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“Higher Ground”

Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II and the Political Content of Prophetic Form

Braxton D. Shelley

“We are being called like our foremothers and forefathers to be the moral defibrillators of our time.”¹ This poetic proclamation, from Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II’s address to the 2016 Democratic National Convention (DNC), likens social injustice to an irregular heartbeat. With these words, Barber, then president of the North Carolina Conference of the NAACP and leader of the Forward Together Moral Movement, opens a revealing window into the musical mechanics of his prophetic preaching. Although he began his remarks with the statement “I come to you tonight as a preacher,” wearing clerical attire whose purple color signified religious authority, the closing moments of Barber’s convention speech marshal sound itself as an agent of moral influence. As the adverb *now* announces the preacher’s shift into the final frame of his message, Barber muses:

Now, my friends, they tell me that when the heart is in danger, somebody has to call an emergency code. And somebody with a good heart will bring a defibrillator to work on a bad heart. Because it is possible to shock a bad heart and revive the pulse. In this season, when some want to harden and stop the heart of our democracy, we are being called like our foremothers and forefathers to be the moral defibrillators of our time.

After describing this need to revive “the heart of our democracy” in the face of those who would weaponize race, religion, and sexuality as modes of division, he exchanges the varied sonic profile of speech for the focused tonal energy of homiletic

song, an act of musical reorganization that breathes new life into this public oration. In the final moments of this address, Barber uses the combination of rhythm, timbre, and pitch characteristic of his Sunday morning sermons to transmute the DNC’s convention hall into a public sanctuary, supplementing that meeting’s communal affect with the specific sonic charge of Black sacred rhetoric. As he injects this other logic into his oration, he renders in song the moral defibrillation he describes in speech. Preaching about new life, Barber recites the lyrics of a canonical revival hymn: “revive us again, fill each heart with thy love, may each soul be rekindled with fire from above.”² Having summoned this heightened musical space, in an instant, Barber calls down these flames of revival, performing a sudden semitonal modulation just before exclaiming the first words of the hymn’s refrain: “hallelujah, thine the glory!”

What do Barber’s messages gain from the type of rhetorico-musical transformations described above? What benefits do his causes and audiences derive from these recurring turns toward religious ecstasy? This essay listens to the political and theological thought conveyed through Barber’s messages – not just in their content, but also in their form. Barber’s performance on the aforementioned July evening crystallizes the angular juxtapositions that animate his public ministry. From its inception, the North Carolina-based Moral Mondays movement, now a part of the broader Poor People’s Campaign,

has been self-consciously characterized by “fusion.” Yet the movement’s so-called fusion politics—that is, its aggregation of a diverse array of individuals and advocacy groups—exists in a productive tension with the oddly specific sound of its most prominent signifier: the orations of its leader, Rev. Dr. William Barber II. Using a message from a 2014 protest as a synecdoche for Barber’s project, this article shows that, as Barber’s jeremiads make their routine turn from speech toward song, their situation at the intersection of political speech and ecstatic sermon, sacred inspiration and public influence, becomes urgent. Through this conjunction, Barber taps into the sonic resonance of the Black prophetic tradition, renewing its connection to the prophetic writings recorded in the Hebrew Bible and repeating their audacious claims about what the world might be. In so doing, Barber’s prophetic utterances critique the oppression wrought by contemporary social orders, announcing the reality of life-giving and just forms of being-together. In place of the world that is called “natural,” Barber’s incantatory preaching pursues moral authority and a more ethical world, building an immersive sonic environment whose audible force argues for the proximity and availability of this higher ground.

North Carolina’s “Revolutionary” Politics

The Moral Mondays movement emerged in response to dramatic public policy changes that occurred in North Carolina beginning in the winter of 2013. After both houses of the state legislature were swept into GOP hands during the 2010 general election, Pat McCrory’s victory in the 2012 gubernatorial election placed both the executive and

legislative branches of North Carolina’s state government under Republican control. As *New York Times* writer Kim Severson observed, “it has been more than 28 years since North Carolina elected a Republican governor and more than 100 years since both that office and the legislature were controlled by Republicans.”³ Presciently, Severson mused that “as a result [of these elections], North Carolina is preparing for an ideological shift whose effects could be felt for decades.”⁴ For the many who wondered how McCrory, who had been a “moderate” mayor of the state’s largest city, would work with the Tea Party–fueled legislature, what followed might have been an unwelcome surprise. Rather than maintaining the neoliberal status quo, this new state government set about enacting “broad-scale conservative changes in taxes, education, voting, health and social policy . . . shift[ing] North Carolina policy to the right.”⁵ Just a few months into this new regime, on Monday, April 29, 2013, Barber and other ministers were arrested at the North Carolina statehouse for protesting these new edicts.⁶ The actions of this day gave birth to thirteen consecutive protests at the capitol, events that would stretch across the summer of 2013, giving birth to the movement now known as Moral Mondays. While state House Speaker Thom Tillis (who would be elected to the U.S. Senate in 2014) argued that the body of legislation at issue in the Moral Mondays protests represented a “conservative revolution,”⁷ understanding the contemporary dynamics of North Carolina’s political landscape requires some attention to a previous “revolutionary” moment, spearheaded not by Republicans but by Democrats.

