of her voice and “insights of her lived experience and thought” (2013, 42). James endeavors to put Black feminism and pragmatism in conversation with each other to introduce an invaluable area of scholarship lacking pragmatist consideration despite Black feminism’s stark attention to lived experience, as well as introduce Black feminist scholarship to pragmatism’s principles and commitments such as meliorism and orientations toward belief, action, social relations, and social change.

The full story of Black feminist visionary pragmatism and Cooper’s place in it will be covered later in this chapter, but it is first important to situate Cooper’s place as a figure in the



rhetorical tradition, as well as situate *A Voice from the South* as a rhetorical Black feminist visionary pragmatist text of lived experience that functions beyond the purview of respectability politics. Thus, the following section begins by sketching how Cooper has been studied as a public rhetor, both inside and outside the Rhetorical Studies scholarship proper. Of the rhetorical scholarship that has been done on Cooper, much has been made of the audiences she spoke to and the hegemonic orientations she appealed to at the time. It is important to address this before explicating Cooper as a rhetor of lived experience, especially considering the critiques made of her appeals to Victorian notions of “true womanhood,” mainly to male, elite, and sometimes white intellectual audiences. Thus, after focusing on her place in the rhetorical scholarship, the next section is dedicated to how Cooper prominently uses discourses beyond respectability. I argue the dominant approach to Cooper’s respectability rhetoric neglects Cooper’s embodied discourse in ways that obfuscate or exclude her appeals to the lived experiences of Black women. I argue that once this is addressed, we can avoid studying Cooper’s rhetorical deployments of lived experience through a white, male, canonical view. To address this, I implement Brittney Cooper’s (2017) framework for analyzing Anna Julia Cooper and her *embodied discourse* beyond respectability. Then, I outline the ways Cooper’s work has influenced a line of scholarship called Black feminist visionary pragmatism, and how *Voice* provided a blueprint for the subfield to challenge disciplinary cultures of justification and professionalization. I argue this helps us understand Cooper’s rhetorical pragmatism as geared toward empowering the rhetorical agencies of Black women and providing them with discursive tools, thus holding discursive, public implications for visionary pragmatism rather than simply intellectual and academic consequences. I argue examining Cooper’s public intellectual work through this lens opens possibilities for scholars to study Black feminist visionary pragmatism from a rhetorical purview, and thus as a discursive

practice with aims for ameliorating social conditions for Black women beyond the scope of philosophical inquiry. Once implementing this rhetorical framework for Cooper's Black feminist visionary pragmatism, this chapter overviews how *Voice* can be read as a rhetorical text of lived experience, and the analysis section follows suit, analyzing the ways in which *A Voice From the South* exhibits rhetorics of lived experience in the form of embodied discourse and pragmatic metaphors that empower Cooper's audience to rearticulate their voices as ameliorative leaders in the public. As Cooper makes her rhetorically pragmatic moves in this text, she gradually develops a rhetorical agency that shifts from her own empowered voice in society to her audience's, ultimately creating discursive space for her Black female audience to express their empowered voices in their own lives through embodied discourse. Lastly, I end this chapter with implications for rhetorical Black feminist visionary pragmatism and for *Voice* as a rhetorical text of lived experience, with close attention to their potential roles as rhetorical tools for challenging cultures of justification in public settings beyond discourses of respectability in response to cultures of professionalization in the academy. All in all, I argue in this chapter that Anna Julia Cooper conveys a rhetorical Black feminist visionary pragmatism marked by embodied discourse, pragmatic metaphor, and the promotion of empowered rhetorical agency in her Black female audience.

### **A Towering Rhetor of the Late Nineteenth-Century**

Scholars such as Logan (1999) and VanderHaagen (2021) have covered Cooper's rhetorical significance in Rhetorical Studies proper, but what has gone woefully understudied in the discipline is Cooper's rhetorical education and her deliberate orientation as a public orator. Trained in classical Greek and Latin rhetorical education, Cooper taught the writings of Cicero, Virgil, and others at the District of Columbia's M Street school for forty years (Vogel 2004, 85).

As an orator, Cooper used many modes of address, including parable, analogy, derision, humor, and more (May 2007, 83; Logan 1999, 98-126), with the overall rhetorical purpose of using “her powers of language—the cultural capital she amassed as a lifelong student and teacher—to rework the very foundations of race and gender in the United States” (Vogel 2004, 85-86). Altogether, Cooper’s rhetorical appeals, strategies, and tools were more than just “floating intentions” as Vogel says, but rather “big designs” for an “alternative social theory [that] was years in the making” and built to “[reforge] the masters’ tools by using language itself in an attempt to change the rules and laws that governed women, African Americans, their rights in America, and even race itself” (86). Considering Cooper’s prominence as a late nineteenth-century public intellectual, it would not be a stretch to also consider her a towering rhetorical figure of this period, especially considering Cooper’s forerunning rhetorical influence on Black feminist thought, Black feminist visionary pragmatism, and the scope of audience *A Voice from the South* has garnered and empowered over the last 130 years.

Cooper’s rhetorical education began at Saint Augustine’s Normal and Collegiate Institute in Raleigh, North Carolina—a school originally founded by the Freedmen’s Bureaus and managed to continue even after the American government shut down the Bureaus—and she began her rhetorical studies and training at Oberlin College in Washington, D.C. in 1881 (Vogel 2004, 86). When Saint Augustine’s first Greek class was organized it excluded women, but Cooper was persistent. She made her way in, and by the time she was admitted to Oberlin for her undergraduate education, she had already been versed in the Greek writings of Xenophon, Plato, Herodotus, and Thucydides, as well as the Latin writings of Cicero, Virgil, and Caesar (Vogel 2004, 87). According to Vogel, Oberlin prized the teaching of rhetorical skills to its students, and this was not a type of rhetorical training based simply in chest breathing exercises or anything featured in

the speech hygiene movement thirty-to-forty years later (Blanton and Blanton 1919; Murray 1944). Instead, for Cooper and other scholars at Oberlin, “Rhetoric’s strength lies in its ability to mold concepts” (Vogel 2004, 88). Thus, Cooper’s rhetorical training cultivated an ameliorative and heavily democratic orientation to writing and oratory with aims “to shape minds and change society” (88). With this education, not only did she build the training and teaching acumen to teach at the M Street School for forty years, but she also built a strong deductive style of argument that she carried into her early speeches. Although the image of the skilled rhetorician in this period was always fashioned as a man and the model of a powerful change-agent always white, Cooper used her training to shape her own oratorical style, which frequently featured challenging audiences to revise their gender-based assumptions regarding moral standards and moral arguments. Moreover, in teaching her students Greek and Latin rhetorical skills, she equipped them with the tools to challenge the mainstream racist assumptions of the time. Thus, Cooper’s education, training, and teaching held destabilizing consequences for patriarchal and white supremacist epistemologies and structures of the period, as well as ameliorative qualities for Black students navigating the racist dynamics of American intellectual and democratic life. Moreover, as will be argued in this essay, there is an equally important set of rhetorically pragmatic appeals in *Voice* that merit a close reading, and these arguments are intimately linked to the *embodied* lived experiences of Black women beyond discourses of respectability for white or male audiences, ultimately expressed to promote democratic empowerment and rhetorical agency in Cooper’s Black female audience.

### **Beyond Respectability: Embodied Discourse and Cooper’s Public Intellectualism**

As a counter-narrative in response to the tragic brutality and systemic violence of American slavery and white supremacy, *A Voice from the South* is primarily written from the perspective of a Black woman originally born into slavery. Cooper’s lived experiences—from learning that her

mother was raped by her master and father, to the firsthand experience of being a Black woman during a failed Reconstruction in America—shape the contours of *Voice* as a text that “stands in a new space between the first person confessional of the slave narrative (or spiritual autobiography) and the third person imperative of political essay” (Alexander 1995, 338). As a public intellectual and sociocultural text, *Voice* functions to deconstruct and challenge white supremacy, advocate for democratic conditions through critique, and emphasize the empowerment of Black folk—particularly Black women—as an overarching message (Grant, Brown, and Brown 2016, 37). Thus, one could argue there is strong evidence of *Voice* as a text that not only speaks on behalf of the lived experiences of Black women, but *to* and *for* Black women for the purpose of empowering them in the struggle against white supremacy and the striving for their democratic rights. However, scholars have noted that, in many instances, Cooper seems to be speaking on behalf of the lived experiences of ordinary Black women rather than *to* or *with* them. This is a stark point of criticism for Cooper’s public intellectualism, and a potentially grave challenge for studying Cooper as a rhetorical pragmatist. For example, Mary Helen Washington (2007, 249-266) criticizes Cooper for not directly speaking *to* Black women for large swaths of *Voice*, and there is a strong argument to be made that Cooper leaves her Black female audience behind following the text’s first two chapters and instead moves her attention to a more intellectually elite, white, and male audience. Hence, much of the scholarship in Rhetorical Studies proper on Cooper centers an elite, male intellectual audience despite noting her deep focus on the experiences of Black women in the late nineteenth century.

As Shirley Wilson Logan (1999) explains, of all the early Black feminists of America’s post-reconstruction era, Cooper focuses more consistently and exclusively on the experiences of Black women than most of her contemporaries (98). Figures like Maria Stewart, Frances Harper,

Ida B. Wells, and Victoria Matthews did speak to Black women audiences, and they undoubtedly spoke about the experiences and plights of Black women, albeit selectively and nearly always in reference to the “race problem” more generally. Figures like Cooper and Fannie Barrier Williams—who both notably spoke at the 1893 World’s Congress of Representative Women in Chicago, Illinois—made the Black woman the focal point of their writings and public discourse. The “grand sisterhood” that congregated for this event—comprising Cooper, Williams, Hallie Q. Brown, Fanny J. Coppin, Sarah J.W. Early, and Frances Harper—is perhaps the upmost rhetorical event of note in the current rhetorical studies scholarship on Cooper (Logan 1999; VanderHaagen 2021). Cooper and the rest of the grand sisterhood frequently faced white male hegemonic rhetorical situations in the late nineteenth century, and this event was no exception. Thus, this scholarship mainly focuses on Cooper’s appeals to white women, her counters to white assumptions of progress and their prejudiced orientations toward Black women, and calls for cross-racial unity among women, with slight attention to her heroic portrayals of enslaved Black women’s plighted yet courageous struggles (VanderHaagen 2021, 2-11). In navigating the status quo of the time, these race women felt pressure to acquiesce to the standard, Victorian, white model of “true womanhood” of the period. Thus, “Williams and Cooper engaged in rhetorical strategies that placed black women in the same category, ‘woman,’ as the white women reading and listening to their texts” (Logan 1999, 99). Although this rhetorical approach lends itself to a level of respectability politics, identity sacrifice, and erasure, the constraints that late nineteenth-century African American women faced rendered challenges from both the domestic and intellectual establishments. Therefore, to gain public voices as writers and orators, these Black women deployed lived experience as responses to the conventions of true (white) womanhood of the time. As Elizabeth Alexander (1995) notes, “It was necessary, then, for the African-American

[woman] writer to construct an autobiographical stance that would say ‘I am here’ in a hostile environment,” making experience “crucial to theorization of a race- and gender-based critique of America” (343). However, as Karen Baker-Fletcher writes, although “Cooper’s intention was to speak in solidarity with other Black women as a representative voice,” problems arise when we further consider the audience Cooper spoke to in her public lectures and published for in print (2007, 278). For many of Cooper’s speeches, her audience was primarily middle-class, male, and intellectual. Although her speeches and writings did reach Black folks of the South and Black women in particular, it has been noted that she spent much of her rhetoric speaking *for* the everyday Black women of the South in her public work more often than she spoke *to* or *with* them. Some scholars have been as harsh as to say Cooper completely lacked rhetorical identification with the ordinary Black woman in her public work, claiming: “Nothing in her essays suggest that they [Southern Black women] existed in her imagination as audience or as peer” (Washington 1988, xxx). From this view, Cooper’s public discourse falls “squarely in the category of advocacy for the work of racial uplift rather than the uplift for women’s work” (Logan 1999, 161). However, As Baker-Fletcher aptly says, “Undoubtedly she felt that since she was in a position to gain an audience it was her responsibility to speak for those who did not have the opportunities for publishing and speaking that were available to her and her peers” (2007, 278). May (2007) adds another layer to this view, noting a refusal by Cooper to wholly acquiesce to elitist leanings by attempting to “[rupture] the epistemic frameworks that shape dominant understandings of reality and that influence perceptions of (or what even counts as) the ‘facts’ about democracy, history, culture, race, gender, science, theology, or philosophy” (98). Altogether, the elitist dynamic of speaking on behalf of lived experience to an educated class is problematic for Cooper’s public intellectualism—especially if we are to consider her a rhetorician of lived experience—but there

is a crucial rhetorical element missing from this equation that I argue dovetails with a rhetorical pragmatist viewing, and that is the primacy of embodied discourse in her public intellectual rhetoric.

Black feminist scholar Brittney Cooper argues Anna Julia Cooper's work is dedicated to two cardinal commitments: 1) establishing the Black female body as a source of possibility rather than a burden, and 2) centering the Black female body as the vital channel for spurring and formulating Black social thought (2017, 3). Cooper argues these commitments permeate *A Voice from the South*, featuring "the Black female body and all that it knows squarely in the center of the text's methodology" (3). From this methodology emerges what Brittney Cooper calls *embodied discourse*: "a form of Black female textual activism wherein race women assertively demand the inclusion of their bodies and, in particular, working-class bodies and Black female bodies by placing them in the texts they write and speak" (3). Embodied discourse operates "beyond the discourse of respectability" and instead functions as a rhetoric of possibility (4). As a disruptive textual practice in response to status quo racial and gendered intellectual conceptions, embodied discourse "ultimately locates Black female bodies within the project of racial knowledge production" and marks them as sites of possibility, inspiration, and theory production (8). As Brittney Cooper argues, "Focusing on the ways that Black women discuss embodied experience in their social theorizing reminds us that Black women did not only seek to make Black female bodies respectable" (9). Beyond appeals to respectability, race women intellectuals used Black female embodiment as the center of their "approaches to understanding and ameliorating Black women's lives" (9). For Anna Julia Cooper specifically, her "formulation of embodied discourse constitutes a radical act" and places "the material condition of the Black female body at the center of her understanding and theorization of Black life, politics, and intellectual possibility" (144). In



other words, there is a rhetorical impetus of lived experience in *Voice* that does in fact speak *to* the lived, *embodied* experiences of Black women as much as it speaks for and from these experiences, and in ways that have a prospective readership of everyday Black women in mind, offering them intellectual possibility and directions for social amelioration.

There are two overarching reasons why Cooper's public discourse that speaks to, for, *and* from lived experience has been largely neglected in rhetorical scholarship, and both share an oversight in recognizing the longstanding impact of Cooper's work, albeit from different angles. One is the neglect of Cooper as a rhetorical figure who advocated for the rhetorical agency of Black women, which will be covered in the following section. The other is the neglect of Cooper as a public intellectual rhetor. Much of this stems from the history of Black intellectualism being primarily headlined by men, leaving Black women intellectuals in a constant "struggle to be known and to have the range of Black women's experiences properly articulated in the public sphere" (B. Cooper 2017, 31). Despite Black women thinkers being perpetually positioned in rhetorical situations marked by audience constraints that render their experiences silent in the public sphere, these women nonetheless "engage in a range of creative practices [including embodied discourse] to make Black women's lives legible" (31). For Brittney Cooper, this legacy of Black women's public discursive practices—spearheaded by the work of Anna Julia Cooper—should be reimagined as a Black feminist intellectual history marked by forms of embodied discourse and deeply rooted in "a set of shared intellectual concerns about Black humanity and personhood" (145). She argues this tradition's lack of recognition as an intellectual movement has prevented figures like Sojourner Truth, Mary McLeod Bethune, Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Angela Davis, and many others from being considered public intellectuals and instead relegated as social movement figures only. For Brittney Cooper, the embodied discourse that runs through this

tradition's intellectual history comprise the practices of its intellectualism, despite conventional "life of the mind" notions of the intellectual as well as the historic subjugations of Black women as "all body, no mind" (143-144). Embodied discourse functions to disrupt the epistemic frameworks tied to logics grounded in patriarchy and white supremacy, and connects this rich tradition of Black feminist intellectualism through both its discursive mode of inspiration and possibility for public audiences, as well as its rhetorical value for shaping bodies of philosophical, political, and social thought.

The neglect by rhetorical scholars in studying embodied discourse in Black feminist thought has led to a dearth of attention to Anna Julia Cooper's rhetorical impact on Black feminist theorizing and its important offshoots. Granted, VanderHaagen (2021) does cover the group of speeches at the 1893 World's Congress of Representative Women in Chicago as precursors to twentieth and twenty-first century Black feminist thought, particularly when considering their arguments for the embodied, self-determined, and future-oriented significance of Black women's agency (12). Vanderhaagen aptly connects these rhetorical qualities to contemporary Black feminist theorizing, particularly Patricia Hill-Collins' centrality of agency, Brittney Cooper's centrality of embodiment, Sharde Davis's emphasis on Black women as self-defined individuals, and Jennifer Nash's focus on future-oriented Black feminist action and political possibility. However, full scholarly attention has not been given to the vast rhetorical value Cooper's work holds for shaping these bodies of thought. For instance, despite *A Voice from the South* being one of the most important influences on contemporary Black feminist theory, rhetoric, and intellectualism, it has received little attention as a rhetorical underpinning to contemporary Black feminist discursive theories and practices. This chapter takes a step toward rectifying this neglect by focusing on one previously mentioned body of thought in particular: Black feminist visionary

pragmatism. The following section covers the intellectual story of this body of social, political, and philosophical thought, tracing the ways in which it both falls within the hegemonic origin story of pragmatism, as well as outside the traditional hegemonic canon of philosophy. In particular, this section zooms in on the ways in which Black feminist visionary pragmatism first relied on traditional pragmatist figures for professional standing, while also resisting professional philosophy's "culture of justification," thus mirroring the pragmatist eschewal of the quest for certainty in unique ways. By tracing the ways in which Black feminist visionary pragmatism challenges the norms of professional philosophy—as well as tracing the underpinning influence of Cooper's *Voice* on this school of thought—we avoid studying Black feminist visionary pragmatism through a white, male, canonical view. Moreover, as will be shown in this chapter, it also opens a door for scholars to study Black feminist visionary pragmatism from a rhetorical purview in its aims for ameliorating social conditions for Black women, rather than only a philosophy concerned with epistemological questions and problems.

As I will argue in this chapter, not only is embodied discourse an important rhetorical dynamic in moving Black feminist public intellectual practice beyond the discourse of respectability, but it is also a crucial discursive element of *rhetorical* Black feminist visionary pragmatism. Brittney Cooper offers embodied discourse as the marker of an intellectual map connecting the "geographic and genealogical routes" of public intellectual race women (31). This chapter expands the public intellectual and rhetorical terrain of this map by tracing embodied discourse as one of the key components in the Black feminist visionary strain of rhetorical pragmatism. Despite the recovery of overlooked figures being one of the focal points in the current pragmatism and rhetoric scholarship, Cooper's rhetorical impact through Black feminist visionary pragmatism has gone completely ignored by scholars in the subfield. The rest of this chapter aims

to amend this neglect by recognizing the ways her embodied discourse functions in rhetorically pragmatist fashions. As will be analyzed in this chapter—embodied discourse gains its rhetorical Black feminist visionary pragmatist flavor when it is colored with appeals to empowered rhetorical agency and, in Anna Julia Cooper’s case, alongside the deployment of pragmatic metaphors. To understand and analyze these rhetorical pragmatist elements of Cooper’s work, it is first important to understand the intellectual history and philosophical dynamics of Black feminist visionary pragmatism.

### **Black Feminist Visionary Pragmatism: Resisting a Culture of Justification**

In the early stages of Black feminist visionary pragmatist theorizing, pragmatism was deployed as a useful term but not directly associated with the philosophical tradition known by most to be associated with Peirce, James, and Dewey (D. James 2009, 92). The first mention of the term came in Stanlie James’s and Abena Busia’s edited volume, *Theorizing Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women* (1993). At this stage, visionary pragmatism was used as a descriptive term for the intellectual tradition and practice of Black feminists who “simultaneously [envision] incremental changes and radical transformation” with a “humanistic visionary pragmatism” to seek “the establishment of just societies where human rights are implemented with respect and dignity even as the world’s resources are equitably distributed in ways that encourage individual autonomy and development” (James and Busia 1993, 3). Historical figures incorporated in this tradition include Maria Stewart, Linda Brent, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, Mary McLeod Bethune, Rosa Parks, Daisy Bates, Septima Clark, Ella Baker, and others. By 1998, Patricia Hill Collins takes up the term *visionary pragmatism* and locates it at the intersections of public intellectualism and the everyday experiences of Black women. For example, she uses it to describe the Black

women on her block growing up and the everyday democratic visionary pragmatism they exuded through a “caring, theoretical vision” and “informed, practical struggle” (1998, 188). For Collins, the goal of extending the scholarship on Black feminist visionary pragmatism is to challenge professional critical and social theory’s academic eschewal of visionary thinking. This type of thinking defined the women in Collins’ neighborhood as well as the social orientations of the aforementioned historical Black feminist thinkers and orators. At this stage of the philosophy’s evolution, Collins argues Black feminist thought has much to gain from the praxis of these figures who linked visionary thinking with pragmatic action, and that a move beyond critique was necessary for its flourishing.

By 2009, Collins makes the practical side of Black feminist visionary pragmatism clearer: “[it] consists of choosing to commit to principles that can be used to guide human action. Many principles can provide this guidance,” but “people who embrace visionary pragmatism do not simply live in the sphere of abstract principles. Instead, they make pragmatic choices in specific social contexts” (2009, 178). For Collins, it “matters which particular principles one stands for,” and the visions tied to particular principles are “characterized by infinite opportunities to engage in critical analysis and take action” (178). Principles and visions are not only linked, but are also in creative tension with one another, and what emerges “is that pragmatic actions shape the vision, and the vision shapes pragmatic actions. If you do not have a vision, you are stuck in the here and now, with no hope and no possibility” (179). Black feminist pragmatism asks, “what necessary tools might better equip people to live in the dynamic and contingent worlds that are informed by visionary pragmatism” (181). It is not a passive philosophy, but one geared toward the tools for action amid the dynamic and contingent affairs of everyday life. As will be shown in the following section, Anna Julia Cooper foreran the utilization and contribution of *rhetorical* tools through a

*rhetorical* Black feminist visionary pragmatism of lived experience, which not only led to these contemporary conceptions of visionary pragmatism, but also serve specific rhetorical purposes for the living lives of Black women in her period and beyond.

Although Black feminist visionary pragmatism began as a nascent social theory independent from what is known as the pragmatist philosophical tradition, as the philosophy evolved, it began to congeal behind the works of Cooper, Collins, and their connections to classical pragmatist figures William James and John Dewey. Black feminist philosopher V. Denise James's work prominently focuses on putting pragmatist and Black feminist intellectual commitments in deeper conversation with one another, with the main goal of collapsing theory and practice in the discipline of Black feminist social theory and instead use philosophy "as a tool in the realization of an inclusive American democracy that would not level difference and dissent but would encourage social justice and cooperation" (2009, 92). She begins this endeavor with a thorough encounter with Dewey and inquires into the possibilities of Dewey's notions of social cooperation and democracy if enriched by Black feminist thought. James argues that the early theorizers of Black feminist visionary pragmatism—despite their inattention to traditional pragmatist philosophy in their work—closely align with Dewey's pragmatism (97). James argues that by the time Patricia Hill Collins takes up the visionary pragmatist term, her formation of the philosophical outlook takes an implicitly Deweyan turn in its moral dimensions on individual striving and human flourishing, as well as its process-oriented characterization as "a creative tension symbolized by an ongoing journey" (Collins 1998, 189). James argues that for "both the black feminist [pragmatist] and Dewey, community is integral to progressive democratic politics. And for both, the choices and aspirations of the individual are not theorized in opposition to society; rather, there is a symbiosis between individual and society that must be taken into account" (2009, 97). Thus,

James proposes a Black feminist visionary pragmatism that engages with philosophical pragmatism more deeply than by moniker alone, touting the potential for Black feminist social theory “to create scholarship that would enrich the lives of us all through the investigation of the lived experiences of black women and propositions concerning how we might achieve deeper democracy” (98). However, as a Black feminist philosopher, James is not content with leaving Black feminist visionary pragmatism within the confines of pragmatism’s dominant intellectual genealogy.

Although Denise James uses Dewey’s communitarian democratic orientations and other classical pragmatist principles to bolster the ameliorative social possibilities for the investigation of lived experience in Black feminist visionary pragmatist scholarship, she warns against falling into the trap of academic philosophy’s “culture of justification.” A phrase pulled from Kristie Dotson’s “How is This Paper Philosophy?” (2012), philosophy’s culture of justification mirrors Rhetorical Studies’ hegemonic history of exclusions and rhetorical pragmatism’s quest for certainty, as it serves “to create, at best, an unwelcoming professional environment for diverse peoples with diverse concerns, and at worst, [supports] an outright rejection of attempts to grapple with philosophically significant questions and themes from diverse perspectives” (James 2013, 35). Philosophy’s culture of justification “operates with the binary of feeling versus reason intact,” and “privileges the way academics have done professional philosophy as important and substantial over other pursuits such as poetry, memoir, or other writing that are marked as trivial and emotive” (35). Thus, professional philosophy has continually neglected to seriously engage the works of figures like Cooper because they “do not conform to the standards of justification,” thus reinscribing “the normative white maleness that is the marker of [the] profession” (36). Therefore, concerns over how Black feminist visionary pragmatism is practiced becomes intensified,

especially when putting figures like Cooper in conversation with canonical pragmatist figures. In reference to Black feminist visionary pragmatism, James notes a shared “family resemblance” with classical pragmatism’s attention to lived experience, but warns that “a philosophical profession that does not open itself to considering a diversity of lived experience has failed” (36). Thus, Denise James argues examining Cooper as a pragmatist figure allows pragmatism to experiment with its practices and continue challenging the professional norms of ‘doing philosophy’ that permeate philosophy as a discipline and pragmatism as an area of study. In the final section of this chapter, I offer implications for viewing Cooper’s engagements with cultures of justification through a rhetorical lens, but in the meantime, it is important to understand *Voice* as a rhetorical text of lived experience, and how this dissertation’s approach differs from those who have examined Cooper’s pragmatism from a literary view.

