

#BlackLivesMatter Political Discourse: A Burkeian Analysis of Controversial Comments at Aretha Franklin's Funeral

Ashlee A. Lambert*
Mark P. Orbe⁺

On August 31, 2018, the life and legacy of Aretha Franklin was celebrated at a memorial service in a Detroit church. Over eight hours, political dignitaries, civil rights leaders, entertainers, friends, and family members paid a fitting tribute to a woman regarded as the Queen of Soul. The widely televised event took an unexpected political turn when Rev. Jasper Williams Jr., senior pastor emeritus of Salem Baptist Church in Atlanta, delivered Franklin's eulogy and offered, in part, his critique of the Black Lives Matter movement. In short, Williams asserted that "black lives will not matter...until black people start respecting black lives and stop killing ourselves." His rhetoric triggered a barrage of responses from others who argued about the intent, appropriateness, and effect of this political discourse. This paper utilizes Kenneth Burke's theory of dramatism to present a cultural-critical analysis of Williams' rhetoric. In doing so, we intend to contribute to the growing body of scholarly literature regarding #BlackLivesMatter as a rhetorical movement.

Keywords: #BlackLivesMatter, Aretha Franklin, Kenneth Burke, pentad, African American preaching

The Queen of Soul, otherwise known as Aretha Franklin, is a musical legend who was born in Memphis, Tennessee on March 25, 1942.¹ Her mother, Barbara Franklin, was a gospel singer and pianist and her father C.L. Franklin was an influential civil rights activist and pastor who presided over New Bethel Baptist Church in Detroit, Michigan.² Aretha grew up singing in the church and eventually started singing secular music. She incorporated jazz, blues, gospel and rhythms & blues into her music and connected with a range of audiences. Aretha became a musical sensation as she went on to receive a plethora of awards, some of which include 18 Grammy awards and 73 Billboard Hot 100 entries. In 1987, she became the first woman during her career to be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.³

* *Ashlee A. Lambert* (B.A., Western Michigan University) is a graduate student in the Department of Communication at Saint Louis University. A 2019-2020 Diversity Fellow, her research and teaching interest focus on communication, culture, identity, power, and social justice. In support of this research project, she received an Undergraduate Student Research and Creative Activity Award from the WMU College of Arts & Science.

⁺ *Mark P. Orbe* (Ph.D., Ohio University) is a Professor of Communication & Diversity in the School of Communication at Western Michigan University where he also holds a joint appointment in the Department of Women and Gender Studies. His research and teaching focus on the exploring the inextricable relationship between culture, power, and communication. He is widely published and whose previous work has appeared in the *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*.

¹ David Blatty, "Aretha Franklin Dies at Age 76," *Biography*, August 16, 2018, accessed February 25, 2019. <https://www.biography.com/news/aretha-franklin-death-obituary>.

² Cady Lang, "Aretha Franklin Wasn't Just a Music Legend. She Also Raised Her Voice for Civil Rights," *Time*, August 16, 2018, <http://time.com/5369587/aretha-franklin-civil-rights/>

³ Lang, "Voice for Civil Rights."

Aretha Franklin is not only a musical genius, but a cultural icon as she used her voice for social justice. One of her Grammy award-winning songs, "Respect" written by Otis Redding, became the anthem of the women's and civil rights movement⁴, and eventually became one of the most influential songs in history. She toured with one of the most renowned civil rights activists (who was also her father's friend), Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.⁵ After he was assassinated, she sang "Take My Hand, Precious Lord" at his funeral.⁶ A few years later Franklin continued her work towards the freedom of Black lives by offering to post bail for the civil rights leader, Angela Davis who was arrested during the shootout at Howard Johnson Motor Lodge in New York City in 1970.⁷

Because of Franklin's influence, many were heartbroken to hear that she passed away from pancreatic cancer on August 16, 2018.⁸ On August 31, 2018, the life and legacy of Aretha Franklin was celebrated at a memorial service in a Detroit church. Over eight hours, political dignitaries, civil rights leaders, entertainers, friends, and family members paid a fitting tribute to a woman regarded as the Queen of Soul. The widely televised event took an unexpected political turn when Rev. Jasper Williams Jr., senior pastor emeritus of Salem Baptist Church in Atlanta, delivered Franklin's eulogy and offered, in part, his critique of the Black Lives Matter movement. In short, Williams asserted that "black lives will not matter...until black people start respecting black lives and stop killing ourselves." His rhetoric triggered a barrage of responses from others who argued about the intent, appropriateness, and effect of this political discourse.