In the first years of the twentieth century, the “redemption movement” thrust Charles

Aycock into the governorship and Furnifold Simmons into a thirty-year tenure in the U.S. Senate. As veteran North Carolina political journalist Rob Christensen explains, Aycock's

was no ordinary inauguration, but the fruits of what Aycock called a "revolution." North Carolina had been "redeemed" for the Democratic Party and for whites—just as it had been in 1877 when federal troops withdrew, ending the period of Reconstruction. The populists were for all practical purposes dead. The Republicans were to be vanquished from power for generations. Blacks were no longer a factor. And white Democrats were beginning seventy-two years of uninterrupted rule in North Carolina. The political mold was cast for most of the twentieth century.⁸

The redemption movement was fueled by racial demagoguery, which accrued power that was then used to suppress African Americans. As Christensen notes, "the literacy test [for voters] radically changed the political equation in North Carolina. In 1896 there were 126,000 black North Carolinians registered to vote. By 1902 there were 6,100."⁹ In the state's eastern Black belt, this decimated voting strength produced stark electoral changes: "In 1896, 58 percent of the New Hanover County voters cast their ballots for the Republican candidate for governor. By 1904 the GOP vote was 4.2 percent. In Warren County, the Republican vote went from 64 percent to 10 percent."¹⁰ The strategy that enabled this period of Democratic dominance would also precipitate the rise of a new Republican Party in North Carolina. No figure would be more central to this than Jesse Helms, who was born in 1921, in the early decades of the redemption movement. Christensen describes Helms as "a political surgeon

[who transplanted] the old conservative Democratic tradition into the Republican Party—making sure that Robert E. Lee was honored at GOP Lincoln Day dinners."¹¹ The political reclassification of many white North Carolinians modeled Helms's own:

Helms, who was a Democrat until age forty-nine, made it so acceptable for conservative Democrats like himself to vote Republican that state Republican Party chairman Frank Rouse coined a name for them: "Jessecrats." Helms became North Carolina's most famous national political figure of the twentieth century. He helped transform the state into a Republican stronghold instrumental in the elevation of Ronald Reagan to the presidency, shifted the GOP to the political right, and contributed to the polarization of the nation's politics.¹²

Helms used his perch as a TV and radio commentator to curry favor with a broad swath of North Carolina's white electorate. While he was in strong agreement with segregationists, as evidenced by his correspondence with white Citizens' Councils and meetings with their de facto leader, William J. Simmons, he worked to ensure that "his contact with a variety of segregationist groups was off the record, and he was also careful not to become identified with extreme segregationism, rejecting violence and methods that would alienate the white middle class."¹³ The historian William Link proposes that Helms's signature political innovation was wedding his "opposition to segregation to a large conservative appeal that criticized federal intervention . . . a fusion of anti-statism and segregationism [that] would reap big political benefits." This pernicious fusion was manifest in what Rob Christensen called "an unvarnished libertarian conservatism [that] called Social Security 'nothing more than

doles and handouts' . . . rural electrification cooperatives . . . 'socialistic electric power,' and Medicare . . . a 'step over into the swampy field of socialized medicine.'"¹⁴ Whenever necessary, Helms would rehabilitate the racial demagoguery that was implicit in many of his policy prescriptions. Nowhere was this tendency in clearer relief than in his 1990 Senate race against Charlotte mayor Harvey Gantt, an African American man. In the final days of that campaign, while seeking to overcome a sizable polling deficit, Helms's campaign produced an ad titled "White Hands." The political scientist Tony Leon Powell—and many others—observed that by "display[ing] plaid-shirted arms and white hands being rejected for a job . . . this final ad had a major impact on swing voters."¹⁵ Helms was reelected. When understood against this backdrop, the electoral backlash to the election of President Barack Obama, epitomized by what Tillis called "the conservative revolution," appears to be a kind of grand payoff on Helm's long-term investment, achieving, in 2012, a potent concentration of political power in the hands of the GOP.