### **Reading *Voice* as a Rhetorical Black Feminist Visionary Pragmatist Text of Lived Experience**

If we read Cooper’s *A Voice from the South* from a traditional, hegemonic, or canonical view, or a white, masculinist, professional philosopher’s gaze, we miss the “vital insights she makes about the lived experiences of common people” (James 2013, 36). Reading Cooper as an establishment philosopher or from the angle of establishment philosophy significantly mischaracterizes her position and goals as a public intellectual. As Denise James says, “If we limit our considerations of her essay[s] to the class of professional philosophers who pay the most attention to the work of Williams James, the pragmatists, Cooper’s essay[s] may easily be dismissed because she does something that even James does not do” (33). For example, Cooper does not take William James’s approach to asserting faith by disproving the logic of his detractors or attempting to appeal to the audience’s ‘logical natures’; instead, Cooper rhetorically pushes the



boundaries of what is considered justifiable argument by the philosophical establishment by appealing to moral feelings over logical reason (33-34). Denise James argues Cooper's attention to the lived experiences of the lower classes, the struggles of Black folk of the South, and the lived experiences of Black women—rather than attention to logically rigorous or morally highbrow philosophical arguments—marks a shift “characteristic of visionary black feminist pragmatism” (2013, 38). Moreover, her “notions of growth, development, and self culture bring to mind the ideas of John Dewey and later black feminist visionary pragmatists about the possibilities of human progress and social change” (39). Therefore, I argue examining her rhetorical moves as a writer and orator of lived experience is an apt approach considering her humanistic orientations toward individual flourishing, social amelioration, and human possibility over abstract philosophical concerns. Denise James detects this in Cooper's religious rhetoric, particularly in the final chapter of *Voice* titled, “The Gain from a Belief.” James takes up an alternative reading of the text that is more in line with the pragmatist orientation and hints at the rhetorical pragmatism in Cooper's work. She writes that Cooper's Christian and religious rhetoric “might be a vital and important tool for a pragmatist philosopher interested in social justice” (33), implying the rhetorical value for Black feminist visionary pragmatism outside of traditional philosophical or academic settings. James argues Cooper's philosophy of belief and her *rhetorical* choices therein comprise her Black feminist visionary pragmatism:

Daring to read the piece as a pragmatist interested in social amelioration and the fullness of experience, what becomes key about belief is not whether or not Cooper has convinced us of the existence of God or some higher moral calling through accomplished argumentation, but that believing is central to how many people lived in her day and continue to do so in our own. So, while James may have argued that belief was a necessary

element of life through his sermon on faith, effectively or ineffectively, depending on who you ask, Cooper's main point is to call the believers to action. I would argue the call to action is another of the key points shared by most of us who call ourselves pragmatists (2013, 36-37).

For the rhetorical pragmatist scholar or rhetorical scholar more generally, Cooper's call to action can be seamlessly interpreted as a rhetorical call. As I will argue in the following section, Cooper displays a type of argument that is rhetorically pragmatist, and rhetorically visionary pragmatist in specific. However, rather than solely focusing on Cooper's religious rhetoric, the following analysis section focuses on Cooper's rhetoric of lived experience, comprised by embodied discourse, pragmatic metaphor, and appeals to empowered rhetorical agency. In particular, I demonstrate how Cooper invokes the embodied Black female voice as a rhetorical force and couples it with pragmatic metaphors to challenge cultures of justification and empower her Black female audience with equipment for rhetorical agency. By examining Cooper's deployment of rhetorical Black feminist visionary pragmatism, the pragmatism and rhetoric subfield gains a more pluralistic historical account of what is considered rhetorically pragmatist, providing an unrecovered cadre of rhetorical tools from an untapped alternative rhetorical history while simultaneously challenging rhetorical pragmatist scholarship's quest for certainty, its reliance on traditional ancient Greek figures or a hegemonic Metaphysical Club origin story, and its exclusion of lived experience as a central feature in the study and development of the subfield.

Before moving on to this chapter's rhetorical analysis, it is important to note one project that has attempted to move the pragmatist account of Cooper's work beyond the examination of her philosophical principles and sociopolitical orientations and toward a focus on the literary and textual dynamics significant to her articulations of lived experience. Part of a larger project

committed to the formation of an alternative pragmatist genealogy called “African American literary pragmatism,” Phipps’s (2018) project outlines the ways in which Cooper—along with other African American women from the early nineteenth century through the Harlem Renaissance—“offer some of the fullest and most provocative representations of how pragmatism understands democracy creatively” (2018, 5). This alternative genealogy locates this collection of Black women as some of the key figures of a literary pragmatist strain of African American feminism, detailing their pragmatist approaches to creative democracy through their textual articulations of experience aimed at radically altering institutional democracy. Phipps uncovers this through their action-based reform approaches to social commentary, the ways their social theories were directed toward ameliorative sociopolitical tasks, and their emphasis on the cultural and community activities that add value to democracy (6-38). He contends that “one could say that nineteenth-century African American women philosophers were pragmatists because, for them, theories gain value and meaning (or ‘truth’) through action, practical bearings, and tangible signs of sociopolitical change and improvement” (39). Phipps is unconcerned with the theoretical or philosophical understandings of Cooper’s visionary pragmatism, and instead focuses on the creative democratic “form[s] of writing that [knit] together aesthetic, philosophical, theological, autobiographical, political, historical, and literary modes of expression and argumentation” (8). Thus, “A literary pragmatic approach to black feminist texts demands, in turn, a focus on how African American women represent democracy through literary elements that reflect their experiential understandings of democracy at the margins of U.S. society (10). One of the key literary dynamics in this alternative genealogy aligns with the alternative rhetorical history this project traces: the role of experience.

However, for Phipps and his literary pragmatist conception, this method of analyzing nineteenth-century Black women as pragmatists lies exclusively in how experience emerges at the *textual* and *literary* levels, overlooking the *embodied* elements that encompass Black female experiences as they are lived and discursively expressed. Phipps observes textual emergences through an analysis of Cooper's musical metaphors, her construction of the Black maternal archetype, and expression of creative democracy through religious appeals and shades of the Black prophetic tradition (2018, 69-73). Granted, his literary pragmatist approach to Cooper's work is useful as a descriptive account of Cooper's textual devices, particularly in terms of the devices that "portray and assemble creative democratic communities by incorporating into [Cooper's] texts the cultural practices that tie black women together and facilitate the experience of democracy" (67). Accentuating the textual and literary elements of Cooper's work can serve as an important addition to conceptualizing Cooper's visionary pragmatism and helps expound upon some of the dynamics involved in Cooper's rhetorical purposes of "inspiring people to bring about change in society" (51). Meanwhile, this dissertation's rhetorical approach to Cooper's work considers the roles of audience, embodied experience, and the tools for rhetorical agency Cooper provides in the realm of experience as it is lived, rather than solely in how experience is textually expressed. In other words, there is a distinction to be made between the rhetoric of experience and the rhetoric of *lived* experience. By zooming in on pragmatism as rhetorics of *lived* experience, we can examine the ways in which Cooper's rhetorical Black feminist visionary pragmatism moves beyond respectability and textuality and toward rhetorical embodiment and empowered rhetorical agency. Therefore, by analyzing the rhetorical Black feminist visionary pragmatism in Cooper's work, we can further analyze how her rhetoric of lived experience holds democratic qualities beyond simply its textual, literary, or respectability components. This approach to studying the rhetorical

pragmatism of public intellectuals is much more than recovering what has been overlooked. Rather, identifying pragmatism as rhetorics of lived experience—such as this chapter’s rhetorical Black feminist visionary strain—is vital to pinpointing a rhetorical history of lived experience that has gone suppressed by professional philosophy’s culture of justification and rhetoric’s hegemonic origin story. These hegemonic origin stories and professional orientations have prevented lived experience from being regarded as a rhetorical force for democratic amelioration and social justice, particularly in the realm of public intellectualism. Studying Anna Julia Cooper through this rhetorical pragmatist lens helps us understand a crucial way in which embodied experience functions as a site for empowered rhetorical agency. Thus, rhetorical Black feminist visionary pragmatism may hold significant value as a set of discursive tools aimed to create ameliorative rhetorical experiences in audiences. These tools are not laid out in the style of a professional philosopher or a rhetorical theorist; rather, they emerge in Cooper’s *Voice* through rhetorical *practices*—the expression of lived embodied experience in the form of pragmatic metaphors and embodied voice—therefore inspiring possibilities for her Black female audience to experience empowered rhetorical agency and instantiate rhetorical tools geared toward social amelioration.

**Cooper’s Rhetorical Black Feminist Visionary Pragmatism: Pragmatic Metaphor, Embodied Voice, and the Vital Empowerment of Rhetorical Agency for a Pragmatic Public**

To begin discussing Cooper’s qualities of rhetorical pragmatist argument, it is important to acknowledge the prominence of lived experience in her work. As noted earlier in this chapter, Cooper’s overall philosophy involves challenging established epistemologies and accentuating the importance of lived experience to notions of being, knowing, and doing. As Vivian May notes, Cooper’s “astute philosophy of liberation was shaped by and connected to the particulars of her lived experience” (May 2007, 13). Due to this orientation, Cooper takes an uncannily pragmatist

interpretation of theory and practice, arguing that the paradoxes and disconnects between the two “should be considered among our core philosophical and political problematics. The ideals of liberation must connect to the exigencies of lived experience; these should be engaged with a sense of urgency, not dealt with in the abstract” (May 2007, 114). One could interpret this as philosophically pragmatist, and Cooper’s orientations toward truth, meaning, and lived experience do not stop there. May notes that “Cooper asserts that truth and meaning can be found in the situational particulars of lived experience,” suggesting a pluralistic view of humanity rather than a monistic, universalized, or fixed one (128, 163). In arguing for the philosophical relevance, political importance, and social consequences of lived experience, Cooper sought to articulate “a new black female subjectivity that is neither fixed, essentialist, nor singular” (42). Thus, Cooper aimed to “create space in the polity for her body and her ideas” by revising, “from her standpoint as a Black woman, the nation’s history and self-concept” (86). As Lemert says, “One might say today that she was intent upon inventing the discursive space of the black woman,” with her practical and direct language aimed to a public audience rather than a primarily academic one (19). Her theories emerge from various modes of embodied of discourse that voice the concerns of Black women as acts of solidarity, therefore emitting a “shared sense of lived (embodied) experience” (White 2021, 197). Thus, Cooper’s work not only entails a philosophical task, but also a rhetorical task that suggests a larger aim than simply mirroring the world or attempting to describe the facts. Two of the ways Cooper deploys this rhetorical task early on in *Voice* is through what I call *pragmatic metaphors*—metaphors that centralize lived experience, evidence, results, growth, and ameliorative possibility—as well as the rearticulation of an *embodied voice* that not only creates discursive space for the Black woman and presents a shared embodied experience with them, but

also implies and provides rhetorical agency for Black women as forerunners for racial uplift and American progress.

These rhetorical qualities are first evident in the text's brief opening chapter, "Our Raison d'Etre," in which Cooper introduces the voice of the Black woman to an America that has otherwise rendered the Black woman voiceless. This serves as the Black woman's entrance, as Cooper argues that white folks "cannot quite put themselves in the dark man's place, [and] neither should the dark man be wholly expected fully and adequately to reproduce the exact Voice of the Black Woman" (Cooper 1892/1998, 52). Instead, the Black woman occupies a unique embodied space in a white supremacist, Jim Crow America. And while Cooper poses herself as an exemplar of this intersectional experience, she compares the South to a choir and inserts the Black woman as a previously "mute and voiceless note" that shall now be "added to the already full chorus" of American discourse (51). Although Cooper deploys a musical metaphor to convey the predicament of being a Black woman in the late nineteenth century American South, this is also the earliest place in the text where Cooper begins to formulate and rearticulate the embodied voice of the Black woman for her reader. She accomplishes this by situating the voice of the Black woman within a cluster of legal metaphors to symbolize the contours of American democratic life. She describes the nation as comprising "Attorneys for the plaintiff and attorneys for the defendant," yet "One important witness has not yet been heard from. The summing up of the evidence deposed, and the charge to the jury have been made—but no word from the Black Woman" (Cooper 1892/1998, 51). This is the first wave of an array of metaphors that Cooper deploys throughout *Voice*, but Cooper chooses the courtroom as her first major nonliteral comparison to signal the primacy of results, consequences, and evidence, rather than ideals, abstractions, or first principles. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) note, metaphors often function to accentuate certain features while

masking others, but more importantly, they help cohere conceptual systems of experience in the process (141-142). For Cooper, her cluster of legal metaphors typify the lived experiences Black women endure, as their voices become continually stymied and silenced as they struggle “to be presented at the bar” (1892/1998, 51). At this early stage, Cooper slowly begins to put forth the prevalence of evidence and results, noting that much of the muffled, muted, and abandoned evidence can be traced to the voice of the Black woman.

Since the vital evidence for describing the interactions of American life from the Black woman’s perspective is silenced, she is left unrepresented, closed off from the courtroom discussion, and voiceless. As Cooper expresses, “The ‘other side’ has not been represented by one who ‘lives there.’ And not many can more sensibly realize and more accurately tell the weight and the fret of the ‘long dull pain’ than the open-eyed but hitherto voiceless Black Woman of America” (51). This is when Cooper begins to set the stage for “voice” as an embodied phenomena with affective, moral, and rhetorical dynamics and consequences. As Eric King Watts notes, the term “voice” is not “detachable from a body (singular or collective)” and is constitutive “of an ethical and emotional event” (2001, 192). Therefore, “voice” is wrapped up in the social commitments of public speech, points us to the ways in which people are included or excluded from public discourse, and “entails one’s capacity for moral agency” (184). Cooper immediately poses the voice of the Black woman as an excluded voice, as well as a unique embodied one that cannot be adequately reproduced by those who do not live in that embodied experience, all before posing capacities for moral agency in her Black female audience. At this point of the text, Cooper has not yet deployed the embodied voice of the Black woman as a rhetoric of lived experience, but she has offered a conceptual framework—through metaphor—for understanding the “puzzling” court case known as the nation’s Race Problem, mainly marked by neglected and botched evidence,



“analyzed and dissected, theorized and synthesized with sublime ignorance or pathetic misapprehension of counsel from the black client” (1892/1998, 51-52). Within this pragmatic metaphor is not only a dedication to evidence and results, but also a dedication to pluralism—that a variety of perspectives should be represented in the court of American discourse. For Cooper, the evidence being presented is one-sided, leaving the Black woman off the stand and pluralism rejected entirely. Thus, this pragmatic metaphor serves as a critique of American democracy’s lack of pluralistic representations and diverse voices. To open a rhetorical avenue for the Black woman’s voice to enter the fold, Cooper discursively makes her way in: “If these broken utterances can in any way help to a clearer vision and truer pulse-beat in studying our Nation’s Problem, this Voice by a Black woman of the South will not have been raised in vain” (52). This is Cooper’s first instance of establishing her own rhetorical agency and creating a discursive space for the Black woman in the American democratic and sociocultural arena. Although it can be interpreted that Cooper is mainly creating a discursive space for herself by explicitly referring to a singular Black female voice from the South, she is simultaneously “representative of many” (Alexander 1995, 351). As Elizabeth Alexander notes, Cooper is not anonymous, but her name on the frontispiece is solely “A Black woman from the South,” serving as her alter ego of which “she can insert her lived experience at a point in an argument where she feels that very experience might be discredited” (351). Thus, throughout *Voice*, she “speaks of simultaneous singularity and collectivity, a multiplicity of voices at play at once,” presenting “herself as part of a group as she defines the group’s very reason for existing” (351). Therefore, even in moments where Cooper is positioning herself in the text as an empowered agent of democratic individuality, she is concurrently empowering her fellow Black female audience of the South to instantiate empowerment alongside her, which is emblematic of how the current scholarship on rhetorical

agency detects its function. This is the first point in which a prospective Black readership comes into view, despite many of the speeches in *Voice* being initially given to audiences of Black men. As the text shifts to its second chapter, Cooper's rhetorical pragmatism eventually emerges as she calls on her Black female audience to cultivate rhetorical agency of their own.

Cooper continues her use of pragmatic metaphors to emphasize the importance of evidence and results in the text's second chapter and speech, "Womanhood: A Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race." In this piece, Cooper swaps legal metaphors for metaphors of fruit and foliage, frequently asking her reader to "look for fruit" in a country that perpetually looks toward ideals and dreams (1892/1998, 54). She says, "our satisfaction in American institutions rests not on the fruition we now enjoy, but springs rather from the possibilities and promise that are inherent in the system, though as yet, perhaps, far in the future" (54). She notes that America has positioned itself as a place abundant with promise and rife with possibility, but insists that the sense of progress—the feeling of *results* in our endeavors—is defined by the experience of working toward goals that offer tangible circumstances of continual advancement. It is not enough to dream, as America continues to do, if "when we look for fruit, like apples of Sodom, it crumbles within our grasp into dust and ashes" (54). As a visionary pragmatic solution to America's race problem and the lack of material advancement for the voiceless sides of American life, Cooper inserts the Black woman as the catalyst. As the leading change-agent, "the position of woman in society determines the vital elements of its regeneration and progress" (59). Initially, Cooper admits this sounds like she is making a statement on *a priori* grounds, and she begins to make a seemingly accommodationist case on behalf of *a priori* reasoning. However, she follows with a critique of white male *a priori* reasoning, claiming that "The vital agency of womanhood in the regeneration and progress of a race, as a general question, is conceded before

it is fairly stated” (60). Cooper asks the audience to envision these grounds being flipped, with womanhood’s influence on society being granted, and then asks to consider its “practical bearings” (60). This is where Cooper begins to speak to, for, and from the lived experiences of Black women, thus initiating a sense of agency in this segment of her audience after previously speaking to the assumptions and arguments of her white and male audiences.

Cooper begins her embodied rhetoric of lived experience in this chapter in a few ways. First, she aligns the embodied experience of the “*Colored Girls of the South*” with metaphors of foliage, describing the “large, bright, promising fatally beautiful class” as “shivering like a delicate plantlet before the fury of tempestuous elements, so full of promise and possibilities, yet so full of destruction” (60-61). In this comparison, Cooper presents the foliage metaphor of a plantlet that has yet to bear fruit to describe the Black female youth of the South. Budding, growing, yet precarious, these sprouts are bound to be clipped before they can blossom. Cooper calls for the preservation of the promising young plantlets, crying for them to be shielded, developed, taught, and inspired: “Snatch them, in God’s name, as brands from the burning! There is material in them well worth your while, the hope in germ of a staunch, helpful, regenerating womanhood on which, primarily, rests the foundation stones of our future as a race” (61). At this stage, Cooper’s rhetoric of lived experience takes shape through the metaphor of the plant’s growth process, comparing its phases and fruition to the unrealized yet vital growth of the race. She warns against revering the “spasms” of development and successes of African Americans, such as the sporadic lofty bank account or the “lists of lawyers, doctors, professors, D.D.’s, LL.D.’s, etc., etc., etc.” (61). Instead, she argues: “True progress is never made by spasms. Real progress is growth. It must begin in the seed. Then, ‘first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear.’ There is something to encourage and inspire us in the advancement of individuals since their emancipation from slavery”

(61). By this point, it is evident that, on the one hand, Cooper is suggesting to the Black men in her audience that women have something deeper and richer to offer the advancement of the race than the ‘spasms’ of titles or one-off elite status achievements. On the other hand, in what follows, there is a prospective readership of Black women Cooper is reaching out to and pragmatically empowering. However, to get there, Cooper argues the race needs to reflect on the evidence of its past.

Cooper argues that, to achieve true progress, the race must reflect, “learn wisdom from experience,” and, “by improved and more practical methods, address ourselves to the tasks before us” (61). She continues: “[We] must not degenerate into mere dreaming nor consume the time which belongs to the practical and effective handling of the crucial questions of the hour: and there can be no issue more vital and momentous than this of the womanhood of the race” (62). Here, Cooper argues on behalf of a pragmatic approach to the nation’s race problem, and positions Black womanhood as the catalyst for progress and social amelioration. She also makes clearer the “pernicious system” under which Black folks are attempting to operate, and describes this system as “proofs of innate corruptness and radical incurability” (62). It is important to note that Cooper does not attack the *intentions* or virtues of this system, but attacks the *proof*—its results, effects, and consequences. As she points out, “We are the heirs of a past which was not our father’s moulding. ‘Every man the arbiter of his own destiny’ was not true for the American Negro of the past: and it is no fault of his that he finds himself to-day the inheritor of a manhood and womanhood impoverished and debased by two centuries and more of compression and degradation” (62). Once illuminating these cultural, social, and political proofs for her audience, she begins to pose a subversive, empowering, and ameliorative avenue for her Black female audience to combat these conditions through empowered agency and uplift leadership. She says, despite “all the wrongs and

neglects of her past, with all the weakness, the debasement, the moral thralldom of her present,” the “re-training of the race, as well as the ground work and starting point of its progress upward, must be the *black woman*” (62). Cooper’s reasons for this are pragmatic: “Our meager and superficial results from past efforts prove their futility; and every attempt to elevate the Negro, whether undertaken by himself or through the philanthropy of others, cannot but prove abortive unless so directed as to utilize the indispensable agency of an elevated and trained womanhood” (62). In other words, uplift efforts have failed with men at the helm, and have particularly failed while ignoring or stifling the agency of Black womanhood. For Cooper, the pragmatic proof reveals that male-dominated uplift efforts have failed in response to the conditions of post-Reconstruction American white supremacy, and yet, “A race cannot be purified from without” (62). Thus, the time calls for looking within at the voices that have been silenced and agencies suppressed.

Although it is evident that Cooper is taking a pragmatic approach to progress, racial uplift, and Black female agency at this stage of the text, what does this ultimately mean for her rhetorical pragmatism? First, it helps her reposition her pragmatic metaphors of fruit and foliage in terms of a critique of prior results. For example, when criticizing patriarchal approaches to racial uplift, she likens the roles of African-American male preachers and teachers as “the gracious rain and sunshine are to plant growth,” and follows with the question: “But what are rain and dew and sunshine and cloud if there be no life in the plant germ? We must go to the root and see that that is sound and healthy and vigorous; and not deceive ourselves with waxen flowers and painted leaves of mock chlorophyll” (62). Although it initially seems as though Cooper is figuratively pointing to first principles or foundations when asking to “go to the root,” her metaphors are distinctly pragmatic when she argues on behalf of ameliorative growth and robust results rather

than “mock chlorophyll.” As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) also note, our experiences of objects in the natural world provide bases of understanding that go “beyond mere orientation. Understanding our experiences in terms of objects and substances allows us to pick out parts of our experience,” identify with them, group them, and “reason about them” (25). By this point of the text, Cooper has grouped her pragmatic metaphors of fruit and foliage in ways that categorize Black women as the seeds and plantlets that have been dug out or pruned in exchange for “waxen flowers and painted leaves,” leaving the race as a whole “constitutionally hopeful and proverbially irrepressible; and naturally stands in danger of being dazzled by the shimmer and tinsel of superficials. We often mistake foliage for fruit and overestimate or wrongly estimate brilliant results” (1892/1998, 63). With this series of pragmatic metaphors, Cooper not only critiques the failure of prior results, but critiques them of focusing on spectacle rather than growth, and thus spasms over progress: “We often mistake individuals’ honor for race development and so are ready to substitute pretty accomplishments for sound sense and earnest purpose” (62-63). Moreover, she presents the fruits of brilliant results through the brilliance of mothers in African American homes: “The atmosphere of homes is no rarer and purer and sweeter than are the mothers in those homes” (63). She positions Black women as holding the past results—and accordingly, capacity for empowered agency—to have ameliorative effects on African American democratic life. By carving a space for Black female agency via pragmatic metaphors, she not only codifies the experience of racial uplift through the lens of past ameliorative results, but subsequently promotes a visionary outlook for substantive progress. As I will examine next, this rhetorical visionary pragmatism takes further shape as she provides forceful capacities for *rhetorical* agency in not just Black mothers, but her prospective Black female audience as a whole.

In promoting rhetorical agency for her Black female audience, Cooper demonstrates the second major quality of her rhetorical visionary pragmatism, as she effectively melds agency with voice. She does so by presenting a rearticulated rhetorical vision of Black female consciousness and discourse, providing rhetorical tools for her audience in the process. She proclaims, “Only the BLACK WOMAN can say, ‘when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me.’” (63). This is an example of rearticulation, a Black feminist rhetorical device described by Patricia Hill-Collins (1989) as an empowering device that reinscribes an existing Black feminist consciousness and stimulates resistance in response to the deficient consciousness imposed by the hegemonic society or culture. Moreover, if we view this device through this project’s visionary pragmatist lens for Cooper’s rhetoric, we find that she also deploys rearticulation in this case as pragmatic device for empowered rhetorical agency. By overtly presenting the *voice* of the Black woman as the source of personal empowerment—“Only the BLACK WOMAN can *say* ‘when and where I enter’” (emphasis added) as “the whole Negro race enters with me”—Cooper centralizes the rhetorical agency of the Black woman as the fulcrum of racial uplift. It is the *voice* of the Black woman that channels the vital agency of Black womanhood, drives their rhetorical approaches, and discursively inscribes their ameliorative impact on Black sociopolitical and democratic life. As Sowards (2010) notes, rhetorical agency “is a function of individual dispositions, social contexts, and a rhetor’s ability to respond to those situations as they change over time and negotiate social standing related to gender, race, ethnicity, class, and national origin status” (227-228). Thus, viewing Cooper’s rearticulation as rhetorically pragmatist centers the empowered voice of the Black woman—and the promotion of the Black woman’s rhetorical agency—as central to *A Voice from the South*, rather than respectability rhetoric or her

accommodations to white or male audiences, in response to a white supremacist post-Reconstruction American society that had previously only attempted male-dominated approaches to racial uplift and liberation.