This paper utilizes Kenneth Burke's theory of dramatism⁹ to present a cultural-critical analysis of Williams' rhetoric. We begin by providing an overview of the Black Lives Matter movement which is followed by a summary of Burke's Dramatism. The heart of our essay applies this theoretical framework as a means to analyze Rev. Williams' comments as a form of symbolic action. We conclude with further engagement of this particular point of analysis, and in doing so, work to contribute to the growing body of scholarly literature regarding #BlackLivesMatter as a rhetorical movement.¹⁰

Black Lives Matter Movement

The origins of the Black Lives Matter movement can be traced back to the death of Trayvon Martin, who was killed by George Zimmerman on February 26, 2012. At the time, several protest hashtags appeared on Black Twitter including #Justice4Trayvon and #HoodiesUp. However, when Zimmerman was later acquitted of murder in 2013, #BlackLivesMatter exploded on different social media platforms.¹¹ The hashtag emerged as a social media call to action for people of all racial and cultural backgrounds interested in protesting "the obvious truth that the criminalization of

⁴ Lang, "Voice for Civil Rights."

⁵ Lang, "Voice for Civil Rights."

⁶ Lang, "Voice for Civil Rights."

⁷ Lang, "Voice for Civil Rights."

⁸ Blatty, "Dies at Age 76."

⁹ Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

¹⁰ Mark Orbe, "#AllLivesMatter as Post-Racial Rhetorical Strategy," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 5 (2015): 90-98.

¹¹ Amanda Nell Edgar and Andre E. Johnson, *The Struggle over Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018).

Blackness is entertained as just and acceptable.”¹² The social movement confronted a number of issues facing African Americans, including racial profiling, police brutality, the militarization of policing in Black communities, as well as mass incarceration.¹³ The movement associated with the hashtag continued to gain momentum in subsequent years as other unarmed Black people were killed during interactions with police, including Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Tony Robinson, Walter Scott, and Freddie Gray. #BlackLivesMatter emerged as a central rallying cry prompting one collective stream of consciousness for lives that had ended thousands of miles and weeks/months/years apart.¹⁴

From its inception, the Black Lives Matter movement spoke to people of African descent in the U.S., especially those who were active in resisting their own dehumanization. The movement worked to improve the lives of all African Americans while simultaneously focusing on those individuals whose lives had been traditionally marginalized with Black liberation movements. Information on their website states that Black Lives Matter “affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folk, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum.”¹⁵ According to Chris House¹⁶, the founders and the ideals of the movement challenged the patriarchal, heteronormative, and gender norms of the traditional Black church.¹⁷ And, in doing so, distinguished themselves from earlier civil rights movements that were inextricably linked to African American religious organizations.¹⁸

The popularity and power of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag prompted different Black Lives Matter chapters to form across the U.S. and abroad. These different grass-roots organizations have organized over a thousand demonstrations – rallies, assemblies, vigils, die-ins, and marches – worldwide.¹⁹ The purpose of #BlackLivesMatter protests revolve around the necessity of making political declarations, most often to publically mourn the loss of African American lives. According to Yancy and Butler, such demonstrations are crucially important.²⁰ Additionally, they argue that when protesters collectively grieve the loss of individuals whose lives are considered ungrievable, they politically assert to those in power that these lost lives are not acceptable losses.

Black Lives Matter has been described by some as “the most formidable American protest movement of the 21st century to date.”²¹ The strength and sustainability of #BlackLivesMatter have relied on the power of social media: “the swift morally blunt consensus that can be created by hashtags; the personal connection that a charismatic online persona can make with followers;

¹² Black Millennials, “What You Mean by #AllLivesMatter,” Black Millennials, December 1, 2014, <http://blackmillennials.com/2014/12/01/what-you-mean-by-alllivesmatter/comment-page-1/>.