Moral Movement

Roughly one year after this new regime took power, more than 85,000 people gathered in Raleigh, North Carolina, on a cold February morning for the 2014 observance of the Historic Thousands on Jones Street (HKonJ) march. That morning, Barber began his address to the assembled counterpublic by talking about the moment in which they stood:

Standing on deep, historic, constitutional principles and sound moral values of faith, we have challenged Democrats; we have challenged Republicans alike. But

this year, after an avalanche of cruel and extremist Tea-Party policies passed by [House] Speaker Thom Tillis and Senate leader [Phil] Berger and signed by Governor Pat McCrory and advised by financier Budget Director Art Pope and their ultra-extreme followers, this year after the last session, this year after more than thirty Moral Monday rallies around the state, this year after nearly a thousand people were arrested for refusing to give up their constitutional rights to nonviolent peaceful assembly, we return to Raleigh with a renewed strength and a renewed sense of urgency.¹⁶

As he repeatedly emphasizes the phrase "this year," Barber's preoccupation with temporality asserts that their gathering, on that day and in the months that preceded it, constitutes a thick moment of resistance, akin to what the performance theorist Tavia Nyong'o has called "the precarious time of occupation."¹⁷ According to Nyong'o, at these junctures, time becomes precarious as it is bound up with the occupation of space "by and for the commonweal."¹⁸ In these liminal moments, precarity becomes temporal when its effects yield a "*movement* vocabulary and a set of principles for the *navigation* of a terrain."¹⁹ While neither the 2014 HKonJ march nor the many Moral Monday marches that heralded it constituted an uninterrupted occupation, this movement's iterative consistency still resulted in more than 1,000 arrests. As they refused to vacate purportedly private zones of the public space that is the North Carolina State Capitol, and as they chose to sing and pray even while being handcuffed, these activists staged a debate that blurred imagined boundaries between the private and the public, the sacred and the secular, legality and criminality, public policy and morality.

Although these embodied debates refused the aforementioned lines of division, Barber secured moral authority in an explicitly confessional form. In the same speech from the 2014 march, Barber addresses in strikingly scriptural terms both the holders of state power and their attempts to quash this season of protest. He thunders:

Your actions have worked in reverse: you may have thought you were gonna discourage us, but instead you have encouraged us. And the more you push us back, the more we will fight to go forward. The more you try to depress us, the more you will inspire us. Maybe you don't know what the Word says in Psalm 118. But I'll tell you what it says: "the stones that the builders have rejected have become the chief cornerstone." And a new movement is happening. And it is the Lord's doing.

Barber's rhetorical focus on Governor McCrory, Speaker Tillis, and Majority Leader Berger also reveals his theory of that day's gathering. Encouraged by efforts to erase it, this new movement assembled in one of the state's most public spaces to challenge the ends to which governmental power had been put.

While I earlier referred to the crowd at the 2014 HKonJ march as a "counterpublic," we would do well to think a bit more about this cross-coalitional collective and their act of coming together, a practice of protest which was an outgrowth of organizational efforts that began well before both this 2014 event and the 2012 general election. In 2005, after Barber's election to the presidency of the North Carolina Conference of the NAACP, he embarked on a statewide tour during which he

started to sketch a list of fourteen justice tribes in North Carolina. We had folks who cared about education, folks who cared about living wages, and others who were passionate about the 1.2 million North Carolinians who didn't have access to health care. We also had groups petitioning for redress for Black and poor women who'd been forcibly sterilized in state institutions, organizations advocating for public financing in elections, and historically Black colleges and universities petitioning for better state funding.²⁰

Added to this list were organizations "concerned about discrimination in hiring, others concerned about affordable housing, and people opposed to the death penalty and other glaring injustices in our criminal justice system." And there were also "the movements for environmental justice, immigrant justice, civil rights enforcement, and an end to America's so-called 'War on Terror.'"²¹

In order to consolidate the efforts and resources of these groups, the first assembly was held in February 2007. The event, which came to be known as the Historic Thousands on Jones Street People's Assembly, has continued on the second Saturday of every February since 2007.

What brand of power is manifest in these acts of assembly? I want to tarry with the name *Historic Thousands on Jones Street* because it highlights another important fact, which is that, before any words were spoken, and before any songs were intoned, the presence of so many together in this significant location, within earshot of the state capitol, constituted an affective intervention. Following Judith Butler, we might understand such gathering, such congregation, as "an embodied form of

calling into question the inchoate and powerful dimensions of reigning notions of the political,” notions that preceded, but were intensified by, the events of the North Carolina General Assembly’s 2013 legislative session.²² Indeed, the event is called a Moral March to communicate the moral critique of present modes of governance that is performed by the aggregation of these bodies. HKonJ and the Moral Mondays rituals are invested in the idea of morality, as evidenced in the titles of these protest events and in the texts of Barber’s many speeches, and symbolized in the clerical attire that pervades these public acts. It is a morality that uses sacred language to interrogate allegedly secular affairs—a political theology that grounds Barber in the Black prophetic tradition, while linking him to the visions of prophets canonized in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible.