Altogether, Cooper's rhetorical pragmatism showcases pragmatic metaphors of lived experience that critique an overall culture of justification for its defunct results, while also promoting a rhetorical agency that empowers Black women to rearticulate their positions in society as ameliorative leaders. It is true that rearticulation can function and be analyzed separate from the rhetorical pragmatist purview; however, by analyzing *Voice* as exhibiting Cooper's Black feminist visionary rhetorical pragmatism, we discover Cooper not only using rearticulation, but providing it as a rhetorical tool for her audience to deploy in building a pragmatic public. For Danisch, this means centering rhetorical and communication practices that can directly influence democratic conduct, rather than philosophical reflections on democratic life. Cooper offers this through rhetorical practice—her rearticulation of *embodied voice*—first operating as a discursive device of lived experience to establish a collective voice, then as a rhetorical tool for audience members of that shared embodied experience to instantiate and deploy as a form of rhetorical agency. Cooper's expression of embodied voice takes Sowards' conception of rhetorical agency a step further and in rhetorical pragmatist fashion—rather than simply facilitating the construction of identity or enabling the mechanisms for collaborative social organizing efforts, Cooper's instillment of embodied voice provides an embodied rhetorical agency for her Black female audience comprised of tools for critique and social rearticulation. By placing the voice of the Black woman of the South at the center of the text's title and mission, Cooper centralizes this embodied rhetorical voice of lived experience as an attempt to empower, equip, and insert this voice in the overarching American discourse, thus enriching pluralism and empowering Black female voices in the pursuit



of a pragmatic public. It is rhetorically pragmatic in its focus on practical results—as both a critique of prior results and as an accentuation of evidence that Black women have previously brought democratic enrichment to the polity—as well as its promotion of rhetorical agency and discursive tools for Black women to deploy as rhetorical agents. Moreover, Cooper’s deployment of an embodied voice is visionary in its steadfast approach to progress, particularly in its focus on avenues for Black women as vanguards of uplift leadership dedicated to enduring ameliorative growth and possibility rather than accolades or fleeting spectacle.

Cooper caps off her rhetorical Black feminist visionary pragmatism with a final grouping of pragmatic metaphors in “Womanhood: A Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race.” She declares:

The time is ripe for action. Self-Seeking ambition must be laid on the altar. The battle is one of sacrifice and hardship, but our duty is plain. We have been recipients of missionary bounty in some sort for twenty-one years. Not even the senseless vegetable is content to be a mere reservoir. Receiving without giving is an anomaly in nature. Nature’s cells are all little workshops for manufacturing sunbeams, the product to be *given out* to earth’s inhabitants in warmth, energy, thought, action (70).

Here, Cooper extends her fruit metaphors to the visionary side of her rhetorical pragmatism, designating the moment as “ripe” for action, calling for ameliorative change and imminent production through “warmth, energy, thought, and action.” Cooper frames this struggle as more agentic and fruitful than the mere reception of aid by others, promoting the capacities for Black women to contribute to society rather than serve as “mere reservoir[s].” As Lakoff and Johnson note, metaphors can be appropriate and important when they “sanction actions, justify inferences, and help us set goals” (142). For Cooper, these metaphors are used to accentuate and prioritize the

“vital” agency of womanhood in the advancement and uplift of African-Americans in post-Reconstruction Jim Crow America. Altogether, this means Cooper’s rhetoric of lived experience is not only meant to induce rhetorical agency in her Black female audience, but also create the rhetorical experience of agency in her audience for the purpose of spurring a form ameliorative action that can potentially contribute to a more vibrant and pluralistic public that robustly features the leadership of Black female voices. Thus, Cooper’s rhetorical pragmatism lies in her ability to pose embodied voice as: 1) a vehicle for the rhetorical experience of empowered agency, and 2) as an instrument of rhetorical agency for her audience to pragmatically employ to build a pragmatic public.

### **Rhetorical Black Feminist Visionary Pragmatism’s Upshot: Resistance to Cultures of Justification, Vehicle for Rhetorical Agency, and Builder of Pragmatic Publics**

Overall, examining Cooper’s rhetorics of lived experience helps us further understand the role of embodied experience in rhetorical matters, the rhetorical role of Black feminist visionary pragmatism, and the role for rhetorical pragmatism in challenging intellectual *and* social cultures of justification. As I covered in the previous section, by invoking embodied voice as a vehicle for the experience of empowered agency and as an instrument of rhetorical agency for her Black female audience to utilize, Cooper espouses a rhetorical visionary pragmatism that centers the Black female voice as a rhetorical force for influencing democratic conduct and building a pragmatic public. Viewing Cooper as a public intellectual who provides discursive tools for Black women to proliferate their voices in democratic fashion firmly positions Cooper’s appeals analyzed here as a rhetorically pragmatist, and rhetorically Black feminist visionary pragmatist in specific. Danisch (2015) argues that first-generation pragmatism is a philosophy that underscores centrality of rhetoric, and argues that for one to be a rhetorical pragmatist, one must commit to the

centrality of communication in their work (xxix). Cooper accomplishes this by centralizing the embodied voices of Black women, therefore confirming the centrality of communication in rhetorical Black feminist visionary pragmatism *through her rhetorical practice*. Moreover, through her espousal of pragmatic metaphors and embodied voice, Cooper's rhetorical Black feminist visionary pragmatism adds a crop of rhetorical orientations and practices for a revised version of the handbook Danisch argues the subfield vitally needs (250). These practices include embodied voice, empowered rhetorical agency, and pragmatic metaphor.

Studying Cooper's Black feminist visionary pragmatism as rhetorics of lived experience that speak *to*, *for*, and *from* the experiences of Black women allows us to understand and take seriously Cooper as a public intellectual rhetor who aimed to empower Black female audiences through their embodied lived experiences. As May notes, Cooper is uninterested in "restating the truth or presenting new facts from the viewpoint of the margins," and is instead concerned with avenues for the "transformation both of the imagination and society" (2007, 98). Therefore, Cooper was not only concerned with the epistemic importance of lived experience, but equally concerned with the sociopolitical consequences of lived experience as a tool for social change. Just as Danisch (2007) argues pragmatist philosophy opens avenues for the necessity of rhetoric in democratic affairs, Cooper's centrality of lived experience serves as a rhetorical facilitator for social transformation. This unlocks an angle to Cooper's work that separates her from philosophers concerned strictly with epistemological problems and ways of describing the world, and instead as a rhetorician concerned with changing the world through rhetorics of lived experience. In *Voice*, Cooper implies and provides rhetorical tools for her prospective Black female readership, creating avenues for rhetorical agency in her Black female audience as well as providing specific discursive tools for her audience to model and employ.

Furthermore, the rhetorical strain of Black feminist visionary pragmatism extends the subfield's project of deepening democracy, prominently featuring the embodied voices previously excluded—not for the purposes of inclusion, but to recover a strain of rhetorical history and practice that stands as a challenge to the subfield's current culture of justification that hinges upon the foundations of classical Greek rhetorical theory. As a rhetorical leader in the vein Danisch (2015) argues is vital to building social democracy (280), Cooper—who promotes rhetorical leadership in her Black female audience, empowers their agency, provides avenues for their democratic flourishing, and thus animates the significance of building a pragmatic public—exhibits a rhetorical visionary pragmatism not indebted to her classical Greek rhetorical training and knowledge, but centered on her embodied experience as a Black woman, the rhetorical agency of her voice, and the empowerment of her fellow Black women enduring exclusion and failed uplift efforts. Thus, the Black feminist visionary strain of rhetorical pragmatism contributes vital elements of rhetorical agency, rhetorical embodiment, and metaphors of lived experience that promote the type of ameliorative leadership that allows pluralistic and empowered discourse to emerge and pragmatic publics to be built.

Furthermore, Cooper's rhetoric of lived experience and the overall rhetorical Black feminist visionary pragmatist project contributes resistance and social amelioration approaches previously unexamined in the pragmatism and rhetoric scholarship. In particular, Cooper's use of pragmatic metaphors serves as a critique of an American culture of justification that suppresses and silences Black female voices and downplays the role of pluralism in public discussion and democratic conduct. This not only reveals the Black female voice as challenging the intellectual culture of justification as philosophical visionary pragmatism does, but more importantly, it reveals a *rhetorical* resistance to the sociopolitical cultures of justification through the rhetorical

deployment of pragmatic metaphors and appeals to empowered rhetorical agency. This opens another avenue for rhetorical pragmatism to advance other than its aspirations to extend beyond the limits of philosophical pragmatism. Although Cooper's work serves as a prominent underpinning for the current formation of Black feminist visionary pragmatism, it is also evident that her rhetorical adoption of embodied voice aimed to carve a public intellectual lane for everyday Black women to rhetorically build pragmatic publics. By analyzing the rhetorical practices of Cooper's visionary pragmatism, we can detect an important shift vital to the study and practice of rhetorical pragmatism: a move away from focusing strictly on intellectual contexts in the academic sphere, and further toward the social contexts that rhetorical pragmatism should largely be concerned with in its democratic efforts. To be more specific, this means shifting the focus from rhetors challenging philosophical or academic cultures of justification through rhetorically pragmatist appeals and toward those who challenge a wide range of sociopolitical cultures of justification that thwart pluralism, suppress excluded voices and embodied lived experiences, and stifle the ameliorative creations of pragmatic publics. Once removed from the constraints of rhetorical pragmatism's quest for certainty and philosophy's culture of justification, this becomes the public intellectual mission of a new rhetorical pragmatism that recognizes a variety of strains and rhetorical histories left previously neglected.

Understanding Anna Julia Cooper's rhetorical pragmatism unveils a new purview for the interpretation, study, and practice of rhetorical pragmatism. By moving the outlook and study of rhetorical pragmatism in the direction of public practice, we gain a novel and better sense of how rhetorics of lived experience function practically and amelioratively to build pragmatic publics. In specific, we saw how Cooper was able to use embodied discourse and pragmatic metaphors to cultivate an empowered rhetorical agency in her audience—an embodied voice that her audience

could provide as rhetorical agents in American democracy. Therefore, Cooper actively worked to foster pluralism in the American polity—to aid in building a rhetorically pragmatic public in which a plurality of embodied voices can be inspired express themselves in ways that make vital contributions to society, no matter how big or how small they are perceived. A crucial element in fostering this pragmatic public for Cooper was empowering the rhetorical agency of her audience, most notably the audience who shared her lived embodied experience. Of course, this goal was not easy, as much of the structural, material, and cultural conditions of the time stifled democratic participation and expression for Black women of the South, oftentimes in violent ways. But Cooper attempted to foster a rhetorical agency in her audience by equipping them with the tools to courageously express themselves in response to those conditions, potentially aid in ameliorating them, and forcefully insert their voices as agents of democratic amelioration. This is rhetorical pragmatism at work: lived experiences rhetorically arising in ways that inspire peoples' rhetorical agency and energize a more just, pluralistic, and moral democracy. In tracing this strain of rhetorical history, this dissertation continues to chart the rhetorical pragmatism of African American public intellectuals. As we continue to see in the following chapters, fostering the rhetorical agency of audiences through the vehicle of lived experience remains prominent, and this emerges as a core quality of rhetorical pragmatism once freed from the constraints of the cultures of professionalism and justification that make pragmatism indebted to James and Dewey and rhetoric indebted to Aristotle and the Sophists. Roughly a decade following Cooper's *A Voice From the South*, W.E.B. Du Bois released his own masterwork, *The Souls of Black Folk*. In rhetorically analyzing *The Souls of Black Folk*, the following chapter operates at the nexus of Du Bois's public intellectualism, affect, and spiritual rhetorical agency. Considering this dissertation's goal of introducing a set of full-fledged rhetorical pragmatisms and leave the pivot from

philosophical to rhetorical pragmatism behind, the following chapter teases out the ways in which Du Bois's public intellectual rhetoric functions to build a pragmatic public in ways that not only emphasize embodiment, but also centralize affect, interiority, and spirituality.

### **Chapter 3: W.E.B. Du Bois, Stories of Lived Experience, and the Possibilities for Spiritual Rhetorical Agency: Voice as an Affective Instrument for Building a Pragmatic Public**

In the decade following Cooper's release of *A Voice from the South*, W.E.B. Du Bois began his rise to prominence as the leading Black public intellectual voice in America. According to Gates Jr. and Oliver (1999), "More than any other figure at the turn of the century, Du Bois was the public written 'voice' of the American Negro intellectual" (xix). Even further, he has been regarded as "*the* towering public intellectual in the first half of the twentieth century in the American empire" (West 2014, 42). Considering his contributions to the academic fields of sociology, philosophy, political theory, and Black Studies, this claim is not overblown. In fact, by the time his most prominent work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, appeared in 1903, he was regarded one of the most well-known African Americans in the nation—at only 35 years old (Gates Jr. and Oliver 1999, xii). To this day, Du Bois's impact and influence is so far-reaching that his rightful place in intellectual history and the history of philosophy has been widely debated. For instance, some authors interpret Du Bois's writings, particularly *The Souls of Black Folk*, as heavily influenced by Hegelianism (Gooding-Williams 2011; Zamir 1995; Shaw 2013). Others have focused on his contributions to American political thought and prophetic political critique (Reed 1997; Marshall 2011). Another tendency is to place Du Bois in the American pragmatist intellectual tradition (West 1989; Taylor 2004; Kahn 2009). A worthwhile feature of this interpretation is the ways in which scholars have located the intersections between Du Bois's pragmatic thought and African-American religion (Kahn 2009; Glaude 2018). Some of these interpretations will be examined closely in this chapter, but an overarching focus will attend to Du Bois's rhetorical presence as a public intellectual. His emergence as a leading public intellectual and "dominant political figure in the Afro-American community is without parallel in the history



of black leadership: his vehicle to prominence had been the *written word*” (Gates Jr. and Oliver 1999, xii). Thus, an imperative facet of Du Bois’s rise was the rhetorical thrust of his public intellectual written work and its impact on African American society, the American intellectual community, and broader American public. Indeed, it was this rhetorical impact that made Du Bois the marquee race leader of the early twentieth century, for he had no intention or aspiration of becoming such a figure before he released *The Souls of Black Folk* (Gates Jr. and Oliver 1999, xiii). The rhetorical force of *Souls* launched a distinguished public intellectual career for Du Bois, making the written word not only his vehicle to prominence, but also his vehicle for academic and social pursuits for racial justice and democratic rights for African Americans in a white supremacist, Jim Crow America.

Like Cooper, Du Bois’s public intellectual rhetoric overlaps many public spheres, including academic and public realms, Black and white audience dynamics, and rational versus embodied modes of thought and action. This is especially true of *The Souls of Black Folk*. Although Du Bois demonstrates elitist, Victorian, and often patriarchal sensibilities in *Souls*, this chapter aims to uncover the deeper democratic sensibilities found in this classic work, specifically the democratic culture Du Bois was trying to foster through the cultivation of a *spiritual rhetorical agency* in his Black audience. Thus, this chapter uncovers the rhetorically pragmatist ways in which Du Bois promotes a spiritual Black individuality delinked from conceptions of the nation state and more attuned to the lived expressions of Black interiority and affect. In Du Bois’s rhetoric, these affective, spiritual lived experiences emanate from the Negro spirituals—the slave narratives that constitute stories of lived experience for his audience and carry a spiritual legacy they can identify as their own. As this chapter aims to show, these stories play an integral role in

Du Bois's efforts to energize rhetorical agency in his Black audience and facilitate building a rhetorically pragmatic public.

Overall, I argue that Du Bois's rhetorical pragmatism emerges through the stories of lived experience he tells in *Souls*, and the commentary he provides alongside these narratives energizes possibilities for his Black audience to realize their *spiritual rhetorical agency*, revealing the capacities of their voices as affective instruments for building a pragmatic public. In the sections that follow, I will show how Du Bois makes the singing voices of slave descendants and their enduring legacies central to his narrative appeals, utilizing these stories of lived experience to channel his Black audience's interiorities and point to a rhetorical agency that privileges their voices as objects of speech with affective and ameliorative social consequences. First, I will cover Du Bois's intellectual background, his encounters with the pragmatists at Harvard, and some of the dominant interpretations of Du Bois's pragmatist influences. Second, I will review the ways in which Du Bois has been covered as a rhetorician—both inside and outside the Rhetorical Studies scholarship—with close attention to the prominent ways he has been studied as a religious and spiritual rhetor. Next, I propose a reconfigured understanding of Du Boisian spirituality and spiritual rhetoric built on a segment of scholarship dedicated to Black interiority and affect. Lastly, I analyze Du Bois's rhetorical pragmatism through the lens of his storytelling as a rhetoric of possibility, providing narrative avenues for the cultivation of rhetorical agency and the creation of a pragmatic public.

### **From Pragmatist Pupil to Public Intellectual Prominence**

Du Bois stands as a unique influential figure in that his widespread impact and public reach emanates mainly from the written word, leading to his high regard as a public intellectual despite navigating in the academic sphere for most of his life. His life of the mind began when he graduated

high school in 1884, the first Black student at his school to do so (Gates Jr. and Oliver 1999, xiv). Although attending Harvard was his dream, the local Congregational Churches that donated to his scholarship fund urged him to attend Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, considered “one of the great Negro academic institutions” (xv). Despite losing out on his dream, Du Bois looked forward to the experience of being around Black folks of his ilk. Although born and raised in the North in Great Barrington, MA, he “felt the lure of the South,” feeling drawn to a land of Black struggle and rebellion (xv). But as he “descended into a white South still resentful over its defeat in the Civil War and bitter over what it considered to be the excesses of Reconstruction,” he experienced firsthand “the daily humiliation of being black in America” (xv). This understanding shaped Du Bois’s “urge to be involved in the politics of race and racism at the turn of the century,” and in turn shaped the overall message of *Souls* (xvi). During his time at Fisk, he spent summers teaching at a small rural school fifty miles outside of Nashville, witnessing the overwhelming poverty that and lack of opportunity that faced the majority of Black folk of the South. These experiences left an affective imprint on Du Bois—a simmering indignation that eventually boils over in emotional moments in *Souls*. In the meantime, Harvard eventually accepts Du Bois as a junior undergraduate. Despite reaching his academic dream, by the time he attends Harvard, his experiences in the South shape him into a self-proclaimed Fisk man—a “Harvard man in name only” (Gates Jr. & Oliver 1999, xvii). Nonetheless, he thrives at Harvard, pursuing his first love of philosophy and finding a new love studying history, and he eventually pursues his graduate work in history (xvii). At Harvard, Du Bois finds his most influential academic mentors, such as Frank Taussig and Albert Bushnell Hart, as well as pragmatist philosophers George Santayana and William James (xvii). Of these influences, James was undoubtedly the most important, and for varied reasons. Not only did he develop a reverence and close personal relationship with James,

but Du Bois was fortunate to study under James as he was beginning to articulate his pragmatist philosophy (Marable 1986, 13). This experience became important for Du Bois's own philosophical, scholarly, and intellectual development (Campbell 1992, 569). He considered himself "a devoted follower of James at the time he was developing his pragmatic philosophy," and expressed great gratitude for James "[guiding] me out of the sterilities of scholastic philosophy to realist pragmatism" (Du Bois 1968, 133). In fact, Du Bois credits James for dissuading him from pursuing professional philosophy and turning him to the social sciences, which he eventually did in prolific fashion as a renowned sociologist. After being the first African American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard, he went on to break new ground as a sociologist, approaching the discipline through the lens of human action in response to dynamic social conditions, rather than approaching society as a static whole governed by physical laws and stable social conditions and practices. He practiced sociology with deep attention to the social problems that faced African Americans and did so from a historical perspective that saw "the Negro problem" as a bundle of social problems (Gooding-Williams 2011, 58-65). Later in his life, he credited his sociological formation to James and pragmatism: "I went forward to build a sociology, which I conceived as the attempt to measure the element of Chance in human conduct. This was the Jamesian pragmatism, applied not simply to ethics, but to all human action, beyond what seemed to me, increasingly, the distinct limits of physical law" (Du Bois 1944/2012, 57-58). His groundbreaking brand of sociology approached the discipline and society as dynamic, interdependent, and influenced by the force of human will—a very pragmatist orientation indeed.

Du Bois's close encounters with James and corresponding influence have led several scholars to describe Du Bois as a pragmatist. In fact, some have attributed his famous conception of "double-consciousness" to his encounters with James (Gates Jr. and Oliver 1999, ix). The term

has been regarded as a metaphor of Black experience that illuminates Black life as a “two-ness,” a “double-aimed struggle” of “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity”—the sense of being Black yet also being American in the early twentieth century —“two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Gates Jr. and Oliver 1999, ix; Du Bois 1903/1999, 11). This notion of Black life and psychology has led scholars to draw parallels between James’s and Du Bois’s “complex conceptions of the human self” (Campbell 1992, 57). In James’s work on psychology, he separates the “I” and “me” of personal experience, dividing them into slices called “The Empirical Self or Me,” “The Material Me,” “The Social Me,” and “The Spiritual Me” (1890/1987, 178-179). For James, the personal self is as pluralistic as collective groups, and Du Bois mirrors this view in his conception of Black experience, highlighting the difference between the personal, spiritual experiences of being Black in America and the social experience of being seen through white America’s eyes. As I explore later in this chapter, Du Bois rhetorically attempts to merge a social rhetorical agency that matches the inner, affective, and spiritual dimensions of Black life, but the constraints of American society’s white gaze in the early twentieth century makes this an arduous goal for Du Bois and his Black audience. Considering this exigence, Du Bois has been frequently analyzed through his appeals to white audiences in his attempts to cultivate pluralism in American social life. Campbell (1992) identifies this pluralist orientation as another Jamesian pragmatist influence, noting Du Bois’s liberal tolerance for diversity and his James-esque penchant for pluralistic democracy (575). As mentioned in chapter 1, this is also the impetus for Menand’s (2001) placement of Du Bois in the pragmatist tradition, underscoring his contribution to the evolution of cultural pluralism in the tradition’s corpus. Du Bois’s ascribed

affiliations with pragmatism range from a “richly inward appropriation” (Posnock 1995, 521), to “a pragmatist in a broad sense”—a pragmatic meliorist whose work reveals aspects of pragmatism otherwise missed, therefore illuminating and expanding the tradition (Taylor 2004, 99-104), and a “Jamesian organic intellectual” who applied pragmatism to a historical account of race relations (West 1989, 139). Like many others, Cornel West also argues Du Bois both appropriated and subverted elements of pragmatism to provide what the philosophy lacks in its inattention to issues of social suffering, internationalism, race relations, and more (147-148). Scholars like Alexander Livingston (2016) take up this view, inviting readers to ascertain new political understandings of William James’s work “when read from within the terms of Du Bois’s historicization of consciousness” (145). Although Du Bois does exhibit evident connections with the pragmatist tradition, is influenced by the pragmatic method in important ways, and provides ameliorative social justice value in areas where the philosophical tradition is lacking, as I will argue in this chapter, there is a specific set of rhetorics tied to these interpretations that are being reduced to philosophical influences or contributions. It is true that Du Bois brought his own pragmatic method to bear in his graduate studies in history and professional practice of sociology, but Du Bois was not just a philosopher, historian, and sociologist—he was also a rhetorician who deployed lived experience as a vehicle for promoting rhetorical agency.

### **Du Bois the Rhetorician: Public Intellectualism, Prophecy, and Pragmatic Religious Naturalism**

Like Cooper, Du Bois was also trained in rhetoric while he was a student at Harvard from 1888-1892, taking a course with Barrett Wendell headlined by the Aristotelean and Ciceronian schools (Rampersad 1976). Du Bois eventually featured rhetorical techniques and appeals in his work, especially his masterclass *Souls*. Thus, Du Bois has been studied in various ways as either

a rhetorician or as contributing to rhetorical theory, both inside and outside the Rhetorical Studies scholarship proper. One of the more common ways Du Bois's work has been incorporated in the scholarship is through his theory of double-consciousness. For example, for scholars such as Frank and McPhail (2005) and Terrill (2009), double-consciousness serves as an apt theoretical and historical frame for understanding President Barack Obama's rhetoric. As for scholars who treat Du Bois as a rhetorician, some astutely point out the ways in which his social theories function as rhetorical devices. For example, Susan Wells (2002) explores the rhetorical contours of double-consciousness as not only a theory but also a rhetorical practice, arguing Du Bois deploys it throughout *Souls* as a technique of writing. In another essay, Justine Wells (2019) focuses on Du Bois's conservation rhetoric and the ways in which he spoke to environmental conservationists of his day through a racial lens, as well as painted societies, nations, and races as comprising rhetorical ecologies. Double-consciousness is a common draw for rhetorical scholars interested in mining Du Bois's work for rhetorical value, and this chapter aims to contribute another layer to this line of scholarship, mainly through the lens of his public intellectualism and the ways *Souls* appeals to a Black public audience to energize their spiritual rhetorical agency and foster their roles in shaping a pragmatic public.

Indeed, Francesca R. Gentile (2017) covers Du Bois as a public intellectual rhetorician, emphasizing the ways in which Du Bois's public intellectual rhetoric opened "discursive arenas for debate" and challenged "the ideological assumptions and structures that threatened opportunities for productive public deliberation" (132). She argues that Du Bois and Booker T. Washington rhetorically operated in a space she coins a "public-intellectual economy," in which public intellectual messaging functions within the principles of supply and demand and circulates within the public sphere as symbolic capital (155). Gentile argues the public intellectual is in

highest demand during times of crisis, thus making public intellectualism an “ethos-driven rhetorical project” (144-145). By analyzing *Souls* through the lens of what she calls Du Bois’s “closed-market model of public-intellectual work,” she assesses the text as a democratically oriented project aimed toward fostering communication between diverse audience members (155). This democratic view of *Souls* is contingent upon the pluralistic audience Du Bois aimed to attract with the text and the ways in which it held possibilities for enhancing modes of associated living, despite the challenges of opening dialogue across diverse groups during a race crisis that excluded African Americans from everyday democratic practices. As Ochieng (2016) mentions, Du Bois faced the double-aimed challenge of navigating the public exigencies he faced while simultaneously playing a role in shaping new publics (116). Thus, the rhetorical formation of his public intellectual imagination was shaped by the racist and anti-democratic conditions of early twentieth century America, but he also “exercised a profound role in reconstituting those publics” (122). It is routine for scholars who treat Du Bois as a rhetorician navigating these complicated public dynamics to focus on the ways in which Du Bois concurrently appeals to his white and Black audiences in *Souls* in the pursuit of pluralistic social relations. This has been done from multiple angles, but a primary one features Du Bois’s use of religious rhetoric.