¹³ Segalov, Michael, “We Spoke to the Activist Behind #BlackLivesMatter about Racism in Britain and America,” *Vice*, February 2, 2015, <http://www.vice.com/read/patrisse-cullors-interview-michael-segalov-188>.

¹⁴ Orbe, “#AllLivesMatter,” 90-98.

¹⁵ Orbe, “#AllLivesMatter,” 95.

¹⁶ Christopher A. House, “Crying for Justice: The #BLACKLIVESMATTER Religious Rhetoric of Bishop T. D. Jakes,” *Southern Journal of Communication* 83 (2018): 13-27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1041794X.2017.1387600>.

¹⁷ Christopher A. House, “Crying for Justice: The #BLACKLIVESMATTER Religious Rhetoric of Bishop T. D. Jakes,” *Southern Journal of Communication* 83 (2018): 13-27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1041794X.2017.1387600>.

¹⁸ Edgar and Johnson, *The Struggle over Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter*.

¹⁹ “Read This List of 2,635 Black Lives Matter Protests and Other Demonstrations,” Elephrame, accessed March 20, 2019. <https://elephrame.com/textbook/BLM>.

²⁰ George Yancy and Judith Butler, “What’s Wrong With ‘All Lives Matter’?” *The New York Times*, January 12, 2015, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/12/whats-wrong-with-all-lives-matter/?mtr-ref=www.google.com&gwh=A0773DB1D87A56E885FEA105BB945FB5&gwt=pay>.

²¹ Jay Caspian Kang, “Our Demand is Simple: Stop Killing Us,” *The New York Times*, May 4, 2015, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/%E2%80%98our-demand-is-simple-stop-killing-us%E2%80%99/ar-BBj9Yxb>.

the broad networks that allow for easy distribution of documentary photos and videos – with an effort to quickly mobilize protests in each new city where a police shooting occurs.”²² In contrast to traditional social justice movements targeting racial injustice, #BlackLivesMatter represents a new form of online activism; it demonstrates how Twitter has become a site of a revolution and a conduit for the protest rhetoric of activists.²³ #BlackLivesMatter was recognized in 2014 by The American Dialect Society as the word of the year,²⁴ something that speaks to the power of symbolic action as articulated by Kenneth Burke.

Burke's Dramatism: Rhetorical Analysis of Symbolic Action

Burke's theory of dramatism is rooted in the core belief that words are first and foremost a form of action packed with symbolic meaning.²⁵ Grounded in this idea, dramatism provides a conceptual framework that facilitates a deeper understanding of the connection between the symbols speakers use and their motivations for speaking in the first place. And where there is action, there is drama. Burke offers dramatism as a technique for analyzing language and thought as modes of action that give life to particular motives and the pursuit of specific goals, rather than as means of conveying information.²⁶ As such, it assists in digging beyond surface understandings of a message and instead, reveals complex motives of a speaker – something most easily understood as the reasons why people do what they do.²⁷ Put another way, motive refers to the internal state or drive of an individual that works to stimulate action; often times this takes the form of “devices that function to explain, justify, interpret or rationalize actions.”²⁸

Burke's pentad provides elements that promote a close analysis of a speaker's rhetoric, something that ultimately works to reveal hidden motives – discerning motivations that may or may not be apparent to others.²⁹ Specifically, he focuses on the *act* (naming what took place in thought or deed; the series of actions), *agent* (person who performed the act), *scene* (situational setting where the act was performed; background of the act), *agency* (procedures or instruments used to perform act), and *purpose* (motive of agent; identification with ultimate meaning of life). In subsequent work, he also draws attention to the importance of a sixth element, that of *state of mind* (attitude; the preparation for the act).³⁰ No pentadic term can be understood in isolation. Instead, Burke emphasizes the importance of analyzing how each element exists within relation to one another, or as Smith and Hollihan describe, “nuanced ways in which the different elements of the pentad functioned in concert with one another.”³¹ A key component of this analysis includes searching for which elements (e.g., dominant ratio) give the most insight into the speaker's motivation.

²²Kang, “Our Demand is Simple.”

²³ Kang, “Our Demand is Simple.”