While Barber’s ministry is clearly shaped by Black liberation theology, his ongoing confrontation with neoliberal inequality calls attention to a broader convergence of the theological and the political in contemporary public policy. Adam Kostko illuminates this overlap, using these two contentious terms—*neoliberalism* and *political theology*—to interpret each other. Defining political theology as “a holistic, genealogical inquiry into the structures and sources of legitimacy in a particular historical moment,”²³ Kostko claims that neoliberalism is “the political theology of late capital.” By claiming that various features of a governing program are immoral, Barber seeks to deny the system the legitimacy on which it depends, suggesting that this interruption is the most effective affront to the extant structure. As he names protest in these

moral terms, Barber aims to invalidate the injustices that are naturalized by market capitalism, the persistent inequity that is explained away as evidence of personal irresponsibility, asserting that there is also a public responsibility. If neoliberalism is a political theology, then it is differently vulnerable to theological critique.

Bereft of its justifying invisibility and alleged secularity, *what is* gets called into question by *what might be*. The reigning convergence of the political and theological is challenged by an embodied and sonic convergence, through which Barber’s prophetic speech and the movement’s direct actions indict the contemporary nexus that locates morality in markets and in the subjectivities they foment. These acts of assembly rebuff the arrogated legitimacy—and near-inevitability—of the present arrangement of social, political, and economic affairs by invoking an alternative. As these iterative Moral Marches on Raleigh ritualize protest, they inaugurate an alternative temporality, interrupting the seemingly inexorable flow of commodified time, producing Nyong’o’s aforementioned “precarious time of occupation.” The thick moment of resistance they then inhabit is akin to the Italian philosopher Antoni Negri’s understanding of *kairós*, ideas upon which stands Nyong’o’s notion of precarious temporality.²⁴ Negri describes *kairós* as “an installation in eternity,” neither future nor past, both spatial and temporal, a point of access that supplants linear time with another frame of reference, temporarily lifting a contemporary event onto higher ground.

Claiming the High Ground

Barber’s remarks at the 2014 Historic Thousands on Jones Street march use the

title of Johnson Oatman, Jr.'s treasured hymn *Higher Ground* to presence a moment and place characterized by this elevated sociopolitical arrangement. In this address, Barber repeatedly turns to the high standards expressed in the North Carolina State Constitution, the United States Constitution, and Christian scripture to assail the new set of policies enacted by the state's ruling regime. Throughout the message, Barber returns to the notion of higher ground. Over the course of the roughly thirty-minute proclamation, those two words become a metonym for a range of policies that the speaker describes as moral—programs including increased funding for public schools, expanded access to health care, and renewed respect for voting rights.²⁵

We have come today to raise our moral dissent because of the road down which our elected leaders are pushing the people of North Carolina.

Let us be reminded that we are called to high standards in our civic and public life. The Word of God, for instance, sets a high standard for how we should live as people and conduct ourselves when we use public power. Micah 6:8 says, "What doth the Lord require but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly before God?"

That's a high standard.

Isaiah 6:10 says, "Woe unto those who legislate evil and write oppressive decrees and rob the poor of their rights."

That's a high standard.

Jesus said to nations and governments, "When I was hungry, did you feed me? When I was naked, did you clothe me? When I was thirsty, did you give me drink? When I was sick, did you heal me? Because inasmuch as you've done it unto the least of these, you've done it unto me."

That's a high standard.

John said, "How can you say you love God, whom you've never seen, and hate your brother, whom you see every day?"

That's a high standard.

Not only the Word of God, the American Constitution sets a high standard for how we should conduct ourselves. It says: "We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty"

That's a high standard.

One hundred and forty-six years ago, the North Carolina State Constitution set a high standard. It said of every political leader that would dare operate on our behalf, Be reminded of this: "All political power is vested in and derived from the people; *all* government of right originates from the people, is founded upon their will only, and is instituted solely for the good of the whole."

And, my friends, when we look at these high standards for North Carolina, high standards for America, high standards from the Word of God, we must declare that there are those who have chosen to live, govern, and act mighty low.

In policy and politics, we face two choices: one is the low road to destruction and the other is the pathway to higher ground. And so, in this *kairós* moment of history, right here in North Carolina, we have been called together to fight against a dangerous agenda of extremist laws by the ultraconservative right wing that is choosing the low road—policies that are constitutionally inconsistent, morally indefensible, and economically insane.

It's extreme and it's mighty low to cut Medicaid for 500,000 people in a state of 1.7 million poor people and knowing that 2,800 will die.