Many scholars have examined Du Bois’s religious rhetoric, particularly his discourse that draws from the Black prophetic rhetorical tradition and the jeremiad. In their coverage of the African American rhetorical tradition, scholars Keith Gilyard and Adam J. Banks (2018) focus on Du Bois’s use of the jeremiad in his early works. A confrontational style that challenges the nation’s ability to live up to its ideals of liberty and justice for all, the jeremiad has been historically deployed by African American rhetors who warn of dire consequences if America continues to fail on its promises and offers a resolving prophecy in its place (Gilyard and Banks 2018, 29-45). By



examining Du Bois as a prophetic deployer of the jeremiad, Gilyard and Banks place him squarely in the Black prophetic tradition alongside figures such as David Walker, Frederick Douglass, Maria Stewart, and on through Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. This is not the only work that positions Du Bois in Black prophetic tradition, and it is certainly not the only work treating Du Bois as a religious rhetor. In fact, two of the most comprehensive rhetorical works on Du Bois both treat him as a religious rhetor, despite these works not coming from Rhetorical Studies proper. The first is *W.E.B. Du Bois: American Prophet* (2007) by Edward J. Blum. Blum recognizes *Souls* as a religious text and identifies the ways in which it deploys the prophetic power to irrevocably alter the souls of both white and Black readers (Blum 2007, 95). He focuses on the ways in which Du Bois appealed to his white audience through a specific set of Christian biblical appeals and the deployment of soul to contest and subvert the white supremacist view that Black folks were soulless beasts (62-97). In Blum's account, African American religion is crucial to Du Bois's rhetorical appeals. Of particular focus are the ways in which Du Bois fashions metaphors and religious arguments for the purpose of inverting white supremacist principles, posing a new set of religious appeals that spiritualize race relations in America and makes it more prominent in the overall American story (76). As Blum argues, Du Bois's vocation "was to display the spiritual side of black life, the side that white supremacist theologians denied even existed, the side that could only be viewed by first believing that people of color had souls" (77). To achieve this, Blum argues, Du Bois had to reverse white supremacist orientations by using their Christian religious language as a rhetorical vehicle to discuss the spirituality of African Americans, making Du Bois "no mere scholar but a biblical and prophetic writer with the power to reveal the unseen and sacred" (77-78). One place Du Bois does this is in his final chapter of *Souls*, "The Sorrow Songs," wherein he demonstrates the spiritual ideals of African Americans and their historical connections to the

Negro spirituals. As Blum says of this chapter and *Souls* generally, “from first readings to the present, countless men and women have found profound spiritual nourishment” (90). However, interpretations over what Du Bois means by ‘souls’ and the ‘spiritual’ have been up for debate.

Another interpretation of Du Bois’s spirituality can be found in a second comprehensive work categorizing Du Bois as a religious rhetor, Jonathon Kahn’s *Divine Discontent: The Religious Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois* (2009). In this text, Kahn takes an alternative approach to what Du Bois means when he describes Black spiritual life and the nature of their souls. Kahn fashions Du Bois as a pragmatic religious naturalist, arguing his religious sensibilities are grounded in a Jamesian radical empiricism and a pragmatic focus on the lived experiences of Black suffering. Not only does he eschew the idea of Du Bois as a biblical Christian rhetor, but he additionally argues it is incredibly difficult to ascertain what Du Bois means by terms like ‘spiritual strivings’ or ‘souls’ “without pragmatic religious naturalism as a frame” (65). Kahn argues that, considering his heterodox views on religion and his personal rejection of established doctrines, religious traditions, or institutions, it is preferable to view Du Bois as one who adopts the languages and resources of religion as “pragmatist tools—by embracing religious resources without metaphysical commitments and by using these resources to address the realities of race” (9-13). Kahn claims that, through his pragmatic use of “religious stories, moods, symbols, rhetoric, and moral values,” Du Bois creates “a radical version of pragmatic religious naturalism”—a line of antifoundational religious thought that “runs through William James, George Santayana, and John Dewey”—and “inaugurates a line of African American pragmatic religious naturalism” that “is more powerful than the pragmatists themselves” (13). Like many other scholars linking Du Bois to the pragmatist tradition, Kahn views Du Bois’s thought and rhetoric as an expansion of the tradition. Although he does deem Du Bois’s version a distinct African American strain linked to

specific African American experiences—cutting “an innovative path between the pragmatic religious naturalism of Dewey and Santayana and [urging] a type of social activism that is anchored by an appreciation of African American history and ritual”—he nonetheless argues it is difficult to understand Du Bois’s spiritual rhetoric in *Souls* without framing it in reference to the pragmatic religious naturalism of Dewey and Santayana (64-65). Although he claims Du Bois’s version is an African American variation, Kahn turns to a culture of philosophical justification that insists the pragmatic religious framework is the best way to understand Du Bois’s religious language use, thus pigeonholing his spiritual rhetoric within a dominant pragmatist narrative that only explains a sliver of Du Bois’s language formation as it relates to Santayana’s, Dewey’s, and James’s religious naturalisms. This is somewhat understandable, considering Du Bois’s close connections to James and Santayana and his contributions to pragmatist thought. However, this interpretation of Du Bois’s expressions of the spiritual denies the centrality of lived experience in Du Bois’s rhetorical decisions and character. Thus, although Du Bois’s spiritual discourse is significant to the way he is studied as a rhetorician, interpretations of what he means by ‘the spiritual’ remain up for discussion.

I argue that if we examine Du Bois’s spiritual rhetoric more closely—and with attunement to the ways in which it speaks to, for, and from lived experience—there surfaces a rhetorical character to Du Bois’s expressions of spirituality delinked from a reliance on pragmatism’s dominant origin story and classical figures, and instead emergent from the African American narratives of lived experience he tells in *Souls*. In fact, as the analysis section of this chapter will show, there emerges a spiritual rhetoric of lived experience expressed through Du Bois’s storytelling of the Negro slave spirituals that does not need relationship to Santayana’s, Dewey’s, or James’s pragmatic religious naturalism for understanding. Kahn himself hints at this when he

says, “soul refers to the values, ideals, and sufferings that give black life its forms of dignity” (65). Spirituality for Du Bois centers on the embodied, affective, and aspirational elements of lived experience. As Kirkwood (1994) explains it, spirituality “is not primarily an ontological term, but rather denotes a preferred set of human attitudes and actions toward life or the divine, as well as experiences believed to have special significance” (14-15). Thus, spirituality is not something disconnected from embodied or interior experience; rather, spirituality consists of significant human experiences that are intimately tied to human aspiration. In Du Bois’s case, these significant experiences arise in the stories he tells—stories deeply tied to Black interiority, affect, and an African American spiritual and musical tradition.

### **Voice as an Affective Instrument: Spiritual Rhetoric and Black Interiority**

As we will see later in this chapter, Du Bois spends significant time in the compelling final chapter of *Souls*, “The Sorrow Songs,” appealing to Black folks’ spirituality through narratives of lived experience. I argue this is where we find Du Bois’s rhetorical pragmatism—not because pragmatist philosophy is the best way to view his spiritual rhetoric or because his spirituality follows a genealogical line we can trace back to the classical pragmatists—but because his storytelling functions as a vehicle for equipping his audience with a spiritual rhetorical agency. Overall, this adds to this dissertation’s newfound understanding of rhetorical pragmatism as unbound to hegemonic histories and instead comprising rhetorical practices of lived experience. Additionally, this chapter aims to analyze the ways Du Bois’s storytelling speaks to, for, and from lived experience in a way that has not been covered by most scholarship examining his work from a rhetorical purview. Like the scholarship on Cooper, the dominant approach to Du Bois’s rhetorical practices focuses on his appeals to a wider or exclusively white audience in the attempt to validate space or a certain type of subjectivity for Black voices in the polity, rather than the

ways in which he invites, urges, or compels his Black audience to insert their voices in society as rhetorical agents. As I will argue in the analysis section of this chapter, Du Bois achieves this through his storytelling, aiming to inspire his Black audience to be rhetorical agents contributing to a more pragmatic public. But it is first important to reconstitute our conception of Du Boisian spirituality—specifically as it is voiced to his Black audience—to understand the type of spiritual rhetorical agency Du Bois attempts to inspire through narrative.

Of course, Du Bois does not exclusively speak to a Black audience throughout *Souls*. It is evident he speaks to white audience members throughout the text—namely, when he refers to the ‘gentle reader’—and it has been well documented that the text was originally circulated to well-educated Blacks and whites. In fact, “The Sorrow Songs” prominently features a scathing confrontation with white America’s perceptions of history, culture, progress, and exceptionalism:

Your country? How came it yours? Before the Pilgrims landed we were here. Here we have brought our three gifts and mingled them with yours: a gift of story and song—soft, stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land; the gift of sweat and brawn to beat back the wilderness, conquer the soil, and lay the foundations of this vast economic empire two hundred years earlier than your weak hands could have done it; the third, a gift of Spirit (Gates Jr. and Oliver 1999, 162).

Much can be said—and has been said—by scholars concerned with the social and political nature of this fiery confrontation (Zamir 1995, 173-177; Gooding-Williams 2011, 125-129). In step with Ochieng’s (2016) conception of the public intellectual, Du Bois is seemingly aiming to reconstitute identifications and conceptions of the public with his confrontational rhetoric. As Gooding-Williams says, in “producing a written re-presentation of black soul, Du Bois demonstrates the mixed essence of the American identity. America, he insists, is always already black. To respond

properly to the sorrow songs, white Americans must acknowledge their implication in the lives of black Americans by heeding the message of the sorrow songs and extending to black Americans their civil and political rights” (126). Three of the proclaimed “gifts” Du Bois mentions here—story and song, sweat and brawn, and spirit—are presented as robust and hard-fought contributions to America’s exceptional standing. Standing below America’s “City on a Hill,” Black folk have given the strenuousness, emotionality, and spirituality of its gifts while being denied equal standing atop the hill. Stephen Marshall (2011) has done a fine job delineating the significance of this jeremiadic rhetoric and the prophetic legacy of Du Bois’s political project in response to American exceptionalism. Therefore, I do not mean to discount the studies analyzing Du Bois through his appeals to white audiences as invalid. Rather, I argue there is a side to Du Bois’s spiritual rhetoric left misunderstood and potentially untapped due to his appeals to the agency of his Black audience being neglected. This neglect has been at the expense of a deeper attention to the affective and interior elements of Black experience in Du Bois’s spirituality. This chapter is specifically concerned with how he attempts to energize and orient these feelings in his Black audience for rhetorical purposes.

To better understand Du Bois’s spirituality of lived experience, it is important to view it from its cultural, interior, affective, and rhetorical layers. A step toward the cultural understanding can be found in his “The Conservation of Races” (1897). In this text, as he is describing the differences between white and Black races, he claims:

But while race differences have followed mainly physical race lines, yet no mere physical distinctions would really define or explain the deeper differences—the cohesiveness and continuity of these groups. The deeper differences are spiritual, psychical differences—undoubtedly based on the physical, but infinitely transcending them. The forces that bind

the Teuton nations are, then, first, their race identity and common blood, secondly and more important, a common history, common laws and religion, similar habits of thought and a conscious striving together for certain ideals of life (1897/1999, 178).

In other words, the deep, spiritual distinctions between races lie in the uniqueness of their lived experiences. These experiences collide to make cultures—common histories, common ideals, common habits, and common stories—and these cultural dynamics equally influence the experiences, reinforcing common modes of thought and conscious striving, ultimately informing and explaining the spiritual differences between races. As Gooding-Williams (2011) argues, “By rejecting the thesis that physical differences between races explain their spiritual differences,” Du Bois “repudiates one of the most influential claims put forth by the racial sciences of the nineteenth century: namely, that physical racial differences explain the mental, spiritual (psychological), and cultural differences distinguishing [and privileging] racial groups” (47). Thus, for Du Bois, “mental and spiritual differences have historical and social causes” (47). Because of this, Gooding-Williams argues Du Bois’s appeals to ‘souls,’ the ‘spiritual,’ or ‘spiritual strivings’ are intimately intertwined with “the collectively shared spirit of the black folk” (2011, 132). It is vital to acknowledge that, despite framing Du Bois’s spiritual conceptions in juxtaposition with pragmatist thinkers and within a hegemonic pragmatist story, Kahn explains that Du Bois “refuses the notion of soul shared by both Augustine and Plato: soul as a metaphysical substance that lies outside of time and human experience” (65). Instead, Du Bois’s formation and deployment of spirituality “constructs the souls of black folk entirely out of the desires, efforts, practices, and accomplishments of African American life as it is lived” (65). It is evident that the souls and spiritual strivings Du Bois refers to throughout *Souls* are not eternal Christian souls, nor any notion of soul as untethered or disparate from connections with the body. These soul formations are

intimately intertwined with the lived experiences of Black folk. Even more importantly, Du Bois's conceptions of soul and the spiritual are heavily enmeshed with affect and emotion.

Throughout *Souls*, Du Bois's rhetoric appeals to the spiritual and affective capacity in his Black audience in a way that allows them to identify with their lived experiences beyond the contours, constructs, constraints, structures, imaginaries, and evils of the American nation state. A few scholars have studied how Du Bois achieves this, specifically in how he taps into what Black Studies scholars have termed "Black interiority" (Iton 2008; Warren 2016; Palmer 2017). Iton is mainly concerned with how Black interiority flowers and flourishes at the social level, claiming it emerges at the intersections of the political and the aesthetic. Others who have picked up this term emphasize its historic oppression, rooted in racial chattel slavery, Black objecthood, and the rhetorical, political, and cultural exigencies that have historically reduced "the Black to a commodified, inter-changeable object that can be endlessly exchanged and made to serve innumerable purposes—[this] is the product of the originary violence of transatlantic slavery" (Palmer 2017, 37). As Palmer explains, "Within this schema, notions of Black sentience and Black interiority are foreclosed or heavily circumscribed, as social value lies in the Black's status as an implement; an instrument accumulated for the pleasure, enjoyment, and *feeling* of the Subject" (37). Thus, historically, "Black interiority, feelings, desires" are "made opaque" and rendered subservient to white affect at best and completely nullified at worst (41-46). This "nullification and denial of Black interiority and Black sentience is particularly noteworthy because it precludes the possibility of the Black as an affective agent" (47). Instead, "The capacity to affect—to enact one's will, to move as a self-determined agent upon the Other—is inextricably tethered to the Subject, who possesses an interiority that is recognized as such, and a capacity for feeling that has sociopolitical value. This is in sharp distinction to the obdurate objecthood of the Black, who is



positioned as purely affectable” (47). As mentioned prior, Du Bois was directly dealing with these affective dimensions of oppressive Black objecthood in his writings, attempting to reorient entrenched white supremacist beliefs that Blacks lacked interior lives of affective subjecthood. Moreover, there are important rhetorical layers to the historical dimensions of Black interiority and affect, with most of the scholarship in this area focusing on how African Americans have rhetorically circumvented oppression to ‘voice’ their affective agency.

One such scholar in this area is Eric King Watts (2001), who studies Du Bois as a rhetorical bridge-builder through affective spaces. He argues that Du Bois, through the rhetorical medium of song in his poem “My Country ‘Tis of Thee” (1907), bridges the “gulf between the lives of black and white citizen singers by constituting an emotional and ethical public ritual that compels an acknowledgement of racial injustice” (191). The affective space of focus for Watts is the shared space Du Bois creates between whites and Blacks. Through the ritual of song, Watts argues, Du Bois creates an affective experience wherein the Black voice can be expressed, shared, and affectively recognized by white listeners. For Watts, “voice” is not a passive term, but rather springs “out of the distinct lived experiences of persons” and is cultivated in shared affective spaces (184, 188). Voice is a vitally embodied expression that denotes the capacity for agency in a speaking subject, and “is not detachable from a body (singular or collective)” (192). Just as importantly, “voice” is not a unidirectional phenomenon, nor “a unitary *thing* that inhabits texts or persons either singly or collectively” (185). Voice is importantly wrapped up in the dynamics and conditions of social life, structural conditions, and public morality—“a function of a public acknowledgement of the ethics of speaking and the emotions of others” (185). All in all, voice “is the *sound* of specific experiential *encounters* in civic life” (185). Watts provides important direction for understanding voice as a cultural and rhetorical phenomenon wherein Black

interiority and affect is expressed in—and constitutive of—ethical and emotional events (192). In sum, ‘voice’ is an affective expression of interiority that arises in emotional and ethical rhetorical situations.

Melvin Rogers (2012) pays close attention to the intersections of affect and rhetoric as well, but from a political purview, emphasizing the ways in which *Souls* crafts “a common horizon for author and reader from which shared emotional judgments regarding racial inequality might be reached” (189). Important to Rogers’s attention to affect and emotional states is Du Bois’s use of “souls” in the text, which Rogers claims refers to “the moral and emotional nature of the human beings that Du Bois is seeking to transform” (195). Linked to this is Rogers’ treatment of Du Bois as a rhetorician, not only on his rhetorical training as a graduate student at Harvard, but also on the ways in which Du Bois exceeds his training and merges rhetoric and affect in ways that appeal to political, ethical, and emotional transformations (194). More specifically, Rogers focuses on the ways in which Du Bois attempts to tap into a broad political ideal of ‘the people’ in the effort to cultivate sympathy and elicit shame in his white audience. He argues Du Bois’s rhetorical approach invites white and Black readers to affirm their agency to reflect—Blacks on their dignity in the face of life’s horrors, and whites on their sympathy and shame for Black strife and their failure to ethically address it or realize good virtues. In his analysis, Rogers uncovers Du Bois’s aspirational democratic vision for equality and democratic cooperation in a reimagined pluralistic polity. Rogers argues that, as a work of political theory, identification between author and reader in *Souls* emanates from a shared identity that is distinctly political and charged with possibilities for community actions toward justice and injustice (189). Thus, those who are more concerned with the elitist dimensions of Du Bois’s thinking miss the democratic qualities of his rhetoric,

specifically in terms of how *Souls* invites enhanced capacities for self-making and collective transformation (189).

Rogers' work makes key scholarly contributions toward understanding how African Americans during Reconstruction and following the period's failed promises were able to deploy political and affective rhetoric despite being excluded from the political and affective concerns of the nation, and even more miraculously, refashion visions of democratic selfhood in the process (2012, 201-202). It is also a work that reminds us of Du Bois's democratic sensibilities and aspirations for a pluralized polity in which diverse groups share community and emotional dispositions regarding Black strife, alongside the agonistic necessity of democratic contestation in a pluralistic nation (191, 198). This agonistic element brings to light the importance of democratic development and selfhood, especially for an African American populace brutally and enduringly excluded from political standing. Without a sense of democratic individuality, political standing in the arena of democratic contestation and communication becomes a daunting challenge, not to mention the repressive obstacles of white supremacist confrontation. As Saidiya Hartman (1997) reveals, the reconstitution of Black objecthood to Black subjectivity post-slavery did not alone solve the problems of *subjection*—"the entanglements of slavery and freedom and the dutiful submission characteristic of black subjectivity" imposed by whites (7). Rogers claims Du Bois's rhetorical attempt to overcome these challenges in *Souls* is a political-ethical one that magnifies the interior life of Black folks and makes the reader "sensitive to the experiential quality of exclusion in its multiple dimensions—from African-Americans' interactions with public agents and agencies to their mundane and private transactions with their fellows, and finally, to their self-understanding" (2012, 192). Thus, "Du Bois's democratic vision aspires to effect a transformation at the deepest levels of the self, so that democracy becomes, in John Dewey's language, 'a way of

life'” (192). Rogers’ work moves us toward an understanding of Du Bois’s democratic vision, which necessarily includes aspirations for Black America to instantiate and activate a sense of agency in response to its oppressive conditions. Important to this is affirming the quality of experiences, no matter how grandiose or mundane, and framing them as significant to self-understanding and democratic action.

These works addressing the intersections of rhetoric and affect in Du Bois’s writings offer rich avenues for scholarship on Black interiority and rhetoric. Moreover, they offer insight into Du Bois’s rhetorical formations of soul and the spiritual, providing layers for us to understand his spirituality as interlaced with Black interiority, affect, and the cultural, historical, political, interactional, and embodied contours of African American lived experience. As Rogers notes, Du Bois deploys rhetorical devices in the attempt to transform his Black audience’s sense of selfhood, primarily through articulations of ‘the people’ for the purposes of reorienting their affective agencies as democratic individuals. This chapter takes a similar approach to Du Bois’s rhetoric, specifically in terms of the affective aims he has for his Black audience; however, rather than focusing on how Du Bois appeals to a wider white and Black audience, I will focus on the ways in which Du Bois specifically communicates to his Black audience with a particular rhetoric of lived experience, deploying stories of lived experience to not simply transform his audience’s interior feelings of selfhood or democratic value, but to energize those interior affective energies toward a sense of rhetorical agency. To use Watts’ terminology, I argue Du Bois compels his audience to ‘voice’ their affective interiorities, using stories of lived experience as a vehicle for inspiration. As Gunn (2010) argues, as an object of speech, the human voice “is the most direct route to feelings and intimacy in publics” (183). Gunn argues “for a return to the object of speech and the sound of voice” and suggests that the object of speech should “remain central to the study

of public address” (179, 203). This chapter contributes to this line of rhetorical scholarship, albeit in a distinct manner compared to the public address scholarship. Rather than, as Gunn does, reprivilege the object of speech as a public address scholar or rhetorical critic, I instead demonstrate how *Du Bois himself* privileges the object of speech for his Black audience through stories of lived experience regarding the Negro spirituals, therefore channeling his audience’s interior feelings and directing them toward a rhetorical agency that accentuates the possibilities for their embodied voices to amelioratively impact public life. As I will cover, central to Du Bois’s storytelling is the singing voices of slave descendants. In turn, Du Bois privileges the object of voice as the embodied vehicle from which Black interiority is subjectively expressed, thus equipping his audience to navigate the objections and subjections imposed on Black folks, while simultaneously collapsing the object/subject binary the classical pragmatists also confronted. By invoking narratives of the Negro spirituals and their legacies, Du Bois shows his audience what is possible—that their interior souls, distinctly felt beyond associations with the nation state, can be affectively expressed through their physical voices, and that their voices can have ameliorative effects on society. By conjuring his audience’s interiorities through shared historical narratives, Du Bois energizes their rhetorical capacities for affective impact, therefore fostering their spiritual rhetorical agencies. Put simply, Du Bois deploys stories of lived experience to equip his audience with a spiritual rhetorical agency that recognizes voice as an *affective instrument* for building a pragmatic public. I argue these rhetorical moves are specific responses to the exigencies of white supremacy in post-Reconstruction America, namely oppressive Black objecthood and subjecthood. As a rejoinder to hegemonic white subjecthood and oppressive Black objecthood, Du Bois aims to foster a spiritual rhetorical agency in his Black audience that recognizes their *voices as affective instruments*—as objects of their embodied speech—with significant rhetorical

capacities for their subjecthood, such as the spiritual expressions of their interiorities, the inspiration of others, and meaningful impacts on American society and culture.

To begin examining Du Bois's rhetoric of lived experience and its spiritual appeals, it is important to cover how Du Bois addresses the white supremacist conditions, constraints, and evils brought on by the American nation state to make these appeals. In the text's earlier chapters and throughout *Souls*, Du Bois is deeply concerned with the ways in which the nation's failed ideals and evil consequences of slavery's afterlife constrain the full expression of Black interiority and democratic individuality. An example of this comes in "Of the Sons of Master and Man." In this chapter, Du Bois describes the physical, economic, and political turmoil of Black folks in the South, but argues that the greatest matter of concern is the spiritual turmoil of the Negro (Du Bois 1903/1999, 115). He describes this spiritual experience as "the atmosphere of the land, the thought and feeling, the thousand and one little actions which go to make up life" (115). He then describes the small, elusive, yet significant experiences of Black life as constituting a "deep storm and stress of human souls, as intense a ferment of feeling, as intricate a writhing of spirit, as ever a people experienced" (115). These feelings—these denials of affective agency—constitute the greatest of all Negro turmoil in Du Bois's scheme: "The centre of this spiritual turmoil has ever been the millions of black freedmen and their sons, whose destiny is so fatefully bound up with that of the nation" (115). This illuminates a subject position in Du Bois's Black audience that is inherently pessimistic if accepted. The flourishing of individuality is not accessible when the interiority of Black life is constrained by the waning ideals of the nation. Affective agency and melioristic possibilities are not in play when the souls of Black folk are oppressively objected and subjected to the destiny of a white supremacist America failing reconstruction. However, "The Black World Beyond the Veil" holds alternative possibilities, despite being "half-forgotten" for the dreams and

wills the gift beneath the veil has instilled into the nation (57). These “half-forgotten” alternative possibilities emerge in the text’s final chapter, “The Sorrow Songs,”—not only through the songs of slave ancestors, but through the inspiring stories of their affective spiritual-rhetorical impact on American social life.

### **“The Sorrow Songs,” Storytelling, and the Rhetoric of Possibility: Du Bois’s African American Spiritual Rhetorical Pragmatism**

“The Sorrow Songs” opens with Du Bois presenting the reader with his lead characters: the crooning slaves who once sang the spirituals. Kirkland (2015) has covered the tragic features of Du Bois’s presentation of these songs, identifying them as “born out of suffering” in their “distinct contribution[s] of black folk to America [as sources] for tragic joy in cheerful sorrow” (433). Kirkland detects the sources for this suffering in Du Bois’s depictions of the sorrow songs, otherwise known as Negro slave spirituals: “They are songs of disappointment and as such the music that might offer a way to live better with disappointment, to appreciate beauty despite disappointment, and perhaps to see life more clearly because of disappointment” (433). According to Gilyard and Banks (2018), these spirituals are one of the “three distinctive and stupendous rhetorical contributions by the end of the nineteenth century” made by Black folks (15). Of these three contributions, one was their verbal formation of a group of people that eventually became publicly recognized as African Americans, significantly boosting their political standing and progress; the other two were their “hundreds of slave narratives, tales that undergird the entire tradition of African-American literature,” alongside their “musical tradition rooted in spirituals and blues that formed a stirring articulation of Black yearnings and has served as an eloquent and enduring argument for Black humanity” (15). As will be covered here, Du Bois argues vehemently on behalf of these rhetorical contributions of story and song, claiming their significance as “gifts

worth the giving” to the American spirit (1903/1999,163). Meanwhile, as Du Bois says, these songs “are the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world of misty wanderings and hidden ways” (1903/1999, 157). This “unvoiced longing”—the suppression of interiority from being affectively and physically expressed—is the emotional impetus for the spiritual expressions of the sorrow songs. The Negro spirituals are soulful music in the utmost sense: affective gifts of song through a spiritual expression of interiority otherwise repressed in nearly every other realm of American life. In “The Sorrow Songs,” Du Bois invokes these musical gifts through his own story and experience of the spirituals, as well as through his own narrated slave stories he draws from the past, ultimately depicting the crooners as spiritual influences in American public life through the affective impact of their voices. Moreover, Du Bois tells the stories of the singers who continue to carry out the legacy of this spiritual tradition, eventually contextualizing for his Black audience the ways in which their own voices hold active spiritual and rhetorical consequences in the world.

In introducing the singers of the spirituals, Du Bois writes, “They that walked in darkness sang songs in the olden days—Sorrow Songs—for they were weary at heart” (1903/1999, 154). In these songs, “the soul of the black slave spoke to men [sic]” (154). With this opening statement, Du Bois sets a tragic stage for the reader in which the Black slaves walk in dreary sorrow as they sing for solace. However, this is also a stage intertwined with emotional and rhetorical dynamics wherein the Black slaves, weary at heart, express the emotions of their souls through song and reach the ears and souls of others in doing so. Du Bois then recounts his earliest recollection of hearing the Negro spirituals. Being a child from the North, he describes the feeling of being a slight outsider who was “stirred strangely” by these songs at a young age—with enough distance from the experience of slavery, yet enough connection to feel the emotional grip of their words and



croons: “They came out of the South unknown to me, one by one, and yet at once I know them as of me and of mine” (155). Beginning with a personal story of his lived experience as a child hearing the Negro spirituals for the first time, he portrays deep cultural, interior, and affective layers of identification with the songs and the singers. Although he is distant from the experiences of the Black folk in the South, he describes his instant associations as soul-like—what one could detect as an affective interior connection rooted in the lived experiences of past descendants. This is supported by his subsequent description as he continued to identify with the spirituals in the years that followed:

Then in after years when I came to Nashville I saw the great temple builded of these songs towering over the pale city. To me Jubilee Hall seemed ever made of the songs themselves, and its bricks were red with the blood and dust of toil. Out of them rose for me the morning, the noon, and night, bursts of wonderful melody, full of the voices of my brothers and sisters, full of the voices of the past (1903/1999, 155).

Du Bois’s deep, affective connections here are unmistakable, and the story of his experience at Jubilee Hall reveals a deep spiritual connection spurred not only by the tragedy, suffering, and disappointment of the bricks “red with blood and dust of toil,” but also rooted in “voices of the past”—what he calls “the voices of my brothers and sisters.” By allowing his audience to peer into the interior spiritual feelings he had as a child listening to the spirituals, he reveals to them the possibilities realized through the development of Jubilee Hall at Fisk University, which was built using proceeds from the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ European tour. The Jubilee Singers were directly influenced by the slave spirituals and they carried on the legacy of the slave singers through their original vocal performances in tours across the American North and internationally. Although Du Bois has not yet invoked slave narrative depictions at this early stage of the text, he begins with

this story of his own personal lived experience to convey a certain state of mind and spiritual feeling based in the kinship built on the voices and workings of the active spirits that came before him. Once again, Du Bois's spirituality is not unbounded by physical and emotional experiences. In this personal story, the spiritual connection is embodied (through blood and voice), cultural (through a shared history), as well as emotionally interior (through a range of feelings associated with both toiling and melody). Thus, in Du Bois's personal story—as well as in his eventually depicted slave narratives throughout the chapter—a spiritual resonance springs from the voices of the sorrow singers. As Du Bois notes, “Jubilee Hall seemed ever made of the songs themselves.” Beginning with the development of Jubilee Hall and, as I will cover, eventually extending these musical influences to democratic conduct, Du Bois depicts the sorrow songs as rhetorical, affective, and cultural forces. Moreover, he depicts these forces as emerging from the medium of the Black voice, therefore revealing the capacities of the singers and their voices as rhetorical agents of possibility.

As Kirkwood (1992) argues, “one of the important tasks of narrative rhetoric is to disclose creative possibilities for an audience (31). In practice, “Rhetors may tell stories of deeds which reflect characters' states of mind, or they may enable or challenge people to perform such acts themselves, with striking consequences for their own life stories” (31). Communication plays “an indispensable role” in this process, as performances often “disclose specific states of mind only when rhetors make them revealing through commentary or the careful stipulation of contextual details” (31). Thus, storytelling plays a significant rhetorical role “in evoking performances which suggest possibilities and in revealing what these possibilities are” (31). As Kirkwood writes, “The need to evoke possibilities of the human condition is central to the rhetorical enterprise, transcending any one school or strategy. However, narrative is perhaps the foremost means by

which such possibilities are disclosed” (32). Through stories, rhetors can show audiences ways of being and acting in the world previously unanticipated or unimagined, helping them “discover their capacity to become what they are not,” therefore expanding their moral responsibility “by showing them they are freer and more capable than previously imagined and inviting them to decide how they will exercise their newly realized freedom” (32). Although many stories reinforce established values and beliefs and merely depict plotline possibilities rather than suggest new ways of living, there are two key ways in which stories function as rhetorics of possibility: 1) by disclosing states of mind; and 2) by eliciting or inventing compelling performances. According to Kirkwood, “While disclosing possible states of mind thus has moral implications, it also has rhetorical consequences” (35). In specific, narratives can convey moral arguments through storytelling accounts that disclose states of mind underlying certain performances. Du Bois’s personal story about his experiences with the sorrow songs fall under this category, disclosing his interior spiritual feelings through a narrative retelling, and revealing the realized possibilities of the past through the development of Jubilee Hall. However, for audiences to interpret possibilities from stories and find them within their own grasp, they must find inspiration “drawn not from the story, but from their own experience or beliefs” (36). Thus, a story elicits capacities, orientations, or feelings of possibility from an audience when “the hearers are bringing a familiar interpretation to the story instead of encountering a new possibility through it” (36). In other words, for a story to be an appropriate, compelling, or fruitful rhetoric of possibility, it needs to appeal to the audience’s lived experiences in some way. In Du Bois’s case, the depiction of his personal experience with the spirituals revealed the possibilities fulfilled by the sorrow singers of the past; but it is not until he portrays the intimate details of the sorrow singers through slave narratives that he eventually uses these stories as stimuli for his Black audience feel their possibilities and carry

out this spiritual legacy as rhetorical agents themselves, all through the affective instruments of their physical voices.

According to Kirkwood, there are two main strategies available for rhetors vying to stimulate audiences to actualize their capacities for possibility in their lives (1992, 38). One is by narratively eliciting the compelling performances the audience has already achieved, “then use these performances to transform the stories people tell about themselves” (38). The second involves “telling factual or invented stories about what others have done, then calling upon auditors to actualize these possibilities in their own lives” (38). Sometimes the goal is to provoke a certain response that is averse to the state of mind presented by the characters in the story. In other narratives, “rhetors may directly help people do things previously thought to be impossible, then reveal the implications of these performances to them” (38). Since “people may not be aware of their own behavior or fail to appreciate its significance, rhetors may need to call attention to audience performances and clarify the implications for auditors’ life stories. Thus, whether acts are performed by narrative characters or audiences themselves, rhetors may choose to make them revealing by reducing their ambiguity” (40). Two ways in which rhetors practically achieve this are by *telling* or by *showing*. Showing occurs when a narrative element displays little or no commentary, making a performance revealing by speaking for itself, allowing audiences to experience a state of mind in their own consciousnesses (43). A narrative that shows a compelling message without commentary can be “exceptionally powerful, revealing possibilities that do not depend on the veracity of stories or the *ethos* of tellers” (43). Du Bois’s story of the Jubilee Singers and their impact on the development of Jubilee Hall is an example of narrative showing. Stories like these can be rhetorically potent because they “do not merely imply possibilities, they demonstrate them. The rhetor’s ability to tell such stories shows that states of mind are

conceivable; the audience's success in beholding these states demonstrates their capacity for them" (43). By showing his state of mind through a personal narrative of lived experience, Du Bois calls attention to descendants of the past and how the impact of their voices resulted in realized possibilities previously unimagined.

Narratives that show possibilities for human conduct can be especially inspiring, but they can also be limited. As noted earlier, audiences may not always comprehend an underlying message that is shown without commentary, especially when an account of a performance is ambiguous. Thus, some narrative rhetors may rely on commentary in the form of *telling* to overcome these limitations. One way this is accomplished is when a narrator invokes commentary that reveals the impact of a story that would otherwise remain ambiguous on its own. This is usually done by connecting narrative elements to contextual details from outside the story world—usually ones connected to the lived experience of the commentator or audience. This means that the narrator, commentator, or 'teller' must hold some level of credibility with the audience, and this credibility is usually tied to a shared lived experience. Another approach is for a narrative to call attention to the audience's own behavior, allowing them to reflect on the possibilities shown to them in the story. This allows the revealing message of the story to be more accessible, and potentially further entrenched in the audience's lived experience. Du Bois begins his narratives of possibility by *showing* his own personal experience with the spirituals, followed by *telling* them about the lived experience from the past through stories of lived experience in the form of slave narratives and their influences. After his personal story, Du Bois pivots to past stories and draws on his own commentary to tell his audience what these stories mean for possibilities of human conduct. Du Bois's commentary becomes useful for these stories because some of them would render his audience pessimistic and devastated if accepted on their own terms. He begins with,

“Away back in the thirties the melody of these slave songs stirred the nation, but the songs were soon half forgotten” (1903/1999, 155). He describes these songs as being caricatured through minstrel shows as Black folk and their songs were portrayed as primitive, with their appearances “uncouth, their language funny, but their hearts were human and their singing stirred men with a mighty power. Thomas Wentworth Higginson hastened to tell of these songs, and Miss McKim and others urged upon the world their rare beauty. But the world listened only half credulously until the Fisk Jubilee Singers sang the slave songs so deeply into the world’s heart that it can never wholly forget them again” (155). Here, Du Bois is not quite revealing to his audience their own capacities for possibility, but he is establishing a shared history through stories of lived experience. In particular, he is divulging a shared musical and spiritual tradition with his audience, using these spiritual-musical performances as vehicles for his Black audience to transform the stories they tell about their past. Rather than portraying the stories of these performances merely through their caricatures, Du Bois overturns these racist narratives by revealing the latent possibilities that were always underlying the Negro spirituals, percolating with affect in the form of “mighty power” that stirred its listeners with “rare beauty” that would never be forgotten despite their racist distortions.

Du Bois tells a few more stories of the spirituals and how they culminate in the formation of the Fisk Jubilee Singers and their global impact. He begins with stories of the early Jubilee slave songs and how they “passed into the soul of George L. White,” a vocal music teacher at Fisk who eventually founded the Jubilee Singers, and whose “life-work was to let those Negroes sing to the world as they had sung to him. So in 1871 the pilgrimage of the Fisk Jubilee Singers began” (156). Du Bois begins to tell of how the Jubilee Singers toured North, from Cincinnati to Wilberforce to Oberlin to New York: “Then they went, fighting cold and starvation, shut out of hotels, and cheerfully sneered at, ever northward; and ever the magic of their song kept thrilling hearts” (156).

He continues, telling of their international impact: “So their songs conquered till they sang across the land and across the sea, before Queen and Kaiser, in Scotland and Ireland, Holland and Switzerland. Seven years they sang, and brought back a hundred and fifty thousand dollars to found Fisk University” (156). He once again emphasizes the ways the Jubilee Singers were mistreated and caricatured, just like the enslaved crooners of the spirituals before them, seeking “again to spoil the quaint beauty of the music, and has filled the air with many debased melodies which vulgar ears scarce know from the real. But the true Negro folk-song still lives in the hearts of those who have heard them truly sung and in the hearts of the Negro people” (156). Although Du Bois admits to “know little of music and can say nothing in technical phrase,” he nonetheless describes the spirituals as “the most beautiful expression born on this side of the seas,” and with these songs, “the slave *spoke* to the world” (155, emphasis added). Through the continuing legacy of the Jubilee Singers, the voices of the slaves were brought to the world in spiritually affective fashion. Through slave narratives and the ensuing story detailing the Jubilee Singers as torchbearers for the legacy of the Negro spirituals, Du Bois continues to transform the narratives that are told of his Black audience’s history, namely by eliciting the compelling performances of the past in juxtaposition to their caricatured histories. Du Bois claims America has given little beauty to the world, but of the little beauty it has exuded, its source can be found in the artful songs of its Negro people. It is one of many instances in which Du Bois shifts the Negro identity as being affected by America to America and the world being *affected by* Black interiority through voice. Thus, through stories of lived experience tied to his Black audience’s past, he *shows* what may have been unappreciated, obfuscated, or suppressed due to distorted perceptions of their own speech, actions, and impacts: their voices. Through stories of the slave spirituals and their

rhetorical legacy, Du Bois privileges the object of speech through the voices of the singers who harnessed their rhetorical agency through song.

Although Du Bois tells a handful of other stories in “The Sorrow Songs,” there are two more stories worth attention here, alongside the commentary Du Bois provides as avenues for his audience to instantiate their own spiritual rhetorical agencies through voice. The first comes when Du Bois lists what he calls the “Ten master songs” of the original Negro spirituals—“songs of undoubted Negro origin and wide popular currency, and songs peculiarly characteristic of the slave” (157). The first is “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen.” Du Bois decides to tell the story of this song poignantly: “When, struck with a sudden poverty, the United States refused to fulfill its promises of land to the freedmen, a brigadier-general went down to the Sea Islands to carry the news. An old woman on the outskirts of the throng began singing this song; all the mass joined with her, swaying. And the soldier wept” (158). Once again, Du Bois provides no commentary, succinctly showing his audience the emotional power of the song. Ultimately, it shows the inspiring and emotional power of the embodied Black human voice, once again eliciting affect from a story of lived experience tied to a Black spiritual tradition. As Kirkwood says elsewhere, spiritual traditions involve “experiences understood by someone, the experiencer or the observer, to be especially meaningful within the context of a given form of spirituality” (1994, 17). In this case, the spiritual experience Du Bois depicts invokes the emotional power of a deep spiritual and musical tradition, and it can be argued this story is alluring his white audience to feel the sympathy and shame Rogers covers. However, this passage can also be interpreted as eliciting a state of mind in his Black audience through a story of lived experience tied to a specific spiritual tradition, showing them the power they hold as members tied to a musical tradition that has historically used the instruments of their embodied voices as affective facilitators for the betterment of humanity—



or at the very least, for the affective transformation of the hearts they touch. This becomes clearer as Du Bois adds commentary to his catalogue of the ten master spirituals, providing a narrative telling to encourage the ways his Black audience can use their own voices as affective instruments in society.

In his commentary following stories of the ten master spiritual songs, Du Bois repeats a phrase from earlier in the chapter: “In these songs, as I have said, the slave spoke to the world” (159). He then continues to describe the affective qualities of the spirituals: “The ten master songs I have mentioned tell in word and music of trouble and exile, of strife and hiding; they grope toward some unseen power and sigh for rest in the End” (159). He then invokes his recollection of a Black woman recounting the melancholic feelings associated with the spiritual love songs: “It can’t be sung without a full heart and a troubled sperrit” (159, spelling in original). In describing their tragic character, Du Bois claims that, in the sorrow songs, “Of death the Negro showed little fear, but talked of it familiarly and even fondly as simply a crossing of the waters” (161). At this stage, he begins making connections between the Negro singing voice and the Negro speaking voice, bringing into closer contact these affective elements of their voices as speech objects with rhetorical potency. These connections begin to peak at a crescendo when Du Bois says:

Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men [sic] by their souls and not by their skins. Is such a hope justified? Do the Sorrow Songs ring true? (162).

It is important to note that Du Bois shifts his focus in this passage specifically to the lyrics of the sorrow songs. This is significant for a few reasons. First, Du Bois describes the ways the sorrow songs breathe hope and inspire faith in the face of despair. He thus describes the songs as having transformational value to reorient souls—to shift pessimism and despair into feelings of “triumph and calm confidence.” One could say these lyrical traits are rhetorical in the sense that their discursive value lies in their orientational influences, thus illuminating the persuasive value of the sorrow songs. Because these lyrics reflect sentiments that are not exclusive to the singing voices of this spiritual tradition alone, Du Bois is opening possibilities for his audience to see the persuasive value in the messaging of these songs as equally as the earlier affective value of their melodies and croons. To further explain, Du Bois invokes the phrase “minor cadences” not only in a musically technical sense, but also in an orientational sense in terms of the “minor cadences of despair.” He also delivers an overarching message built into the spirituals that he pinpoints as the deepest meaning of the sorrow songs: “that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men [sic] by their souls and not by their skins.” There is much that can be said about this passage for our contemporary day, but in light of the early twentieth century, these words hold various implications. The most common one regards the white audience Du Bois is attempting to reach and reorient, but there is a message to his Black audience embedded in this commentary that deserves attention. Through his commentary of the slave spirituals, Du Bois gradually reveals rhetorics of possibility that overlap the ranges of his audience’s vocal registers. In the abovementioned passage Du Bois shifts the focal point from sorrowful and beautiful singing voices with emotional affects, to the ameliorative consequences of the messages they entail. Thus, Du Bois reveals not only the multifaceted persuasive value of the sorrow songs, but also the affective rhetorical value of the Black voice as an embodied speech object rife with ameliorative possibility

for Black subjects. These messages are more attainable for his general Black audience's vocal registers than the croons, thus opening possibilities for his audience to vocally identify with the messaging of the songs either independent of or alongside the harmonies, and to realize the affective and ameliorative power of their voices. Thus, the spiritually affective influence of the Black voice and its faith in "boundless justice" and a "fair world beyond" is not left exclusively for talented and inspiring sorrow singers to impart. As Kirkwood explains, revealing accounts conveyed in narratives hold the potential to "exceed the contexts in which they first arise" and imply the audience's capacities for what is possible, thus functioning as inspirations for audiences to instantiate in their own lives (37). Through commentary tacked on to stories of lived experience, Du Bois offers a percolating narrative of possibility, leaving inspirations for his Black audience to employ and inviting them reorient their attitudes toward their own voices.

In continuing the commentary for his stories of lived experience, Du Bois subsequently activates a rhetoric of possibility that facilitates an invigoration of affective agency for his Black audience. In particular, he invokes the toiling interiorities of Black life to show how, despite their feelings of despair, the melioristic outcomes of their feelings hold significant meaning. He does so through what he calls the active "gift of spirit" Black folk have given to America and the world. More importantly, he argues passionately on behalf of the *rhetorical* contributions of this gift of spirit in the forms of story, song, and warning. For Du Bois, an active spirituality infuses the physical, rhetorical, and affective effects African Americans have had on humanity:

Nor has our gift of the Spirit been merely passive. Actively we have woven ourselves with the very warp and woof of this nation,—we fought their battles, shared their sorrow, mingled our blood with theirs, and generation after generation have pleaded with a headstrong, careless people to despise not Justice, Mercy, and Truth, lest the nation be

smitten with a curse. Our song, our toil, our cheer, and warning have been given to this nation in blood-brotherhood. Are not these gifts worth the giving? Is not this work and striving? Would America have been America without her Negro people? (1903/1999, 162-163).

In Du Bois's account, the active impetus of Black folks' souls pervades the sorrows, toiling, mingling, and strivings of the nation. Moreover, the affective interiority of their souls—from their sorrow to their cheer—permeates the expressions of their songs and rhetorical encounters. The “gift of Spirit” is not only physical through battles and blood, but also rhetorical through musical and discursive means. The common interpretation of this passage is that Du Bois is speaking to his white readers, arguing for a reciprocal relationship between Blacks and whites that honors the gifts Black folk have given to America through their pathos, slave labor, shared bloodlines, beguiling art of song, and shared battles fought. But when read as commentary for his narratives of lived experience, and when carefully considering the Black audience he attempts to energize, I argue there is another layer to these passages worth considering. By interpreting these “gifts” as attributes of their own, Du Bois's Black audience is called to recognize that they offer something of great value to the nation, and that these traits *affect* the contours of the nation state rather than vice-versa. Thus, Du Bois suggests these rhetorical gifts—these voices—shaped America as *affective rhetorical instruments*. As Du Bois adds commentary to his narratives of lived experience—the stories of the slave spirituals and their legacies—he is able to configure their spiritual power as “gifts” with rhetorical, affective, and cultural potency, and with societal impact in the struggle to ameliorate the anti-democratic, white supremacist conditions that stifle Black subjecthood and promote oppressive Black objecthood. Overall, when viewed as appeals to his Black audience and tied to stories of lived experience, these “gifts of story and song” can be viewed

as gifts of spiritual rhetorical agency—not only through the conduits of their singing voices, but through a wider vocal range with varying interpretations for their own rhetorical possibilities. These rhetorical possibilities include story, song, confrontational rhetoric, and other discursive means. But most importantly, their voices—their objects of speech—are their spiritual “gifts.” This renders a spiritual rhetorical agency that privileges the physical larynx as the vehicle for expressing Black interiorities and subjectivities, leaving a plurality of Black audience members potentially inspired to openly vocalize the tones of their distinct voices— whether it be through the songs they sing, the stories they tell, or the registers of their messages—in response to the conditions that repress them.

Viewing these stories of lived experience and their commentaries as rhetorics of possibility helps us further understand how stories bring to life potentialities beyond the story-world of the narrative itself (Kirkwood 1992, 36-37). If a story reveals certain possibilities of conduct through the performance of a particular character, plotline, or scene—and is closely related to the lived experience of the auditor—the underlying or explicit message gleaned from the story holds potential to endure and exist beyond the narrative from which it is evoked. One way this is done through narratives is to depict performances others can aspire to, even when the audience feels they do not have the same heroic or lofty capabilities (38). Rather than calling the audience to match the significant impact of the sorrow singers, Du Bois implies their ameliorative roles to participate in a particular rhetorical and spiritual legacy. Therefore, when Du Bois presents the Negro gifts of story and song as affective instruments with the rhetorical force to influence the emotions, conduct, and culture of American life—and provides the slave spirituals and their musical legacy as inspirations through realized possibilities of the past—he implies what is possible for his own audience: that they can continue this rhetorical legacy through their own

voices as spiritual rhetorical agents. Moreover, it reveals the ways in which they can equip themselves to be active democratic and rhetorical agents in society through their objects of speech, using their voices to not only carve discursive space for themselves in the community, but also to inspire the affective interiorities and conduct of others as well. Du Bois amplifies this message with a poignant parting story, portraying the ways in which the young singers of his time—through the registers of their vocal cords reaped from a legacy of song—inspire him to persevere, presumably during his time as a faculty member teaching at Atlanta University:

Even so is the hope that sang in the songs of my fathers well sung. If somewhere in this whirl and chaos of things there dwells Eternal Good, pitiful yet masterful, then anon in His good time America shall rend the Veil and the prisoned shall go free. Free, free as the sunshine trickling down the morning into these high windows of mine, free as yonder fresh young voices welling up to me from the caverns of brick and mortar below—swelling with song, instinct with life, tremulous treble and darkening bass. My children, my little children, are singing to the sunshine, and thus they sing (1903/1999, 163).

Du Bois then includes the musical notes and lyrics of the Negro spiritual, “Let Us Cheer the Weary Traveler” in the text of the chapter, followed by his final line: “And the traveller girds himself, and sets his face toward the Morning, and goes his way” (164, spelling in original). Although it is true that the short “After-Thought” that follows this final line is a message to God pleading for the white reader to receive the messages in *The Souls of Black Folk*—“Let the ears of a guilty people tingle with truth” (164)—Du Bois nonetheless exits the main text with the message of a hope breathed through him by the spirituals. As the narrator, Du Bois depicts himself as affected by the voices carrying out a touching and deep spiritual tradition, using its message and tone to identify his interior feelings with the weary traveler. In this sense, Du Bois positions himself

as the audience member for the spiritual rhetorical agents he wants to see in the world, revealing to his readers the effects—and affects—these voices have on their listeners.