It's mighty low to raise taxes on 900,000 poor people and working

citizens in order to cut taxes for twenty-three of the wealthiest families.

It's mighty low to end unemployment benefits for 170,000 people who have lost jobs through no fault of their own but give your political appointees salaries that don't even fit their resumes.

It's mighty low to resegregate our schools and to eliminate preschool for many poor children and to cut so much money from public education that we are now forty-eighth in the country, lower than Mississippi.

And then, on top of that, to fire thousands of teachers and teachers' assistants and then remove 10 million dollars of our public money and give it to a private vouchers school program.

That's mighty low!

It's mighty low to raise taxes on 89 percent of North Carolinians so you can give 11 percent of the richest North Carolinians a tax break, knowing that this transfer to the top will never trickle down, but [will] drain, over ten years, 650 million [dollars] from our budget, sorely needed for education, infrastructure, and economic development.

It's mighty low for us to sing "America, America, God shed his grace on you" with one breath and then with the other breath to deny workers the grace of labor rights and collective bargaining; to cut the grace of safety nets to the needy and raise taxes on the poor and the working poor; to deny immigrants the grace of fair immigration policy; and to undermine the grace due to the rights of women and the LGBT community.

It's mighty low!

It's mighty low to wave banners and place bumper stickers on our cars saying "God Bless America" but fail to realize our obligation to bless God by how we treat our brothers and sisters.

It's mighty low after you've committed all of these low acts to then

commit crimes against democracy and try to suppress and undermine the right to vote.

But "higher ground" is not just a motif or set piece for Barber: the invocation of higher ground is Barber's entire project. This invective derives its power by confronting reigning notions of the possible, asserting that the alternative both speaker and audience seek is attainable. In this address, Barber declares that "our politics can be merciful. Can be kind. Can be loving. Can be just. Can be fair. Can be equal." Barber's characteristic unwillingness to "absolutize the present,"²⁶ here and elsewhere, is one of the ways he practices prophetic speech, grounding his public ministry in the Black prophetic preaching tradition, while deriving direction from the prophets of Hebrew scripture. The fundament of this tradition, which Walter Brueggemann theorizes as "a prophetic imagination," is a kind of emphatic contrariness, a refusal of unjust arrangements of human power in view of divine principles.²⁷ As a synecdoche for Barber's project, "higher ground" clarifies the genealogy from which his messages derive meaning. The homiletician Kenyatta R. Gilbert rightly notes that, "due to racism, the prophetic principle has been virtually institutionalized in Black churches since the independent Black church movement of the early nineteenth century."²⁸ Although their contributions are extolled far less than Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "word that moved America,"²⁹ Gilbert notes that Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., Reverdy C. Ransom, and Florence S. Randolph "rose up to name the dehumanizing political and socioeconomic realities (e.g., substandard housing, racial and gender discrimination, unstable employment) stirred by the Great Migration, and simultaneously offered a word of

hope which possessed the power to topple despair.”³⁰ Tracing the divine’s movement through the world points out the failure of human societies to “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly.”³¹ What Brueggemann describes as “a sustained effort to imagine the world as though YHWH were a real character and the defining agent in the life of the world” is certainly at work in Barber’s public ministry.³²

In Barber’s words,

[t]he job of a pastor is to touch people where they are hurting and to do what is possible to bind up their wounds. You can only do this sort of work locally—among people whose names you know and who, likewise, know you. But you cannot do it honestly without at some point becoming a prophet. Something inside the human spirit cries out against the injustice of inequality when you know people who have to choose between food and medicine in a country where CEOs make more in an hour than their lowest-paid employees make in month.³³

As I noted earlier, on the day in question, Barber’s prophetic contrariness took shape in the idea of higher ground, refashioned as an indictment of what is and an invocation of what can be. HKonJ as an event, as a ritual, evidences what Barber often calls “fusion politics.” The assembly of so many individuals and organizations with allied, but not identical, interests is the purpose of these massive events. Indeed, their unfolding typically includes readings and prayers from Christian, Jewish, and Muslim clerics. But Barber’s characteristically Black, musical, and intensive mode of address is always the keynote. Given such calling-together, how does Barber’s improbably specific utterance function? While I am mindful of Gilbert’s concern that, with

reference to Black preaching, “higher esteem is given to how things are said (style) over what is actually being said (content),”³⁴ I also share Martha Nussbaum’s conviction that “style itself makes its claims, expresses its own sense of what matters.”³⁵ Barber gives a sense of what matters to him near the end of his 2014 address when he makes a solicitous request: “Can I be a preacher for a minute?” His rhetorical petition to the assembled thousands both precedes and announces an emphatic shift in his manner of presentation, a characteristic move from the domain of speech toward song. On that chilly Saturday morning, standing mere feet away from the seat of the state government’s power, and while speaking in antiphony with the assembled counterpublic, Barber summons a holy power, concluding that day’s address with a sonic form that would have made for a fitting culmination of a sermon delivered in his church’s pulpit on any given Sunday.