### **African American Spiritual Rhetorical Pragmatism and the Limits of Narrative Possibility**

Through his unique variation of spiritual rhetorical pragmatism, Du Bois presents stories of lived experience and provides commentary to facilitate the possibilities for spiritual rhetorical agency in his Black audience, revealing to them the capacities their voices hold as affective instruments of ameliorative consequence. It is important to clarify that this does not mean that audiences will automatically comprehend, embrace, or assimilate the possibilities Du Bois presents here and the rhetoric I have examined. Thus, not every member of Du Bois's Black audience will read "The Sorrow Songs" and feel a sense of spiritual rhetorical agency in which their physical voices hold ameliorative possibilities for their social lives as objects of speech; however, it does mean that when his stories reveal capacities for thought or conduct, his audience is confronted with a type of moral decision-making. As Kirkwood argues elsewhere, "storytelling has significant relational or command features which may aid processes of self-confrontation," and thus "storytelling can briefly override auditors' immediate defenses and introduce views of life which would otherwise have been rejected before they could prompt self-examination in listeners" (Kirkwood 1983, 68, 73). Therefore, stories that disclose certain states of mind through revealing accounts can invoke underlying narrative messages that provide audiences with moral directions for their own human conduct. Therefore, the understanding, analysis, and deployment of narrative as a rhetoric of possibility holds several implications. One is that these rhetorics of possibility play important humanistic social roles in spurring people to reflect, instantiate, and enact "creative possibilities of awareness and action. By helping people examine possibilities which previously they did not imagine or think they could achieve, rhetors can free them to pursue more satisfying

responses to both personal and public needs” (Kirkwood 1992, 44). Thus, storytelling holds possibilities for inspiring morally laden arguments and social conduct in a variety of private spaces and public spheres. Moreover, “a rhetoric of possibility can illuminate diverse kinds of communication, from psychotherapy to political discourse” (44). Thus, in analyzing Du Bois’s narrative rhetoric of possibility in his public intellectual discourse, this chapter examined the ways in which he reveals his audience’s *possibilities* for rhetorical agency, rather than delivering clear or rigid instructions for their rhetorical agency. Thus, rather than providing his audience with a handbook of rhetorical techne like the one Danisch calls for, Du Bois provides possibility through the less direct practice of his narrative rhetoric, thus opening a plurality of possible interpretations for auditors to equip themselves with the rhetorical agency to build a more pragmatic public.

As I have argued, Du Bois reveals his Black audience’s capacities for rhetorical agency, equipping them with the rhetorical tools to navigate their constraints and oppressive circumstances through the inspiration of their voices. Du Bois conveys this by showing his audience their capacities for rhetorical agency, portraying a spiritual and musical legacy through stories of lived experience and providing facilitative commentary for his audience to realize what is possible for them *to affect* through the embodied and spiritual influence of their voices. Thus, Du Bois’s narratives of lived experience both affirm his audience’s legacies and imply “possibilities beyond the context in which it first occurs” (Kirkwood 1992, 44). In some stories, Du Bois directly shows the experiences of his Black audience’s slave ancestors for the purpose of demonstrating to them that certain modes of rhetorical agency are conceivable, were implemented in the past, and can inspire auditors to experience these states of mind and parallel versions of rhetorical conduct in their own lives. In other stories, Du Bois calls attention to his Black audience’s otherwise overlooked capacities for rhetorical agency and reveals their possibilities, invoking direct



embodied ties to their lived experiences and ancestral, musical, and spiritual legacies along the way. In the following chapter, the topic of spiritual legacy continues to be an important focal point in the context of African American public intellectualism, and *tradition* emerges as an even more significant rhetorical factor. Although this dissertation will travel nearly 100 years after the release of *The Souls of Black Folk* in the next chapter, the goal is to continue providing evidence for the rhetoric of lived experience in African American public intellectualism across time, further attuning rhetorical pragmatism to the ways lived experience is used as a device for promoting rhetorical agency and contributing to a more pluralistic democracy, empowering disenfranchised groups to voice themselves in response to stifling and oppressive antidemocratic conditions. In fact, the next chapter analyzes the rhetoric of a public intellectual directly inspired and influenced by Du Bois and the legacy he left behind. In specific, this chapter will analyze Cornel West's rhetorical prophetic pragmatism as a vehicle for equipping audiences with the prophetic rhetorical agency to confront anti-democratic conditions.

## **Chapter 4: Cornel West, Traditions of Lived Experience, and Rhetorical Prophetic Pragmatism: Reorienting Nihilisms toward Fortified Rhetorical Agency**

Cornel West's contributions to the history of African American political thought, social struggle, and public intellectualism are undeniable. Influenced by the legacy produced by figures like Cooper, Du Bois, and many others, West likewise "engages with an extraordinary range of political, social, and cultural issues" as a "writer, public intellectual, political and cultural commentator, and social activist" (Wood 2021, 705). West addresses numerous subjects over several mediums including "scholarly and biographical writing, public talks, preaching, teaching, hip-hop recordings, radio and television programs, and acting" (705). His "philosophical views, theoretical concepts, pedagogical strategies, rhetorical tactics, [and] policy proposals" have been received as "provocative, inspiring, and energizing for scholars and students within the academy and for tens of thousands more outside the academy who read his work and hear him speak" (Wood 2000, 5-6). Despite his attention and devotion to philosophy, democracy, criticism, and ethics—as well as his public stature as a popular activist-intellectual—Cornel West has received little attention in rhetorical studies. This is surprising, especially considering his proclivity to center themes such as power and social justice at the center of his work, both in print and in oratory. West has been mostly overlooked or criticized by rhetoric and communication scholars, and much of this centers on his philosophical project called *prophetic pragmatism*. For example, Simonson gives West a fine place in the pragmatism and communication scholarship, yet claims West offers "a pragmatism of prophecy, not conversation" (2001, 18). Moreover, Danisch's account of rhetorical pragmatism criticizes West's prophetic pragmatism for not having a positive account of the "centrality of communication" (2015, 95). He goes on to say West provides tools for deepening democracy, critiquing power, and shaping existing power structures, but "they are not necessarily

rhetorical tools” (91). In other words, for most rhetorical scholars, prophetic pragmatism is fine as a philosophical project, but not a rhetorical one.

Despite West’s prophetic pragmatism being criticized as anti-rhetorical or merely non-rhetorical, there is much we can say about West’s public intellectualism that is indeed rhetorical. One of West’s primary tasks is to bring his intellectual commitments, critical orientations, and political pursuits to the public arena. As Rosemary Cowan (2003) writes, “Through his intellectual work West seeks to galvanize the oppressed to work for their liberation. In order to inspire this political activity West’s work must be intelligible to a wide range of people” (8). Undoubtedly, West travels rhetorical terrain when his work seeks to inspire and galvanize certain audiences through language to work for their liberation. Much can be said about the wide range of audience members he attempts to engage through popular books, public speeches, commentary pieces, and online media. Although West engages these arenas with political and/or philosophical goals in mind, he unmistakably uses rhetorical means in the attempt to make his ideas comprehensible, inspiring, and transformative. As Cowan states, “unless people understand why change is needed in American democracy there will be no sense of urgency concerning transformation. This prompts flexibility concerning the medium and specific content of his message so that it can be targeted to different groups” (8). In other words, West’s public intellectualism is keenly and intentionally rhetorical, considering his attention to public channels, message content, rhetorical situations, and his target audiences. As Cowan puts in even clearer terms: “In his conscious attempt to address a variety of publics—those who inhabit the diverse realms of the academy, the church, prisons, grassroots political organizations, popular television talk-shows, and so on—West can be identified as a *multicontextual* public intellectual” (8). West’s public address aims “to touch as many people as possible” and “to create new space for intellectual work outside the academy” (9).

As a multicontextual rhetorician, West navigates a range of audiences as a teacher, social galvanizer, and political coalition-builder with deep concerns about economic, racial, and social justice issues.

West's primary concerns as a philosopher, Black Studies scholar, and public intellectual center on issues of human suffering. Thus, his academic and public works traverse the existential and political experiences of human struggle, culminating in a "a political struggle for freedom that is tied to an existential quest for meaning" (Cowan 2003, 18). This orientation toward lived experience appears in his academic and public rhetorical works, as topics such as existentialism, nihilism, democracy, resistance, meliorism, neoliberalism, authoritarianism, and white supremacy consistently crop up in his books and speeches. Due to these experiential concerns, West condemns many professional modes of philosophy, namely analytic philosophy, "for a failure to relate its sharpness to themes of struggle, misery, and suffering" (Cowan 2003, 37). Much like the philosophical pragmatists and Danisch's assortment of rhetorical pragmatists, West wants to "transform philosophy into a public conversation that is based on lived experiences, with the purpose of leading America away from chaos towards community" (37). West wants philosophy to *work* for everyday people, be available to everyday people, and function in public communication through (and for) everyday lived experiences. His overall critique of professional philosophy's insularity, elitism, and unresponsiveness to suffering and struggle led to him being perceived as a cultural critic rather than a philosopher; but, like the pragmatists, West vehemently criticizes the hegemonic, narrow description of the philosopher as one who exclusively thinks, reflects, and contributes solely to academic circles. West's own lived experience as a Black male in America informs his views on philosophy, and despite being heavily influenced by many figures

of the philosophical tradition he critiques, he is equally if not more informed by the African American prophetic Christian tradition.

### **West's Prophetic and Pragmatist Influences**

Despite being influenced by philosophers like Plato, Kierkegaard, Marx, Gramsci, and Freire, West is equally influenced by poets, playwrights, artists, and critics such as Anton Chekhov, John Coltrane, and James Baldwin. Moreover, West has written about many Civil Rights figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Ella Baker, and Fannie Lou Hamer. Perhaps most importantly, West is deeply influenced by the Black prophetic tradition, a tradition headlined by figures such as David Walker, Frederick Douglass, Maria Stewart, and many others. West groups the aforementioned Civil Rights figures in this tradition as well, and prominently features W.E.B. Du Bois as a headlining social and intellectual figure in the tradition. In practice, West wears his prophetic influences on his sleeve in many fashions. His book, *Black Prophetic Fire* (2014) features these figures as crucial contributors to the American historical, critical, and social consciousness. West presents these exemplary figures as emblematic of a necessary activist-intellectual tradition requiring constant recognition as America's racial problems shift and evolve. This tradition is undoubtedly West's highest influence as a thinker, teacher, and critic, not to mention his jazz-infused improvisational flair and sermonistic oratorical style. Holding deep roots and connections to slavery abolition, Civil Rights, jazz and blues music, and political commentary, the Black prophetic tradition is a rich American tradition that informs nearly every aspect of West's work.

Meanwhile, the pragmatist tradition is influential to West's work as well—not just due to its Jamesian anti-professionalism, meliorism, and attention to agency and lived experience, or its Deweyan emphasis on topics like democracy and education—but largely in its function as a form

of cultural criticism. In fact, West is one of the few who categorizes pragmatists as cultural critics, underscoring their evasions of traditional epistemological problems in exchange for the sociopolitical consequences of thought and action. Moreover, in his comprehensive work of the pragmatist tradition—*The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (1989)—West takes step toward a rhetorical approach to pragmatism, describing it as “less a philosophical tradition putting forward solutions to perennial problems in the Western philosophical conversation initiated by Plato and more a *continuous cultural commentary* or set of interpretations that attempt to *explain* America to itself at a particular historical moment” (1989, 5—emphasis added). I add emphasis to the term ‘explain’ and phrase ‘continuous cultural commentary’ not to force rhetorical intentions on West’s approach to the pragmatist tradition, but to spotlight the centrality of communication that Danisch claims is lacking in West’s prophetic pragmatism, hence his rendering of it as a non-rhetorical pragmatism (2015, 81-111). Key to Danisch’s interpretation of West’s prophetic pragmatism as solely a philosophical rather than a rhetorical project is West’s attention to the pursuit of deeper accounts, critique of social structures, and uncovering of appearances in the quest for profound meaning (109). For Danisch, “It is the search for depth, the quest to give an account of what the world is really like, that renders West’s prophetic pragmatism philosophical and allows him to abdicate questions of rhetoric and denigrate democratic theorists like the sophists” (109). Therefore, for Danisch, when West uses phrases like ‘cultural commentary’ and ‘explain America to itself,’ he reads those as philosophical pursuits for deeper truth rather than rhetorical pursuits for deeper social democracy. He juxtaposes West with Isocrates, whose training of Athenian students in the art of rhetoric held democratic consequences for participants to lead in various ways as public communicators. West, on the other hand, criticizes sophists like Isocrates and chooses figures like Socrates as exemplars for cultural criticism.

Danisch argues Isocrates's goal—and the goal of rhetorical pragmatism—is to direct people to implement rhetoric in effective ways as active participants in the polis (109). I argue that this is in fact a function of *rhetorical prophetic pragmatism*, and that we can better understand prophetic pragmatism's rhetorical contours once we understand the rhetorical tradition of highest influence for West: the Black prophetic rhetorical tradition. As I will show, *tradition* is constitutively rhetorical for West, is central to his prophetic pragmatist project, and emerges through a rhetorical prophetic pragmatism in his public intellectual work. I argue that once we look deeper at the influences of the prophetic rhetorical tradition in West's work, we can better locate rhetorical prophetic pragmatism in practice. Once we do so, we can recognize West's cultural commentary and critical explanation of American empire as deeply critical-rhetorical activities untethered to classical Greek rhetorical theory, rooted in the Black prophetic rhetorical tradition, and rhetorically pragmatist in their attunement to lived experience and the fortification of rhetorical agency in a broad public audience.

Thus, this chapter continues this dissertation's overall project of tracing pragmatism's rhetorical history through discourses of lived experience, ultimately pinpointing the source of West's rhetorical pragmatism in how he deploys the Black prophetic tradition in his public intellectual work. As Brad Elliot Stone (2019) argues, West's prophetic pragmatism cannot be completely understood if we solely examine his genealogy of pragmatism in isolation (45-60). There is a 400-year-old African American prophetic tradition he pulls his experiences, practices, and rhetoric from. As Stone writes, it is the “notion of prophecy that governs prophetic pragmatism,” as it “*considers the concrete practices of African Americans, created and sustained by the vocabulary of the Black prophetic tradition, as sources of reasoning for prophetic reasoners to employ*” (59-60, emphasis in original). Thus, this chapter asks: if we look closely at the elements

of the Black prophetic tradition West espouses and instantiates, is this where we can locate West's rhetorical prophetic pragmatism? Instead of searching for the ways in which the prophetic tradition accounts for the centrality of communication in West's prophetic pragmatist philosophy in academic texts, I examine the ways in which the prophetic tradition informs West's rhetoric of lived experience in his public intellectual rhetoric. In specific, I analyze the ways in which this tradition functions rhetorically as *a tradition of lived experience* in the pursuit of rhetorical agency for his public audiences, equipping them with the *prophetic rhetorical agency* to take to their own communities to deepen democracy and build pragmatic publics. Thus, understanding rhetorical prophetic pragmatism as a public intellectual rhetoric of lived experience that equips audiences with the prophetic rhetorical agency to confront sociopolitical problems expands the rhetorical pragmatist project by unbinding it from simply focusing on the communication-centric elements in one's pragmatist philosophy. It also allows us to look at rhetorical pragmatism as a rhetoric that functions in the public sphere through public intellectual channels and beyond, allowing for scholars of rhetorical pragmatism to—in pragmatist fashion—mine a set of tools from rhetorical *practice* rather than simply through a set of communication theories in one's pragmatism. This opens avenues for a re-working of how rhetorical pragmatism is to be studied moving forward, particularly from the purview how its rhetorical history is understood. When viewing its rhetorical history as a set of rhetorics of lived experience with specific goals for rhetorical agency, rhetorical pragmatism emerges as untethered to a dominant pragmatist origin story or foundational set of Greek rhetorical figures. Instead, West's rhetorical pragmatism is driven by a critical and ameliorative sensibility garnered from—and deployed through—the Black prophetic rhetorical tradition.



This chapter will rhetorically analyze West's popular 2004 book, *Democracy Matters*, examining the ways in which West deploys the Black prophetic tradition in the attempt to convert his audience's nihilism and despair by equipping them with a critical, prophetic rhetorical agency. In this *New York Times* bestseller, I argue West deploys traditions of lived experience to speak to a wide public audience in the attempt to galvanize a pluralistic coalition, stimulated by a prophetic sensibility drawn from his own tradition of lived experience, with the overall aim to fortify his audience's prophetic rhetorical agency and confront the anti-democratic American conditions of free-market fundamentalism, aggressive militarism, and escalating authoritarianism. By detecting West's rhetorical prophetic pragmatism in his public intellectual work rather than probing his philosophical work exclusively, this chapter discovers how West's rhetoric of lived experience provides everyday people with a prophetic rhetorical agency geared toward transformative sociopolitical reforms, attuned to moral struggle, and constitutively crafted to empower ordinary people to flourish in response to disillusionment. As I will cover in the following sections, West's rhetorical prophetic pragmatism holds malleable qualities, especially for equipping audience members with rhetorical agency, allowing for a wide range of traditions and lived experiences to instantiate and exude *prophetic sensibilities* in their critical expressions toward anti-democratic conditions. Before moving forward, it is important to note that Danisch does attend to West's prophetic Christian influences, but mischaracterizes the tradition when saying, "regardless of its emphasis on practice, prophetic Christianity does not take seriously the question of how one participates in the decision-making processes of democratic governance. The moral imperative to engage in those kinds of practices underpins much of the prophetic tradition, but that moral imperative is not cultivated into a rhetorical theory or set of rhetorical practices" (2015, 87). The body of literature on the Black prophetic rhetorical tradition stands in stark opposition to these

claims, especially regarding its rhetorical practices. It is unclear whether Danisch is unaware of this rhetorical tradition or simply viewing it through the lens of classical Greek rhetorical theory and practice, but this tradition has been cultivated into a set of rhetorical practices and theories over the last 400 years. The following section will cover this tradition in detail before explaining how this tradition is entrenched in West's prophetic pragmatism. Then, I will cover the critical, prophetic sensibility embedded in West's work, how it informs his prophetic pragmatist project, and how it points toward a rhetorical prophetic pragmatism in his public work. Afterward, I cover the role tradition plays in West's prophetic pragmatism, how tradition has been covered in the rhetorical scholarship as a rhetorical device, and how it operates as the central vehicle of West's public rhetorical prophetic pragmatism. Then, this chapter features an analysis of West's rhetorical prophetic pragmatism in his book *Democracy Matters*, charting the ways he deploys traditions of lived experience to prophetically equip his audience with the sensibility to reorient nihilism and despair, ultimately directing his readers toward a fortified rhetorical agency drawn from the prophetic sensibility. Lastly, I conclude this chapter with implications for examining rhetorical prophetic pragmatism in West's public intellectualism, offering outlooks for scholarship on the Black prophetic tradition, rhetorical criticism, and this dissertation's contribution to the rhetorical pragmatism scholarship.

### **The Black Prophetic Rhetorical Tradition and West's Prophetic Public Intellectualism**

Why start with the prophetic in West's work? West draws from a number of influences when formulating his prophetic pragmatism, including Emerson, Dewey, Du Bois, Marx, Gramsci, Unger, and others. One answer is West's discursive decision to foreground "prophetic" in the name. However, a more profound answer lies in West's identifications with—and instantiation of—the tragicomic history of the Black prophetic tradition. West's version of African American

pragmatism is keenly tied to the Black prophetic tradition in sharply moral, critical, and radical ways, is rhetorically crafted to confront particular vectors of power in the effort to deepen social democracy, and features the significance of communication in its public intellectual practice. Thus, if we are serious about detecting West's rhetorical prophetic pragmatism in practice, it is imperative to start with the communication-centric attributes it draws from the Black prophetic rhetorical tradition. When observed more closely, these communicative qualities are drawn from a particular prophetic legacy of lived experience that West personifies, expresses, and poses for others to adapt in rhetorical ways.

As Andre Johnson (2012) explains, prophetic rhetoric “does not descend from our traditional, systematized Greco-Roman model of rhetoric. Prophetic rhetoric comes from the Hebraic tradition found in the writings of the Old Testament in which there is no systematic theory of rhetoric” (7). Thus, defining prophetic rhetoric through the lens of traditional rhetorical theory and practice can be difficult, especially if one attempts to connect this rhetorical tradition to the hegemonic rhetorical origin story that begins with Plato's rivalry with the Sophists and runs through Aristotle and others. Akin to what I have been tracing throughout this dissertation, prophetic rhetoric is a particular language of lived experience. As Johnson defines it, prophetic rhetoric is a “*discourse grounded in the sacred and rooted in a community experience that offers a critique of existing communities and traditions by charging and challenging society to live up to the ideals espoused while offering celebration and hope for a brighter future*” (7, emphasis in original). The Black prophetic rhetorical tradition's discourse stems from a particular historic experience of Black life as it is lived and expresses itself as a response to the conditions that shape American white supremacy, imperialism, and political and economic exclusion. In line with West's prophetic pragmatism and with what I will cover in the next section regarding his formation

of *prophetic criticism*, the Black prophetic rhetorical tradition serves as a cultural commentary in confrontation with American's proposed ideals, proposing a set of interpretations in the attempt to explain America to itself, offering visions for the future and sometimes alerting audiences of apocalyptic consequences if the country continues betraying its broken promises.

The Black prophetic rhetorical tradition is rich, and its variations share the “struggle for reform and increasing democracy” in accordance “with God’s will for the race” (Hobson 2012, 43). It is important to stress that “one cannot properly speak of a single African American prophetic tradition, but only of traditions” (Hobson 2012, xii). Black Christian prophecy is “a varied genre” (11) comprising rhetorical religious elements ranging from the Jeremiad, appeals to the Isaiah-Ezekiel tradition, the Exodus and Deuteronomy tradition, and the Daniel-Revelation tradition (xii). Across these traditions, Black prophetic thought shares five consistent elements: 1) the assumption “that God is the protector of the race”; 2) that God has historically been on the side of the oppressed; 3) that he will always be on the side of the oppressed; 4) “that the United states will be tested and judged by its turn toward or from God’s justice”; and 5) the trials of Black folk that began “on the shores of Africa [and] are destined to end at an unspecified but finite time in a redeemed, transfigured United States” (5). As Hobson notes, African American prophecy is not a special position held by members over time, nor is it necessarily tied to a specific religious organization or institution, but rather “a kind of *speech or writing* that occurred to its practitioners as they turned to questions that arose in community life. These questions involved the nature and destiny of African Americans and the larger society they inhabited, and God’s purposes for both” (30, emphasis added). Thus, the Black prophetic tradition can be regarded as a distinctly *rhetorical* tradition dating back to the early nineteenth century, and one that is not confined to public messengers from the Black church or even Christian rhetors. Hobson describes prophetic rhetoric

as “a religious language ambiguously handed to [Afro-Americans]” and remade “as one of emancipation” (188-189). Moreover, this tradition is marked by “a profoundly political discourse” that brings forth critical questioning in the face of American political evil and its absurd levels of inequality and oppression (Marshall 2011, 18). The Black prophetic tradition comprises “a dangerous but necessary kind of democratic rhetoric” in its confrontations with America’s historically white supremacist constitutional and civic procedures (Hobson 2012, 184). It is a rhetoric of critical witness with strong links to social justice, moral advocacy with a religious tenor, and radical democratic possibility marked by strenuous “endurance through this world’s furnace and to a new world of glory” (197). Although many African American prophetic rhetors hail from the Black church—such as Henry McNeal Turner and Alexander Crummell—many came from outside the religious establishment, adopting prophetic rhetoric for the purposes of slavery abolition and anti-lynching campaigns. From the antislavery rhetoric of David Walker to the anti-lynching rhetoric of Ida B. Wells, and to critiques of racial segregation and unfettered capitalism by Martin Luther King, Jr., Black prophetic rhetoric has long embraced discursive modes of critique, morality, and radical democracy in response to contemptible social, political, discursive, and material conditions.

Not only is Black prophetic thought a varied genre, but its types of prophetic rhetoric vary as well, ranging from the apocalyptic to the jeremiad (Johnson 2012, 9). However, as Johnson argues, “not all prophetic discourse fits the apocalyptic and jeremiad types” (9). Instead, African American prophetic speakers “had to develop other forms of prophetic discourse in order to appeal to and move their audience” (9). In other words, prophetic rhetoric is malleable and dynamic, depending upon the speaker or rhetorical situation at hand. Johnson demonstrates this in his book, *The Forgotten Prophet: Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and the African American Prophetic*

*Tradition* (2012). Through an analysis of Turner's rhetoric, Johnson charts four other types of prophetic rhetoric: *celebratory prophecy*, *disputation prophecy*, *mission-oriented prophecy*, and *pessimistic prophecy*. Johnson's book covers each of these variations in extensive detail, so I will not restate their characteristics here. However, Johnson does offer a general view of prophetic rhetoric's general function as a critical rhetoric. He invokes McKerrow (1989) to explain how prophetic discourse, like critical rhetoric, "examines the dimensions of domination and freedom as these are exercised in a relativized world" (91). Moreover, Johnson delineates a four-part rhetorical structure for African American prophecy. The first is that prophetic speakers "*must ground prophetic discourse in what the speaker and the audience deem as sacred*" (2012, 7, emphasis in original). This does not mean prophetic rhetors will always appeal to religious sacredness per se, but it does mean the speaker needs to locate, recognize, or share the beliefs of the audience and understand what brings meaning to the community they are in communication with. Moreover, prophetic discourse highlights the identity of that community "by lifting up and reminding the people of whatever is sacred," activating the symbols associated with the belief systems of their consciousness. This is closely related to the second element of prophetic discourse: "*consciousness-raising through a sharing or an announcement of the real situation*" (8, emphasis in original). This means "the prophet speaks the *already known and bears witness to what the speaker believes as the truth*. Therefore, instead of an unveiling, it becomes more of a revealing" (8, emphasis in original). Through a rhetorical revealing, the prophetic rhetor states what is already known to the audience but might be afraid to speak. Johnson argues this is a consciousness-raising process because the rhetorical goal "is that the audience reflects on the situation with the hope of changing its ways" (8). Intimately tied to this facet of Black prophetic rhetoric is frankness and boldness of speech, what Johnson details as "very similar to the classical rhetorical term *parrhesia*"

(8). Parrhesia is a dutiful and “critical telling of the truth within uncomfortable situations”; however, “the difference between parrhesia and prophetic parrhesia consists in the sacred grounding of the prophetic speech” (8). Next, the third element of prophetic rhetoric’s rhetorical structure “*is the charge, challenge, critique, judgment, or warning of the audience(s)*” (8, emphasis in original). In this stage, the prophetic speaker takes the beliefs, traditions, and sacred communal values of the audience and then “charges, challenges, critiques, or renders judgment or warnings not only to the assembled audience, but also toward much wider audiences, or to institutions and society in general” (8). Important to this stage is what the prophetic speaker couples with this wider critique, which includes “offering reinterpretations of what is sacred and begins to cast a vision of the world not as it is, but as it could and should be” (8). The final part of prophecy’s rhetorical structure is “*the offer of encouragement and hope*” (8, emphasis in original). Although the prophetic speaker is grim about the prospects of what they champion, they nonetheless end their discourse “in a hopeful or encouraging declaration” (8). As Johnson notes, there are two different types of hope associated with prophetic rhetoric: eschatological hope and pragmatic hope. Whereas eschatological hope involves faith in the afterlife and is usually associated with the apocalyptic, pragmatic hope “is more of an earthly hope”—rooted in a faith in God but geared toward lived experience and human meliorism in the face of life’s horrors (9). In fact, Johnson directly ties pragmatic hope to what Cornel West calls “tragicomic hope”—“a melancholic yet melioristic stance toward America’s denial of its terrors and horrors heaped on others,” highlighting “imperial America’s weak will to racial justice” and promoting “a courage to hope for betterment against the odds” despite “severe constraints of unfreedom” (West 2004, 216). As I will cover later in this chapter, tragicomic hope plays a significant role in West’s deployment of the Black prophetic

rhetorical tradition and is vital to how he compels his audience to instantiate and express a prophetic rhetorical agency of their own.

Overall, prophetic rhetoric acts as a form of social criticism—and thus a critical rhetoric—by challenging the ritualistic and hegemonic practices of a given society (Johnson 2012, 7). It is important to note how McKerrow’s pivotal contribution to rhetorical theory and criticism explicitly borrows West’s view that criticism “serves a ‘demystifying function’ (West, 1988, p. 18) by demonstrating the silent and often non-deliberate ways in which rhetoric conceals as much as it reveals through its relationship with power/knowledge” (92). Despite West’s direct influence on one of critical rhetoric’s marquee passages, the rhetorical criticism scholarship and studies in critical/cultural rhetoric have neglected West’s work on these matters. It is thus important to study how a deeper examination of prophetic discourse can inform scholarship on critical rhetoric. As I will explore in this chapter, a close analysis of West’s deployment of tradition may bring insight into how he fortifies audiences to be critical rhetorical agents in the public sphere outside of the academy, rather than as specialized rhetorical critics in English and Communication Studies departments. One of West’s overall goals as an activist intellectual is to bring academic audiences to the frontlines of social justice matters and vice-versa. As Cowan writes, West persistently “seeks to create new space for intellectual work outside the academy where citizens can debate public issues,” and “insists that intellectual work must serve some political ends” (2003, 125). As Marshall aptly notes, the tradition of prophetic political critique has long elaborated “resonant and revisable political vocabularies that enabled the comprehension and transformation of multiple shifting foundations of white supremacy” (2011, 171). Cowan claims West provides this political-intellectual vocabulary through a “language of conversion,” a “spiritual-ethic language” that seeks to convert the nihilism of suppressed subjects into “a sense of agency among the oppressed through



an affirmation of their humanity” (2003, 127-128). Cowan detects this in the ways West deploys a “language of moral value” that seeks to reconstitute the public sphere by reaching out to those “whose lives lack meaning [and] are unable to engage in the necessary work to overcome oppression because their sense of possibility has been debilitated” (131-135). West argues agency cannot be fostered if people feel they lack public worth, and thus “believes America’s crisis of spirit must be confronted with a value-based response. He believes that a moral vision must undergird any movement for social transformation” and the invigoration of democracy (137, 149). West himself notes that figures of the Black prophetic tradition have long shaped these value-based responses in the form of moral discourse (1988, 23). This has required a “language of rights and common good” via “the common moral language of the society as a whole: namely, the language of rights” (23). According to Lyon and Olson (2011), “a rhetorical approach to human rights considers the human rights implications of language and symbolism by examining the hierarchical significance of words, definitions, re-definitions, symbols designating social groupings, myths, rituals, symbolic images, and the like,” and the rhetoric of human rights “scrutinizes symbolic actions constructing identifications and divisions among social groups” and “examines the reproduction of hierarchies” (205). As West notes, the Black prophetic rhetorical tradition has historically been forced to adopt human rights rhetoric as “a mode of moral discourse through which they could make their plight understood in terms the rest of the nation could grasp” (West 1988, 23). As Andre Johnson writes, prophetic rhetoric “dedicates itself to the rights of individuals, especially the poor, marginalized, and exploited members of a society” (2012, 7), and this is West’s overarching goal with his public intellectual rhetoric.

Although deploying a language of rights and common morality forced many Black Christians to shun their religious language “to couch their public concerns,” therefore constraining

the African American prophetic tradition's rhetorical choices, the tradition nonetheless fostered a keen sense of its overarching exigency—an oppressive, “pluralistic capitalist democracy” that requires a “language of rights that permitted and protected other life-styles as well as their own” (West 1988, 24). Thus, this tradition grew to be “moralistic in rhetoric, legalistic in impact” (24) in response to a specific set of conditions—slavery, economic inequality, imperialism, and myriad forms of despair, struggle, and catastrophe. West packages this overall condition within a superstructure he calls a “capitalist civilization”—an exigency rendering stark consequences of “poverty, disease, lack of self-esteem, and despair but also the suppression of individuality (or self-realization within community)” (West 1982, 123). Whereas “racism provided the chief ideological justification” for American slavery in this scheme, “sexism was employed to defend the abuse of women” (124). Therefore, “capitalist civilization remains racist and sexist at its core and based upon class exploitation and imperialist oppression” (125). This capitalist civilization superstructure remains a constant object of critique for West, and one of his public intellectual goals is to target the American institutions associated with the contemporary versions of this condition, which West claims continues to drown individuals in nihilism—namely corporate market institutions and white supremacist structures—and prophetically identify these structures as requiring change for there to be conversions in public nihilism (Cowan 2003, 136-137). According to West, “To prophesy is not to predict an outcome but rather to identify concrete evils” to “generate enough faith, hope, and love to sustain the human possibility for more freedom” (1982, 6). Once again, the center of concern amid these conditions for West is the state of the suffering and oppressed—who West calls “the least of these” across many of his texts and speeches. West's dual approach to human suffering includes a stark critique of American capitalist civilization alongside a dedication to fostering the agency of individuals mired in crises of

hopelessness and despair. His devotion to moral agency, like Du Bois's, contests the notion that human beings are constantly subjected to powers "that [stand] above and outside the social practices of human beings" (1989, 225). Instead, West's melioristic orientation toward power structures strives for a desired rhetorical situation that "allow[s] the suffering to speak" (1993a, 4). This is important to keep track of when examining West's public intellectualism and detecting his rhetorical prophetic pragmatism. In this vein, there are two important—and sometimes intersecting—projects in West's work that I argue are important to pay attention to regarding his orientations toward criticism, agency, and meliorism: *prophetic criticism* and *prophetic pragmatism*. Understanding these projects in West's academic work help us understand the rhetorical role the prophetic sensibility plays in his public intellectual work.

### **Criticism and the Prophetic Sensibility: Toward a Rhetorical Prophetic Pragmatism**

For West, prophetic criticism is a type of demystification which "begins with social structural analyses" such as "empire, exterminism, class, race, gender, nature, age, sexual orientation, nation, and region [as] springboards—though not landing grounds—for the most desirable forms of critical practice" (1990, 105). Moreover, "it also makes explicit its moral and political aims," keeping track "of the complex dynamics of institutional and other related power structures in order to disclose options and alternatives for transformative praxis," while accenting "the central role of human agency" (105). West's prophetic criticism unapologetically "affirms moral agency and action," and remains "unrelentingly critical" and "improvisational in the service of existential democracy" (1993b, x; xiv). West argues that a pluralistic and diverse democracy "can thrive only if there are communities, groups, organizations, institutions, subcultures, and networks of people of color who cultivate critical sensibilities and personal accountability" and "promote a prospective and prophetic vision with a sense of possibility and potential, especially

for those who bear the cost of the present” (1990, 108-109). West urges critics in the academic realm—especially critics of color—to stay dedicated to those who are suffering rather than committing to the academy’s culture of professionalization. He urges academics of color to overcome the intellectual, political, and existential challenges of this approach and to use their intellectual rigor and critical force to craft creative responses with deep commitments to individuality and democracy. However, as West continues to expand his formation of prophetic criticism throughout his works, it evolves in concurrent fashion with his goals for coalition-building across diverse groups and pluralistic modes of democratic expression. In *Keeping Faith*, he describes prophetic criticism as “an intellectual inquiry constitutive of existential democracy” dedicated to the “preserving and expanding of human empathy and compassion,” and credits “John Dewey’s pragmatism (and democratic socialism) [as] a leading American example of the political aspects of existential democracy” (1993b, xi-xii). This seems like a much different definition and approach to prophetic criticism than in West’s earlier works, and it certainly does not seem influenced by the Black prophetic tradition. As Wood aptly notes, one could conclude West’s body of work “does not provide a consistently clear theory for overcoming racism and building a genuinely democratic society,” and thus his intellectual influences, critical approaches, and theoretical frames can seem scattershot (2021, 706). But when viewed from the lens of the intellectual *practices* he expresses and provides, his project of social transformation and democratic praxis is much more consistent, and “fully represents a unique expression of the black prophetic tradition of prophetic witness, judgment, and provocation” (706). Thus, West’s prophetic sensibilities, especially toward democratic practices and discourses, is shot through his entire corpus, including his public intellectualism. This remains true of his prophetic pragmatist project, which he calls a “new kind of cultural criticism” (1989, 212). A closer look at this project can help

us understand his Deweyan and other pragmatist influences, as well as the rhetorical prophetic pragmatism this chapter aims to analyze in his public work.

West's prophetic pragmatism "shares its roots in the American heritage and its hopes for the wretched of the earth," providing what West claims pragmatism requires—the "need of an explicit political mode of cultural criticism that refines and revises Emerson's concerns with power, provocation, and personality in light of Dewey's stress on historical consciousness and Du Bois's focus on the plight of the wretched of the earth" (1989, 212). Prophetic pragmatism explicitly accentuates the "political substance of the American evasion of philosophy," meaning that everyday people—not just intellectuals, philosophers, and elites—are entitled to the "power requisite for the human production of truth and knowledge. . . the populace deliberating is creative democracy in the making" (213). For West, a prophetic pragmatist can be religious or secular, but prophetic pragmatists of all stripes share the impulse for moral courage and a progressive democratic vision in the face of struggle. No matter the tradition a prophetic pragmatist claims, the prophetic and progressive elements of this practice is accented by a political, moral, and critical language dedicated to the perspectives and needs of the oppressed. Its prevailing impulse comprises the *prophetic sensibility*—the courage to speak the truth with love and moral power in the face of catastrophe and the powers of political evil (230, 232-233). Amid the amalgam of influences and exemplary figures included in the prophetic pragmatist project—which also includes William James, Sidney Hook, C. Wright Mills, Reinhold Niebuhr, Lionel Trilling, Roberto Unger, Karl Marx, and Antonio Gramsci—there lies a clear prophetic sensibility in this project: "Human struggle sits at the center of prophetic pragmatism, a struggle guided by a democratic and libertarian vision, sustained by moral courage and existential integrity," keeping "alive the sense of alternative ways of life and of struggle based on the best of the past" (229). In

practice, prophetic pragmatism is “a material force for individuality and democracy,” and comes in the form of “tragic action with revolutionary intent, usually reformist consequences, and always visionary outlook” (229, 232). Tradition plays a key role in West’s prophetic pragmatism, and this will be covered in the following sections as crucial to his deployment of rhetorical pragmatism.

It is important to note that West’s prophetic pragmatist project in *American Evasion* is not an explicitly rhetorical one—it does not outwardly promote a set of rhetorical tools for readers to adapt and utilize in the polis. Thus, it does not fit the mold for rhetorical pragmatism as it currently stands under Danisch’s model. However, Keith Gilyard (2008) has launched scholarship in Rhetoric and Composition studies on West’s prophetic pragmatist rhetoric, distilling three prominent rhetorical strategies from West’s work: Socratic commitment, prophetic witness, and tragicomic hope (5). For Gilyard, these rhetorical inventions constitute West’s prophetic pragmatism as “a discursive strategy for evaluating and reassessing various problems” (14), engendering a prophetic cultural critique that shares its roots with the American pragmatist tradition and values a vigorously creative democracy, with the moral aim “to make power accountable with the practical resources at our disposal” (5). Gilyard argues West provides rhetors with the “prophetic weaponry” (109) to speak truth to power in efforts to morally transform social and political conditions, and some of these devices are starkly familiar considering this chapter’s coverage of the Black prophetic rhetorical tradition. The first, Socratic commitment, is a relentless critical examination of power coupled with the expression of fearless speech “in confrontation with irresponsible power. The second, prophetic witness, entails an abiding concern with justice and the plight of the less privileged.” The third, “tragicomic hope, is an indomitable, keep-on-pushing sensibility reflective of the African American freedom struggle, blues, and jazz” (Gilyard 2008, 5). Altogether, these rhetorical elements contribute an ameliorative orientation derived from

the pragmatist tradition, a unique rhetorical approach to power previously uncharted by pragmatism, and a distinct African American humanism linked to prophetic Christianity. Gilyard argues it is “profoundly within the purview of composition studies to address the concerns raised by West about educating a critical citizenry who will promote democratic values and who will draw upon a heritage of what West terms a ‘deep democratic tradition’ to fashion humane responses to unwarranted social misery’ (*Democracy Matters*, 13)” (3). Whereas Gilyard aims to mine the Socratic, tragicomic, and witness-bearing elements of prophetic pragmatism and extract its usefulness for the value, examination, and instruction of rhetorical education (3), this project follows Gilyard’s lead in the arenas of rhetorical history, rhetoric and public affairs, and the study of rhetorical pragmatism. Gilyard’s admirable approach focuses on lives of engagement for students of rhetoric and composition, extracting and adopting prophetic pragmatism’s rhetorical resources to help students “engage in critical reception and production of language rather than lethargically [reproducing] the status quo” (3). I align myself with Gilyard in arguing that West provides rhetorical value for ordinary citizens to demystify discourses of power, along with delivering a moral vision for deepening democracy. What I add here is that West equips his public audiences with prophetic rhetorical agency through traditions of lived experience—using tradition in a rhetorically pragmatist sense. By using tradition rhetorically in a fashion that speaks to, for, and from the lived experiences of nihilism, disillusionment, and tragicomic hope he draws from the Black prophetic tradition, West provides his audiences the prophetic rhetorical agency to be critical rhetors not only in rhetoric and composition classrooms, but in everyday life, thus fulfilling the rhetorical pragmatist quest for deeper democracy outlined by Danisch. Key to this is West’s attention to public nihilism, as well as the rhetorical value of *tradition* in equipping auditors with the fortified rhetorical agencies to reorient nihilisms and ameliorate despair.

## Tradition as a Central Vehicle for Rhetorical Prophetic Pragmatism

West argues all humans have are traditions—“those institutions and practices, values and sensibilities, stories and symbols, ideas and metaphors that shape human identities, attitudes, outlooks, and dispositions” (1989, 230). Thus, for West, traditions are constitutively rhetorical, resembling Murphy’s (2001) argument that traditions rhetorically shape our identifications with—and orientations toward—the world, therefore crafting “the identities of those who feel their force” and invigorating their responses to material, social, and political conditions (260). For Murphy, traditions shape our rhetorical situations and equip us for living under present circumstances. Therefore, exploring rhetorical traditions allows rhetoricians to “explore languages that make worlds” (260). Rather than viewing persuasion “as a reasoned force outside of tradition” that “cuts against tradition [as] tradition seeks to overcome rhetoric”—a view rendering the phrase “rhetorical tradition” an oxymoron—Murphy argues that “traditions are rhetorical” and function to unsettle views of rhetoric “by offering up another’s notion of rhetoric” (261, 268). Murphy proposes a model of “creative understanding” for rhetoricians studying traditions or doing scholarship from the perspective of particular rhetorical traditions, asking them to stand outside traditions and view them *as* rhetoric, rather than as forces of authority with no ostensible rhetoric to render their formations (261, 268). This chapter applies Murphy’s creative understanding approach, recognizing traditions as not only rhetorically formulated, but *rhetorically deployed* as democratic devices for specific social, cultural, or political ends. Not only does West seem to be sympathetic to the rhetorical character of tradition, but as I argue in the following section, he rhetorically deploys tradition as a vehicle for empowering a democratic and critical rhetorical agency in his public audiences. West views traditions as “dynamic, malleable, and revisable, yet all challenges to tradition are done in light of some old or newly emerging tradition. Innovation



presupposes some tradition and inaugurates another tradition” (1989, 230). Moreover, as I will show in the next section, tradition is central to the public practice of rhetorical prophetic pragmatism. West says prophetic pragmatism “highlights those elements of old and new traditions that promote innovation and resistance for the aims of enhancing individuality and expanding traditions,” and that “all such progress takes place within the contours of clashing traditions” (230). All in all, “tradition may serve as a stimulus rather than a stumbling block to human progress” (230). As I will argue in the following section, West displays these attitudes toward tradition in his public intellectual work, effectively practicing rhetorical prophetic pragmatism through the deployment of tradition as he describes it in the schema of his prophetic pragmatist project. When removed from the confines of West’s philosophical work and *The American Evasion of Philosophy* in particular, West’s rhetorical prophetic pragmatism takes shape in his public work through the rhetorical deployment of *traditions of lived experience*.

Murphy (1997) has argued that traditions “organize the ‘social knowledge’ of communities and make available symbolic resources for the invention of arguments aimed at authoritative public judgments,” therefore constituting ways of thinking, talking, and acting in the public sphere (72). He provides a basic definition: “*Rhetorical traditions consist of common patterns of language use, manifest in performance, and generative of a shared means for making sense of the world*” (72, emphasis in original). Thus, traditions provide modes of identification for those who associate with them. According to Murphy, these “common patterns of language use” include “characteristic figurative and argumentative devices” that are “shaped by dialogic interactions in which actors share, repeat, critique, revise, and satirize the tradition itself” (1997, 72). Thus, tradition holds a rhetorical function by providing people with a cultural lexicon that aids relationship processes, identifies problems, and addresses solutions to societal issues. Therefore, not only do traditions

provide modes of identification, but they provide modes of discourse for adherents to employ. Once these discourses are dispersed, they take on dynamic qualities in the public sphere that can be revised, critiqued, adapted, or utilized, and these discourses can be identified as rhetorical devices. In this chapter, I argue one such rhetorical device is *lived experience*—the marker of rhetorical pragmatism. However, there is a key distinction to be made. Although it is true that languages of experience constitute traditions, in keeping with Murphy’s conception of traditions *as* rhetorical, it is also true that traditions can function *as* rhetorics of lived experience. In the remainder of this chapter, I argue West deploys the Black prophetic tradition as a rhetoric of lived experience in the attempt to convert his audience’s nihilism and despair by equipping them with an empowered, critical rhetorical agency. As Wood (2021) notes, West understands “that more is required than confronting our being-unto-death and questioning the meaning and purpose of life to inspire individuals to participate effectively in social justice work. This confrontation and questioning must be informed by a recognition of the suffering of others, an appreciation for the possibility of overcoming the conditions that cause this suffering, and a critically informed understanding of what must be done to accomplish this goal” (711). Thus, “Without this the process of reflecting on finitude may well lead one to plumb the depths of self, never to return to democracy matters,” and instead resort to the nihilistic, “self-consumed, antisocial individualism” that American capitalist civilization rewards (Wood 2021, 711). West’s dedication to the flourishing of individuality and democratic expression involves confronting nihilistic threats that infect “*the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaningless, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness*” (West 1993/2017, 14—emphasis in original). Therefore, West’s public intellectualism offers conversion for those suffering from nihilistic threats to capture new and meaningful orientations. Stroud (2016) calls this “rhetorical reorientation,” a process of

addressing problematic situations using “communicative means to (1) reflectively *evaluate* held and potential orientations, (2) *renounce* a held orientation judged harmful, and (3) *convert* to a more beneficial orientation” (24). As will be covered in the following section, through his deployment of the Black prophetic tradition in his public intellectual work, West *evaluates* public nihilism through the power structures that foster them, prophetically *renounces* conditions associated with the capitalist civilization as objects of criticism for his audience to confront, and rhetorically offers avenues for them to *convert* their nihilism by providing alternatives for transformative practice through the outlet of prophetic rhetorical agency, or as he describes it, their “democratic armor.”

### ***Democracy Matters: West’s Rhetorical Prophetic Pragmatism in Practice***

*Democracy Matters* is an important book in West’s public intellectual corpus, serving as a sequel to his renowned book *Race Matters* (1993/2017) and featuring a set of subjects that prolifically appear in his public speeches over the years. The first chapter, “Democracy Matters are Frightening in Our time,” immediately introduces West’s concerns with disaffection and nihilism, turning to “the waning democratic energies and practices in our present age of the American empire” (2004, 2). From the outset of this text, West begins his process of rhetorical reorientation through an *evaluation* of the American conditions and sociopolitical structures that foster these disaffections, presenting the audience with what he deems as threatening to democracy matters in the twenty-first century. He writes:

There is a deeply troubling deterioration of democratic powers in America today. The rise of an ugly imperialism has been aided by an unholy alliance of plutocratic elites and the Christian Right, and also by a massive disaffection of so many voters who see too little

difference between two corrupted parties, with blacks being taken for granted by the Democrats, and with deep disaffection of youth (2004, 2).

Amid this evaluation stage critiquing powerful elites and imperialistic forces, West also introduces flashes of visionary outlook for his audience, arguing, “we must dip deep into often-untapped wells of our democratic tradition to fight the imperialist strain and plutocratic impulse in American life” (3). This is the beginning of West’s attention to tradition, mirroring the importance he places on the term in his prophetic pragmatist project and foreshadowing its importance throughout *Democracy Matters*. When charting the “greatest threats” plaguing American democracy, he not only pinpoints nihilism and disillusionment, but also “the rise of three dominating, antidemocratic dogmas”: free-market fundamentalism, aggressive militarism, and rising authoritarianism (3-8). West positions these hegemonic ideologies in respect to their material consequences, highlighting the “obscene level of wealth and income inequality” as a result of free-market fundamentalism, the expansion of aggressive militarism and masculinist world policing, domestic police power and the profiteering prison-industrial complex, and the escalation of authoritarianism infringing upon democratic individuality (3-8). These antidemocratic dogmas make up the conditions West evaluates the as the problematic roots of American nihilism, ultimately destructing democratic individuality in its wake. West heavily critiques these dogmatisms for the antidemocratic conduct and conditions they render, effectively *renouncing* them for “snuffing out the democratic impulses that are so vital for the deepening of democracy in the world” (8). Thus, at this early stage of the text, West is attempting to tap into his audience’s democratic sensibilities—whether latent or predisposed—and energize them in confrontation with the conditions causing their nihilism and closing off their potential for fortified democratic conduct. This is not only a move toward rhetorical reorientation, but it is also a distinctly prophetic move that bears witness through a

revealing of the what the audience is experiencing and may be afraid to speak or lack the rhetorical tools or avenues to do so. In working toward providing these avenues and tools for his audience, West offers what he calls “moral commitments and visions and fortifications of the soul that empower and inspire a democratic way of living in the world” (15). This is the first time in the text in which West begins to offer transformative outlets and practices for his audience to confront the destructive antidemocratic conditions causing public disaffection and disillusionment. He begins drawing on what he calls America’s “deep democratic tradition” and love of democracy, “pushed forward by our great public intellectuals and artists” (15). He then promotes this tradition through three historical channels that he claims are crucial to America’s deep democratic tradition: the Socratic, the prophetic, and the tragicomic. He argues for each: “In the face of elite manipulations and lies, we must draw on the Socratic,” then, “In the face of callous indifference to the suffering wrought by our imperialism, we must draw on the prophetic,” and “In the face of cynical and disillusioned acquiescence to the status quo, we must draw on the tragicomic” (16-18). With these early passages, West seems to neatly separate these traditions, even the prophetic and the tragicomic, demarcating the prophetic as distinctly associated with prophetic Judaic figures and the tragicomic as mainly associated with Black America. Later in the text, West deploys the Black prophetic tradition as more of a fusion—something Cowan (2003) covers as critical for West’s promotion of new meanings, political languages, coalition-building, and societal transformation for marginalized voices (165). In the meantime, *Democracy Matters* remains evaluative and renunciative in its early stages, providing only a general preview of the rhetorical tradition he supplies in the pursuit of rhetorical agency, namely “a deep democratic tradition in this country that speaks powerfully against [the] nihilistic, antidemocratic abuse of power and that can fortify genuine democrats today in the fight against imperialism” (2004, 22). In this text, imperialism

functions as an object of critique just as his “capitalist civilization” conception does, comprising elements of white supremacy, corrupt political power, market-driven culture, neoliberal hegemony and economic inequality, and military intervention. West offers a broadly diverse American democratic tradition for inspiration in response to this object of critique, headlined by figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, Jr., James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison. In these early stages, West’s deployment of traditions as a rhetorics of lived experience remains nascent.

In chapter two, “Nihilism in America,” West poses what he considers the “most frightening feature of imperial America”—the “insidious growth of *deadening nihilisms*” that “have been suffocating the deep democratic energies in America” (2004, 26—emphasis in original). West spends this chapter renouncing the actions, conditions, and powers causing American nihilism and crushing its democratic sensibilities, ranging from “the spiritual to the social, the personal to the political, and the existential to the economic” (40). Once again, West offers traditions as foils for these suffocating antidemocratic conditions and deadening nihilisms, claiming, “To delve into our legacy of race and empire is to unleash our often-untapped democratic energies of Socratic questioning, prophetic witness, and tragicomic hope” (41). West approaches democracy as “more a verb than a noun,” and crafts traditions as specific social forces in democracy’s historical “movement of an energized public to make elites accountable” (68). At this stage of the text, West is not quite deploying tradition for the purpose of reorienting nihilisms, but he is using tradition in some of the ways Murphy describes, mainly in the sense of organizing the social knowledge of his wider audience, establishing a pattern of language use, offering sense-making, and shaping identifications and orientations toward specific conditions. In the early and middle portions of the text, he is largely focused on posing traditions in their general senses within America’s overarching

democratic history, featuring exemplary figures along the way and juxtaposing them with antidemocratic conditions in renouncing fashion. As the text progresses, he begins promoting broad visions for his audience while hinting at rhetorical avenues, notably in chapter three, “Building a Deep Democratic Tradition in America,” when he writes, “A democratic public must continuously create new attitudes, new vocabularies, new outlooks, and new visions” (69). In the text’s final chapter, “Putting on Our Democratic Armor,” West makes his proposed attitudes, vocabularies, and visions explicit through a specific deployment of the Black prophetic tradition, offering avenues for his audience to instantiate them through a fortified rhetorical agency.