Can I be a preacher for a minute? O help me, Lord! Yeah! Every now and then, when I’m blessed to be in the vision, in the stratosphere of the Spirit, every now and then, when God lets my mind and my soul go a little bit higher in the troubles of this world, when I’m up there in the Spirit, I’m reminded that the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice. When I’m up there, I’m reminded that if we help the poor and stop exploitation, Isaiah said the Lord will hear our prayer, the light will shine on us, and we’ll be preparers of the breach. When I’m up there in the Spirit, in my spirit I hear the Lord say, “They that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength, mount up on wings as eagles.” When I’m up there, I’m reminded that if God be for you, it does not matter if the whole world is against you. When I’m up there, in my spirit I’m reminded greater

is He that is in us than he that is in the world. When I'm up there, somebody say, "Up there," I'm reminded the Lord is my light, my salvation. God can pick you up. He can turn you around. He can plant your feet on higher ground. When I'm up there, I'm reminded weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning. Every battle for justice has gone through the night, but joy always came in the morning. After slavery, joy came in the morning. When women didn't have the right to vote, joy came in the morning. After segregation, joy came in the morning. So don't get weary. Don't get weary. We've just begun to fight. There's a nonviolent army and it's rising and it's rising. There's an army rising to break every chain of injustice, to occupy the high ground.

As he settles on D-flat as a reciting tone, and as the keyboardist enters to amplify his musical inflection, Barber sonifies the hoped-for while standing among the thousands on Jones Street. No longer simply a referent for public policy and the morals from which they spring, "Higher Ground" becomes the name for the sonic environment into which this assembly is suddenly thrust. This resonant alteration has argumentative value. Enveloped in a new sonic world, grounded by musical systems of key and meter, the grip of the material world is slackened by the invisible, but audible, materiality of musical sound. Through this movement, Barber's claim about what else is possible achieves a phenomenal corroboration. As such, Barber's shift from speech to song, and the cross-coalitional assembly's antiphonal escalation, produce another politics, a theopolitics distilled in the declaration that there is another world.

Since the 2014 sermon with which this article is concerned, Barber's investment in the Black prophetic tradition has become

even more explicit, resuscitating the language and focus of King's 1968 Poor People's Campaign in the second decade of the twenty-first. Amid the growing national and international prominence evidenced by the movement from the HKonJ event through Moral Mondays into the Poor People's Campaign, the form and content of Barber's public orations have remained remarkably consistent. What do these messages do? What is conveyed by their very structure, by their very shape? Since, speaking in this manner, enacting this conventional musical inflection is not Barber's only aesthetic choice, one would ask, what claim is made through enacting this style? What thought is expressed, not just through the content of his address, but through its form? Ashon Crawley's work on a host of Black aesthetic practices offers an illuminating way to grapple with these questions, focusing on religiomusical enunciations of "Blackpentecostal breath," which, more than an invocation of characteristic Black religiosity, expresses "a collective possibility for belief in otherwise worlds, one that is a creative critique of the one(s) in which we exist."³⁶ This is not belief in some illusory utopia, but an assertion "that otherwise is possible and . . . [that] we are charged with producing otherwise in the cause of justice."³⁷ "Producing otherwise" is a valuable phrase for this article's analytical endeavor; it illuminates what results from Barber's serial invocations of Black sacred rhetoric in protest, events and messages that serve as conjunctions between policy and morality, temporality and transcendence, intersections that Barber best understood as a kind of higher ground. While Barber's solicitous request of permission to "be a preacher" indexes a vocal conversion, this shift in phonation is symptomatic of

something broader. As the pioneering Black liberation theologian James Cone observes about other elements of Black Christian aesthetic practice, “[t]he truth of black religion is not limited to the literal meaning of the words. Truth is also disclosed in the movement of the language and the passion created when a song is sung in the right pitch and tonal quality. Truth is found in shout, hum, and moan as these expressions move the people closer to the source of their being.”³⁸ Truth, Cone clarifies, is located not just in content, but also in form, such that we might refer to the consistently intensive character of Barber’s protest messages as articulations of “prophetic form,” a sonic arrangement whose arresting character advances moral critique. I contend that, as Barber raises his voice, he shifts the debate into political theological territory, using vocal inflection to make the prophetic claim, a formulation that Walter Bruggeman defines in this fashion:

The powers of modernity want not to notice human suffering; they want to define suffering as a legitimate and necessary cost of well-being or as an inexplicable given of human history. Prophetic speech demystifies pain and sees clearly that much pain is principally caused by the manipulation of economic and political access whereby the strong regularly destroy the weak. Such suffering is not a legitimate, bearable cost; and it is not inexplicable. Instead, social pain is a product of social relationships that can be transformed.³⁹

By making a sound that cannot easily be ignored, Barber’s prophetic form reorganizes collective attention on what matters: the human cost of immoral public policy.