West begins the final chapter of *Democracy Matters* with a tragic tone, immersing the reader in the sadness, anger, and disillusionment associated with September 11, 2001 in America. As he addresses disillusionment, he turns the reader’s attention to the topic of democracy—the verb, not the noun—writing, “All systems set up to enact democracy are subject to corrupt manipulations, and that is why the public commitment to democratic involvement is so vital. Genuine, robust democracy must be brought to life through democratic individuality, democratic community, and democratic society” (203). He then begins illustrating the traditions necessary for the democratic conduct he describes. The first, Socratic commitment—if viewed through the lens of the rivalry between rhetoric and philosophy—*could* be viewed as anti-rhetorical as Danisch purports. However, once viewed as a *deployed* rhetorical tradition in the pursuit of a pragmatic public, we see that West uses the Socratic tradition for clear rhetorical purposes. When West introduces this tradition, he does so through its critical, confrontational, and democratic concerns with corruption, elite power, and market-driven conduct. Although he highlights the foes in Plato’s writings, namely the “greedy merchants and clever rhetoricians with little regard for the quality of democratic public life” (207), he does not renounce the rhetorical tradition wholesale. In fact, he

deploys the Socratic tradition rhetorically, providing a prophetic mode of discourse for his audience to employ as critical rhetorical agents. For example, he promotes “the enactment of *parrhesia*—frank and fearless speech—that is the lifeblood of any democracy” (209, emphasis in original). As mentioned prior, Andre Johnson links this historical rhetorical device with the Black prophetic tradition, specifically the element of prophecy’s four-part structure associated with bearing witness and revealing lived circumstances with the anticipated goal of eliciting audiences to reflect and make change. West calls this type of speech “indispensable to any democratic experiment” and proceeds to critique Plato for his fear of this kind of speech in the *demos* (209-210). Thus, he extracts a Socratic tradition out of the Platonic writings, finely separating this tradition from Plato’s anti-rhetorical, antidemocratic, and oligarchic sensibilities, effectively buttressing frank and fearless speech as a critical-rhetorical necessity in democracy. As he writes, “The fragile health of a democracy rests upon the Socratic health of its *demos*,” and “Without these Socratic dimensions of American democracy, American tyranny would have triumphed” (211). He argues Emerson personifies this “deep democratic tradition” in the American vein, noting Emerson’s tribute to Socrates as a leading democratic exemplary figure (213). Thus, at this latter stage of the text, West is gradually reorienting his audience toward critical sensibilities as democratic agents. As we will see, as he continues deploying tradition to bring a particular rhetorical situation into view and provide equipment for living under those present circumstances, he ultimately provides an overarching tradition of lived experience that openly offers avenues for fortified democratic and rhetorical agency in his audience.

The next tradition West invokes is his own tradition of lived experience—“My own philosophy of democracy that emerges from the night side of American democracy” that is “rooted in the guttural cries and silent tears of oppressed people”—the Black prophetic tradition (213).



However, he does not deploy this tradition in the same way he deploys the Socratic. Rather, he effectively folds the Socratic tradition and Hebraic prophetic tradition within the umbrella of the Black prophetic tradition, ultimately posing the Black prophetic tradition as the source and impetus for a fortified, critical, and democratic rhetorical agency. In fact, West writes, “our Socratic questioning must go beyond Socrates” (213). He argues this rich legacy needs the deep African American prophetic legacy—the “language of cries and tears”—“the cries and tears of an oppressed people [that] signify an alternative to oppression” (214). West claims this prophetic “language” provides a moral urgency in response to anti-democratic conditions, unleashes ethical energies, and provides the melioristic impulse to pursue justice and freedom. He claims, “the cries and tears of an oppressed people signify an alternative to oppression” because “human hurt and misery give rise to visions of justice and deeds of compassion” (214). At this stage West wholly enters the conversion phase of his rhetorical appeals, offering a reorientation avenue for audience members experiencing disillusionment, despair, and nihilism. In deploying the Black prophetic tradition as a rhetorical device to organize his audience’s feelings in response to antidemocratic conditions, he presents prophetic rhetoric as an outlet for suffering through the language of cries and tears, effectively constituting the symbolic resources from the tradition to facilitate his audience’s understandings of their problematic situations and offering a transformative outlet through affective, communicative means. He says the prophetic tradition “symbolize[s] an allegiance to a God who requires human deeds that address these cries and tears,” and “is fueled by a righteous indignation at injustice—a moral urgency to address the cries and tears of oppressed peoples” (214-215). Here, West demonstrates the final stage of Johnson’s four-part model of rhetorical prophecy, offering a pragmatic, earthly hope rooted in a faith in God but geared toward lived experience and human meliorism in the face of anguish and misery. Moreover, it is a moral

language of human rights—a language intimately associated with the history of the Black prophetic tradition. In posing what the prophetic tradition symbolizes, he offers his audience a form of fortified, prophetic rhetorical agency to instantiate, ultimately aimed to channel their feelings of despair and nihilism into a “language of cries and tears” intended to confront anti-democratic conditions. He is offering his readers rhetorical outlets to confront the structural sources causing injustices at the societal level, provoking a rhetorical agency attuned to moral urgency and potentially fortified to address the sufferings of others. He asks them to instantiate this prophetic rhetorical agency through a call to action, insisting his audience that, “We need a bloodstained Socratic love and tear-soaked prophetic love fueled by a hard-won tragicomic hope. Our democratic fight against corrupt elite power needs the vital strength provided by [this tragicomic hope] through the black American invention of the blues,” its “love of freedom,” its “melancholic yet melioristic stance toward America’s denial of its terrors and horrors heaped on others,” and its “courage to hope for betterment against the odds without a sense of revenge or resentment” (216). He concludes: “even if the tears of the world are a constant quantity and that the air is full of our cries, we can and should still embark on a democratic quest for wisdom, justice, and freedom” (217). In prophetic rhetorical fashion, West continually reminds the audience that *democracy* is what is to be held as sacred, and the prophetic language of cries and tears is what needs to be expressed in order to preserve, vitalize, and conduct democracy in its most humanistic form. West argues the Black prophetic tradition’s language of cries and tears is the moral, democratic resource at his audience’s disposal to conduct ethical witness, exude moral consistency, pursue political activism, and demonstrate a love of justice “to fight against corrupt elite power” (215). By folding the Socratic and Hebraic traditions within his prophetic rhetorical call, he henceforth invokes an eclectic collection of exemplary figures “wedded to a long and rich

tradition of humanist pursuits of wisdom, justice, and freedom,” including Amos, Socrates, Shakespeare, Beethoven, Chekhov, and Coltrane (217). Thus, West is able to deploy his prophetic tradition in unique fashion, extracting its rhetorical resources and opening them up to a diverse range of potential rhetorical agents for adoption, adaptation, and instantiation. As Cowan notes, West’s unparalleled hybridity as a public intellectual lies in his ability to fuse traditions (2003, 172). Through a pluralistic array of traditions and exemplary figures, West broadens his tradition of lived experience by arguing its rhetorical value as a deeply American tradition with deeply democratic consequences for the amelioration of social suffering.

Lastly, West poses tragicomic hope as “dangerous—and potentially subversive” to the structures, conditions, and corrupt elite powers that impose antidemocratic ideologies and spread nihilism and despair. Additionally, he invokes specific types of rhetorical expression associated with the Black prophetic tradition in doing so: “Like laughter, dance, and music, it is a form of elemental freedom that cannot be eliminated or snuffed out by any elite power. Instead, it is inexorably resilient and inescapably seductive—even contagious” (2004, 217). In other words, tragicomic hope is *persuasive* through its embodied rhetorical expressions of laughter, dance, and music, and West poses this as another set of rhetorical resources for a subversive and prophetic form of rhetorical agency deeply linked to “profound interpretations of what it means to be human” (217). These rhetorical resources allow one to delve deep into the depths of human meaning, therefore sidestepping elite power and tapping into empowered individuality through a fortified and expressive form of rhetorical agency. West argues the “creative weaving of the Socratic, prophetic, and tragicomic elements” offer this profound sense of meaning, constituting “the most sturdy democratic armor available to us in our fight against corrupt elite power” (217). As traditions, “they represent the best of what has been bequeathed to us and what we look like when

we are at our best—as deep democrats and as human beings” (217). These traditions provide the democratic armor to encourage people “to fight any form of dogma or nihilism and still endure. It only requires that we be true to ourselves by choosing to be certain kinds of human beings and democratic citizens indebted to a deep democratic tradition and committed to keeping it vital and vibrant” (218). It is important to note that West uses richly inclusive language at this concluding stage of the text, suggesting a collective effort allied to West’s overall public intellectual goal for galvanizing a pluralistic coalition of change-agents. As Wood writes, West’s work catalyzes “self-reflection, exposes and denounces the forces responsible for oppression, and encourages and inspires individuals to join movements to build a just, generous, and democratic society” (2021, 706). Therefore, the critical sensibility embedded in West’s rhetorical prophetic pragmatism offers the rhetorical agency to reorient audiences toward meaning and purpose, alongside possibilities for individual flourishing, building social momentum, mobilizing, creating radically democratic networks and movements for freedom, and building coalitions geared toward social amelioration and justice.

### **Traditions of Lived Experience, Prophetic Rhetorical Agency, and the Plurality of Rhetorical Pragmatism**

Overall, I claim the traditions, languages, and expressions West poses are the sources of his rhetorical prophetic pragmatism in *Democracy Matters*, offering an overarching prophetic rhetorical agency for his audience to employ. As Wood (2021) writes, “West has kept alive the black prophetic tradition by making visible and criticizing the social, cultural, economic, ethical, and spiritual causes of human suffering, and calling on citizens to act on behalf of the dispossessed” (729). In this sense, West’s deployment of the Black prophetic tradition is much more concerned with the transformation of conditions for deepening democracy rather than

philosophically reflecting on them—a hallmark of rhetorical pragmatism. Although West appeals to a broad audience in doing so—and argues in *Evasion* that prophetic pragmatism can potentially take many forms depending upon the instantiated tradition of the practitioner—he nonetheless insists upon the *prophetic sensibility* of the deployer and argues “it must inspire progressive and prophetic social motion” (1989, 234). As he writes, “the probable catalyst for social motion will be the prophetic wing of the black church” (234). Although he prominently appeals to a wide audience in *Democracy Matters*, he retains the prophetic tradition and its critical, rhetorical, and democratic sensibilities as the impetus. As I have argued, West deploys traditions as rhetorics of lived experience, providing conversion avenues for his audience to reorient personal and/or social nihilism and despair toward fortified, prophetic rhetorical agency. Although West certainly deploys prophetic rhetoric throughout his public works and can be effectively analyzed through the lens of Johnson’s four-part structure, this chapter uniquely examines how West fortifies prophetic rhetorical agency in his public audience. Overall, I claim this is the source of West’s rhetorical prophetic pragmatism. In making this argument, I claimed it is important to not only take a close look at West’s prophetic pragmatist philosophy, but also take a closer look at the tradition that shapes his own worldview and rhetorical aims and goals and how he chooses to deploy that tradition.

Thus, this project focuses on West’s deployment of the Black prophetic rhetorical tradition through the lens of creative understanding, therefore activating a conception of his *rhetorical* prophetic pragmatism. This creative understanding allows us to consider the ways West deploys a variety of traditions as rhetorical stimuli for rhetorical agency, yet deploys the Black prophetic tradition as a rhetorical catalyst for the social motion behind these traditions, effectively crafting his form of rhetorical pragmatism toward a wide audience in the pursuit of democratic rhetorical

agency and individuality in response to repressive anti-democratic social and political conditions. By magnifying the prophetic side of West's prophetic pragmatism, we can better understand the components of rhetorical prophetic pragmatism. As Danisch notes, once one attends "to questions about communication practices and how symbols and words enact relationships, generate consensus, and make meanings, then I am in a position to change, transform or improve my socio-political circumstances" (2015, xx). A rhetorical prophetic pragmatism bears witness to the communication practices and material conditions of America's "capitalist civilization" via critical, moral, and visionary democratic responses, with aims toward deepening social democracy for the ordinary and the oppressed. However, instead of asking questions about communication practices, it offers communication practices for audiences to employ, thus offering a prophetic form of rhetorical agency for readers to conduct in their own communities. Thus, under this dissertation's revision of the rhetorical pragmatist scholarship, Danisch's critique that West is unable to "account for the constitutive nature of communication in power" (99) holds less weight, because this project shifts the purview for rhetorical pragmatism from the centrality of communication in pragmatists' philosophies to their resources for rhetorical agency in their public intellectual work. Therefore, although it may be true West disregards criticism as a rhetorical act in his academic work and ignores the development of "rhetorical strategies and methods of communication beyond critique that might have the capacity to develop different effects on different audiences" (Danisch 2015, 99), his public intellectualism tells a different story about criticism that is distinctly pragmatist and rhetorical.

As I covered earlier, West's desired socio-rhetorical condition is to "allow the suffering to speak," which speaks to the type of rhetorical agency he sees as a democratic ideal and aims to engender in his audience or push his audience to fight for. This specific rhetorical agency he aims

to cultivate is a *critical* rhetorical agency—and a prophetic rhetorical agency in specific. As Stroud (2011) says, “Criticism is not what ‘critics’ do; it is what anyone does in certain problematic situations” (39). West calls his version of prophetic criticism a humanist endeavor with moral and political purposes that begins with structural critique (1990, 105). In his public intellectual work, especially *Democracy Matters*, West aims to cultivate a critical voice in his audience attuned to the anti-democratic American conditions of aggressive militarism, free-market fundamentalism, rising authoritarianism, and nihilism. West garners his critical orientation from both the Black prophetic tradition and varying critical traditions—culminating in what he calls prophetic criticism—and this critical orientation delves into the territory of rhetorical criticism in important ways. However, as I’ve demonstrated, West is much more concerned with cultivating an audience of democratic critical rhetors than contributing to rhetorical criticism theory or scholarly practice. This is where his rhetorical pragmatism lies—in deploying a language of experience in the attempt to equip his audiences with a critical rhetorical agency to instantiate in their own lives—what he calls their “democratic armor” for deepening democracy.

This chapter’s approach to West’s rhetorical pragmatism is important for two chief reasons. First, it can help rhetorical scholars better understand the history of rhetoric in the Black prophetic tradition and the role it continues to play in the quest to build pragmatic publics. This contribution aligns with one of the overarching goals of this dissertation: to expand the pluralistic purview of rhetorical pragmatism to include a diverse set of traditions, rhetorics of lived experience, and justifications “for seeking, developing, and deploying methods and practices for improving social democracy” (Danisch 2015, xii). Thus, rhetorical prophetic pragmatism is not Danisch’s conception of a standalone (or sophistic) rhetorical pragmatism, but rather a version expanding Danisch’s project and contributing to the pluralistic tradition of pragmatism and communication

(Simonsen 2001). By looking at the robust influence of the Afro-American prophetic tradition in West's work, we find prophetic pragmatism's critical, moral, and radically democratic elements of rhetorical practice, as well as the crucial attention to rhetorical agency vital for rhetorical pragmatism in building a pragmatic public. Second, viewing West's variation of rhetorical pragmatism as influenced by—and deployed through—the Black prophetic rhetorical tradition and its languages of lived experience helps detach the subfield from its hegemonic reliance on the classical Greek rhetorical tradition for cultural and scholarly justification. Second, it helps us eschew rhetorical pragmatism as monolithic to any figure's overall rhetorical, theoretical, or social project. Rhetorical pragmatism is an important ameliorative tool for deepening democracy, but it does not need to be central to any figure's overall project to be justified as rhetorical. Moreover, rhetorical pragmatism does not need to look like classical Greek rhetorical theory or practice to contribute to ameliorative social change or deepening democracy. It certainly can, but under this dissertation's revamped conception of rhetorical pragmatism as languages of lived experience aimed to energize rhetorical agencies toward building a pragmatic public, a rhetorical pragmatism inspired by Greek rhetorical practices is not *the* singular, monolithic rhetorical pragmatism. It is instead a variation—one of the many pluralities of rhetorical pragmatism. Like West's prophetic pragmatist intellectual project, one's instantiated and expressed rhetorical tradition may determine the centrality of communication in one's rhetorical pragmatist practices and aims.



## **Conclusion: The Prospects for Rhetorical Pragmatism and Building a Pragmatic Public**

In summary, this dissertation analyzed and presented a variety of rhetorics of lived experience garnered from a range of African American public intellectual figures. These rhetorics entail: (1) embodied discourse and pragmatic metaphors as forces for empowering voices of rearticulation, (2) stories of lived experience that energize possibilities for individuals to realize their spiritual rhetorical agency, and (3) traditions of lived experience that fortify the prophetic rhetorical agency to reorient nihilisms, confront anti-democratic conditions, and galvanize pluralistic coalitions. I argue these rhetorical characteristics mark moments within a strain of pragmatism's rhetorical history. Although this project began with overlooked or ancillary pragmatist figures as a starting point for its case studies, the story of pragmatism's rhetorical history is told and traced through its discursive *practices*. Rather than relying on foundational figures, theories, or a technical rhetorical handbook, the type of rhetorical pragmatism scholarship I present in this dissertation looks toward discursive practices that have contributed to—or hold possibilities for—building pragmatic publics. Thus, rather than garnering the communication-centric elements from pragmatist philosophers' academic theories, the revision and advancement of rhetorical pragmatism scholarship presented here is attuned to the rhetorical performances tailored to move audiences toward expressing rhetorical practice themselves. In large part, much of the Rhetorical Studies scholarship studying public address or persuasive rhetorical artifacts focuses on rhetors who use discourse to move others to *do something*, such as join the rhetor's cause, identify with something, make a moral decision, or take democratic action. This dissertation is a study of how rhetorical practice moves people to *say something* through the conduits of their lived experiences, and to do so with the amelioration of personal and/or social suffering in mind.

Thus, rhetorical pragmatism has much to offer Rhetorical Studies writ large regarding rhetorics of lived experience—particularly the ways in which lived experience *teaches and inspires* audiences to use rhetoric for ameliorative ends. As the old adage goes, experience is the best teacher, and perhaps rhetorics of lived experience function as rhetorical teaching tools in educational and other public settings more than we currently account for. Moreover, I argue that a focus on the variety of rhetorics of lived experience helps us not only trace a rhetorical narrative of pragmatism's history, but also more finely attunes the rhetorical pragmatism scholarship to: 1) the significance of lived experience in rhetorical matters; 2) the rhetorical role of lived experience in inspiring rhetorical agency; 3) the potential varieties of rhetorical agency, including this project's coverage of the spiritual, empowered, and prophetic; 4) lived experience's rhetorical role as a facilitator of pluralism and rhetorical agency's value as a vehicle for meliorism; and 5) rhetorical agency's function as a discursive orientation toward ameliorating social suffering and building pragmatic publics through empowered, energized, or critical voices.

All in all, this dissertation challenged, revised, and advanced scholarly understandings of rhetorical pragmatism to further attune its discursive commitments to pluralism, lived experience, and the amelioration of social suffering in five ways: 1) by reinterpreting the scholarship's rhetorical history and reorienting its focus from dominant origin stories, rhetorical foundations, and philosophical figures to a strain marked by rhetorics of lived experience; 2) by revising and arranging the commitments of rhetorical pragmatism to more precisely address how it appeals to, for, and from lived experience to promote pluralism, ameliorate social suffering, and build pragmatic publics; 3) by featuring a set of African American public intellectuals as case studies for a revised and advanced version of rhetorical pragmatism scholarship, thus shifting the focus from the communication-centric elements in pragmatist philosophical works to rhetorical

pragmatist practice in public works; 4) by advancing, expanding, and enriching rhetorical pragmatism's attention to communicative agency by placing it in conversation with the rhetorical agency scholarship and offering new avenues for both areas of study; and 5) by specifying the function, purpose, and aims of rhetorical pragmatism by identifying its practices as various rhetorics of lived experience geared toward energizing audience's rhetorical agencies in response to constraining, anti-democratic, and oppressive conditions—ultimately offering tools for building a pragmatic public and promoting visions for ameliorative possibility, deep pluralism, and individual human flourishing. I want to be clear that this does not discount or dismantle Danisch's or Mailloux's versions of rhetorical pragmatism. If anything, their works can be categorized as distinct varieties of rhetorical pragmatism, likely in the form of sophistic rhetorical pragmatism. Moreover, I want to make clear that this dissertation's advancement of rhetorical pragmatism is open to revision as well, especially for the purposes of fine-tuning its commitments to lived experience, pluralism, and meliorism.

Although the three African American public intellectuals covered in this dissertation were all associated with the academic establishment at some point, they all made purposeful efforts to engage with publics outside of the academic sphere, and their written works have proliferated even further than their spoken words. These figures—through an African American intellectual strain devoted to democratizing agency—offer valuable insight for the scholarly developments of rhetorical agency and rhetorical pragmatism. Moving forward, this strain's coverage by Joy James (1997) and the numerous figures and works she associates with this tradition should continue to be harvested for their value in the rhetorical scholarship. Moreover, this dissertation's focus on these figures' works does not mark the *beginning* of a revised intellectual history of rhetorical pragmatism; rather, it delves into *the middle* of the rhetorical events, problems, situations, and

goals involved in this history. Therefore, it is certainly viable for scholars studying rhetorical pragmatism to chart other works that occur, publish, or circulate long before and long after the works studied in this project. Moreover, this dissertation leaves open possibilities for rhetorical pragmatism—as *rhetorics of lived experience equipping audiences with rhetorical agency geared toward the amelioration of personal or social suffering and the growth of democratic pluralism*—to be analyzed in a multitude of rhetorical situations and public spaces. In other words, examining public intellectuals is only the beginning for rhetorical pragmatist scholarship and where we can discover and analyze people using communicative means for building a pragmatic public. Making an ameliorative difference does not always mean speaking to a large lecture hall or roaring stadium and making immense statements about social justice, political action, or joining causes. Whether it be in a neighborhood, family, small community, classroom, local business, or job, the small differences matter. Sometimes, the impact of small differences can be the difference between a meaningful life and a precarious one. In the human search for meaning, people need ameliorative avenues for their lived experiences to matter. When lived experiences cease to matter, meanings take dualistic public forms rather than pluralistic ones, privileging aggressive individual ambition over flourishing individualities, and endorsing territorial unity over multidimensional communities. Once meaning becomes hyper-individualistic in attitude, dualistic in practice, and territorial in public, communities are left at the peril of the disoriented souls that only feel empowered, energized, or significant when they successfully deconstruct, undermine, or damage democracy. Rhetorical pragmatism’s prospects for building a pragmatic public lie in how these types of problems are addressed through persuasive and communicative means.

Thus, future studies on rhetorical pragmatism should not be limited to the public intellectual arena. Rhetorical pragmatism and the pursuit of pragmatic publics need to be

discovered, located, and practiced in everyday, small-scale settings just as much as they need to be located in large-scale, hyper-influential ones. Moreover, rhetorical pragmatism needs to be located and applied where people are suffering, largely because these are the spaces where meaningful lived experiences are sparse and precarious. These are the spaces where rhetorical agency desperately needs to be built, especially when the political bodies governing those spaces cast people out. Thus, future scholarship should continue to follow Dansich's lead in terms of rhetorical pragmatism's search for rhetorical methods, tools, and agencies for ordinary people across a plurality of publics:

I argue, following the pragmatist tradition, that any meaningful notion of citizenship must entail and recommend a set of rhetorical practices, and that rhetorical citizenship must be cultivated in different ways to fit different democracies. Put simply, rhetorical citizenship is the search for, and practice of, methods of communication capable of guiding public decision and judgment. If a democracy is to be a government of, for, and by the people, then it must allow its citizens a voice in the affairs of the state (2015, 224).

Overall, I argue that rhetorical pragmatist scholarship should continue to locate and examine the communication practices guiding ordinary citizens to have a voice in democratic affairs. Further, rhetorical pragmatism scholars can potentially operate as rhetorical critics, analyzing closely the rhetorics of lived experience that circulate monism and dualism at the expense of pluralism and social amelioration. Additionally, rhetorical pragmatist scholars can take the intellectual populist approach, engaging "the people" in "spaces other than those that the established order controls" and going to the "civic centers, libraries, public auditoriums, neighborhood churches, and nonacademic meeting halls" (Stob 2020, 220-222). A variety of possible rhetors in countless democratic spaces could be analyzed as deploying rhetorical pragmatist tools, therefore leaving

pathways for the rhetorical history of pragmatism to extend beyond the public intellectual realm altogether. The next goal for rhetorical pragmatism is to grow as an area of scholarship that is deeply attuned to the depth, nuance, and complexity of lived experience. Thus, rhetorical pragmatism could possibly be detected in the rhetoric of politics, social movements, popular culture, sports, music, television, film, a small neighborhood in California or Texas, a small community online, a neglected rural district, or an excluded street community. Furthermore, many public spaces can be critiqued for appeals to lived experience that promote monistic or dualistic orientations with anti-democratic or harmful consequences. In sum, the study of rhetorical pragmatism could be far more multidimensional than it currently stands. The question of whether discourses in these sites are rhetorically pragmatist depend on their rhetorics of lived experience, their aims for inspiring rhetorical agency, and their pursuits of building pragmatic publics comprising voices attuned to pluralism and ameliorating the suffering of those in need. Moving forward, rhetorical pragmatist scholarship can pose this question: which rhetorics of lived experience activate people to make an ameliorative difference in the world with their words?

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