While Barber’s “higher ground” cannot be located in any single human event, the political content of his prophetic form is

buttressed by a conventional interpretive thread that traces divine movement across space and time. No longer simply a referent for just public policies and the virtues from which they spring, “higher ground” now discloses a transcendent plane from which to recall God’s intervention in human history. This recollection is a remarkably consistent feature of Barber’s public presentations. His emphatic turn toward musicality is always tethered to swift motion across divergent scenes of human events. Barber’s combination of remembrance and imagination refuses spatiotemporal boundaries, inhabiting *kairós*, drawing together unlikely collectives of communities which, though separated by thousands of years, become one in the struggle during the ecstatic phase of a protest sermon. At the 2014 HKonJ march, the notion of higher ground was the rhetorical lever that enabled Barber to hold these places, moments, and publics in a fleeting communion. When defined as higher ground, the ecstasy engendered by the musicality of preaching becomes the moment when Barber sounds the prophetic, remembering societal victories like abolition, women’s suffrage, and integration as articulations of the divine’s liberating presence. Each of these moments constitutes a picture of joy coming in the morning.

When I’m up there, I’m reminded weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning. Every battle for justice has gone through the night, but joy always came in the morning. After slavery, joy came in the morning. When women didn’t have the right to vote, joy came in the morning. After segregation, joy came in the morning.

The teleology of Barber’s prophetic form is revealed by the message’s penultimate

move. Having used the theme of higher ground to critique policy, interpret history, and imagine another world, Barber finally recites the lyrics of the hymn itself.

Did not the hymn writer say, “I’m pressing on the upward way. New heights I’m gaining every day, still praying as I’m freedom bound. Lord, plant my feet on higher ground. (Sister Coleman,) my heart has no desire to stay where doubts arise and fear dismay. Though some may dwell where these abound, my prayer, my aim, is higher ground. Lord, lift us up and help us stand by faith, by faith, by faith, on Canaan’s land. A higher plain that I have found. Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.

The turn to this hymn feels just as consummative as does the homiletic inflection of his voice near the end of an event for which he dressed in clerical attire. These concomitant moments of arrival, both of which are amplified by the solicitous request of permission to be a preacher—the vocation for which he is known—reflect the performativity of the HKonJ gathering, a transformative capacity that is clarified in Barber’s final move. Before he leaves the podium, at the apotheosis of volume and affect, the preacher turns the message’s theme and the hymn’s title into an extensive chanted prayer. As he oscillates between the tonic and flattened third, a sonic materialization of the hymn’s elevated topography, Barber supplicates:

Lord, plant our feet
on higher ground.
Plant North Carolina
on higher ground.
Plant the governor’s office on
higher ground.
Plant the legislature
on higher ground.

Plant every state all over the South
on higher ground.
Plant Washington, D.C.
on higher ground.
Plant the legislature
on higher ground.
Plant the Congress
on higher ground.
Plant this nation on higher ground.
Plant America on higher ground.
Lord, Lord, plant our minds
on higher ground.
Plant our hearts on higher ground.
Plant our souls on higher ground.

In this final move we literally see Barber summoning spiritual power as a remedy to societal problems. While exclaiming “Lord, lift us up,” he performs the lifting of which he speaks, planting his audience—and, proleptically, his nation—on higher ground. In this way, gospel sound makes its own prophetic statement, asserting that an otherwise politics is at hand.

The prayer derived from what might be called “Barber’s theme song” is uttered in earshot of others whose political behavior is indexed by the label “Christian.” As this demonstration of moral power is woven into the public assembly of embodied authority, a claim is made about the essence of the Good News, about the side the divine takes in human affairs, and about what matters most in social life. Barber’s movement between genres of address—from speech to sermon to prayer, transitions marked by inflected words and modes of vocalization—braids sacred rhetoric together with his slate of policy prescriptions. When read against the diversity of the listeners it attracts, this aesthetic alchemy leads me to ask, what are the audiences that gather around Barber responding to? What meaning emerges

when, at their rhetorical apotheoses, his speeches veer toward one of the most recognizable sonic expressions of Black religious ecstasy? What is the relationship between the hyperlegibility of Barber's inflection and his recurring use of "we are" in the following passage?

We are Black. We are white. We are Latino. We are Native American. We are Democrat. We are Republican. We are independent. We are people of faith. We are people not of faith, but who, though they are secular, they still believe in a moral universe. We are natives and immigrants. We are business leaders, and workers, and unemployed. We are doctors and the uninsured. We are gay. We are straight. We are students. We are parents. We are retirees. We are North Carolina. We are America.

By attending to the actions of the assembled crowds during the climactic moments of Barber's speeches, their heterogeneity becomes apparent through the multiple ways in which the attendees respond to the preacher's sonic specificity. As the speaker becomes the preacher, instruments join in to "back him up" as they might at his church on Sunday morning. In this same vein, videos reveal the sight and sound of congregants whose familiarity with Black church traditions leads them to engage in an antiphonal dialogue with the preacher. These interactions wed their affirmation of the spoken message with expressions of praise. Other responses have more in common with a secular rally, venting strong agreement with Barber's assertions, while showing some distance from the confessional investment of fellow congregants. In this way the improbable specificity of Barber's rhetorical style makes the argument of fusion politics, showing

that there is room for multiple forms of engagement within a single performance. That Barber chooses to preach in this peculiar way in the midst of a group whose diversity is so obvious suggests that a kind of pleasure is taken in the heteroglossic character of these events.

What are these unlikely collectives bodying forth? I see an imagination of another mode of being-together, another politics, a shared intention to inhabit higher ground. While much about this scene seems familiar, articulating the practice that homileticians like Henry Mitchell, Frank Thomas, and William Turner have described as "celebration," I want to suggest that there is more going on here than simply "the musicality of a Black preacher."⁴⁰ Something unfamiliar is also afoot. While Barber is indeed a Black preacher, iterating a characteristic brand of preacherly musicality, his presentation resists easy categorizations. Somewhere between political speech and ecstatic sermon, Barber sounds a reclamation of public space, public discourse, and public policy. In these performances, sounds that are highly characteristic of Black sacred rhetoric are recruited to question the self-legitimizing systems of oppression. As Barber asks for permission to be a preacher, he offers his immediate audience – and all to whom his sound might travel – permission to imagine being otherwise. Not new, but otherwise. To imagine existence before and above what is allegedly natural. To imagine belonging, not to Black Pentecostalism, Black Christianity, or any other confessional system, but to an otherwise world where such lines of distinction lose some of their alienating power. We might think of such a world as "Higher Ground."

In this essay, I have argued that Rev. Dr. William Barber’s protest messages advance political and theological thought—not just in their content, but also in their form. The improbable collectives that take part in these gatherings perform a critical form of sociality. As Barber’s sacred rhetoric makes available a realm that attendees cannot see, it contradicts the inevitability

of current social order, yielding a power of subversive imagination that converses with the power of the state. In its public form, Barber’s ecstatic musicality brings near a world that is more just than what seems to be inescapably natural, turning sound into a technology of transcendence, the sonic path into higher ground.

NOTES

1 Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II, “Address to 2016 Democratic National Convention,” July 28, 2016, Democratic National Convention, Wells Fargo Center, Philadelphia, PA, YouTube, 11:09, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NAFZKcYn8qI>.

2 William P. Mackay, *Revive Us Again*; see, for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RuMrQt4l6qE>.

3 Kim Severson, “G.O.P.’s Full Control in Long-Moderate North Carolina May Leave Lasting Stamp,” *New York Times*, Dec. 11, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/12/us/politics/gop-to-take-control-in-long-moderate-north-carolina.html> (accessed Feb. 1, 2017).

4 Ibid.

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8 Rob Christensen, *The Paradox of Tar Heel Politics: The Personalities, Elections, and Events That Shaped Modern North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 34.

9 Ibid., 9–10.

10 Ibid., 39.

11 Ibid.

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13 William A. Link, *Righteous Warrior: Jesse Helms and the Rise of Modern Conservatism* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2008), 55.

14 Christensen, *The Paradox of Tar Heel Politics*, 211; see also Rob Christensen, “Helms Spawns Passions among Supporters, Detractors,” *News and Observer*, Sept. 23, 1984.

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19 Ibid., 142.

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23 Adam Kostko, *Neoliberalism’s Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capital* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 128.

24 Antoni Negri, *Time for Revolution* (London: Continuum, 2003).

25 Barber, “Post-March Speech,” Feb. 8, 2014.

26 Walter Brueggemann, "The Prophetic Word of God and History," in *Texts that Linger, Words that Explode: Listening to Prophetic Voices*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 35–44.

27 Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001).

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30 Kenyatta Gilbert, "Making the Unseen Seen: Pedagogy and Aesthetics in African American Prophetic Preaching," *Homiletic* 34/2 (2009): 21.

31 Micah 6:8.

32 Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 132.

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37 Ibid.

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