²⁴ RLG Johnson, “Johnson: Words of The Year (#BlackLivesMatter),” *The Economist*, January 15, 2015, <https://www.economist.com/prospero/2015/01/15/blacklivesmatter>.

²⁵ Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*.

²⁶ Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*.

²⁷ John F. Cragan, Donald C. Shields, and C. Thomas Preston, “Dramatism Theory,” in *Symbolic Theories in Applied Communication Research: Bormann, Burke, and Fisher*, eds. John F. Cragan and Donald C. Shields (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1995), 61-89.

²⁸ William Benoit, “A Note of Burke on ‘Motive.’” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (1996): 70.

²⁹ Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*.

³⁰ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

³¹ Francesca Marie M. Smith, and Thomas A. A. Hollihan, “Out of Chaos Breathes Creation: Human Agency, Mental Illness, and Conservative Arguments Locating Responsibility for the Tucson Massacre.” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 17 (2014): 585-618, doi:10.14321/rhetpublaffa.17.4.0585.

Collectively, Burke advocates for using this rhetorical technique to determine how the elements of the pentad reveal the drama described in the words spoken – not necessarily the speech itself as determined by the act, agent, scene, agency and purpose. The objective of rhetorical criticism is to move beyond describing a text alone; instead, the goal is to reveal the “substance” through which speakers/writers engage in symbolic action.³² Burke’s pentad has been a frequent lens through which rhetorical scholars have engaged a variety of texts, including but not limited to speeches,³³ mass-mediated rhetoric,³⁴ news coverage,³⁵ and films and documentaries.³⁶ Given the utility of Burke’s technique, we adopt it as we engage in a rhetorical analysis of the critique of the Black Lives Matter movement performed by Rev. Williams’ within his eulogy of Aretha Franklin.

Pentadic Analysis: Rhetoric and the Ultimate Meaning of Life

This section represents the heart of our analysis. Specifically, we engage each of the pentadic elements – scene, agent, act, agency, purpose and state of mind – as a means to facilitate a greater understanding of the motive(s) beyond Rev. Williams’ rhetoric regarding the Black Lives Matter movement. Once this fundamental analysis is complete, we conclude the essay with presenting a more nuanced account that goes beyond an analysis of his rhetoric, and instead, interrogates the drama demonstrated within his comments.

Scene: Greater Grace Temple, Detroit Michigan

The scene of Aretha Franklin’s eulogy took place at her funeral, which occurred at Greater Grace Temple in Detroit, MI on Friday, August 31, 2018. Greater Grace Temple is led by Bishop Charles Ellis III and has over 300 ministries.³⁷ Bishop Charles Ellis III was not only in charge of Franklin’s funeral, but he also led Rosa Parks’ funeral in 2005, a celebration of life where the Queen of Soul also performed.³⁸

Although Rosa Parks’ seven-hour service was legendary, Franklin’s service has been described as possibly the “largest and most-viewed religious gathering in the Black tradition” ever televised in the U.S.³⁹ More than 100 pink Cadillacs lined up in honor of Aretha Franklin and her 1985 hit song, “Freeway from Love.” Kern Brantely, a bass player and producer for the Queen, described

³² Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*.

³³ Edward C. Appel, “The Rhetoric of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: Comedy and Context in Tragic Collision,” *Western Journal of Communication* 61 (1997): 376-402.

³⁴ Janice Hocker Rushing, “Mythic Evolution of “The New Frontier” in Mass Mediated Rhetoric,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 3 (1986): 265–296, doi:10.1080/15295038609366655.

³⁵ Smith and Hollihan, “Out of Chaos Breathes Creation.”

³⁶ Emma Frances Bloomfield and Angeline Sangalang, “Juxtaposition as Visual Argument: Health Rhetoric in *Super Size Me* and *Fat Head*,” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 50 (2014): 141–156; Kris Rutten, Griet Roets, Ronald Soetaert, and Rudi Roose, “The Rhetoric of Disability: A Dramatistic-narrative Analysis of One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest,” *Critical Arts* 26 (2012): 631-47, doi: 10.1080/02560046.2012.744720.

³⁷ “Bishop Charles H. Ellis, III,” Greater Grace Temple, accessed March 1, 2019, <http://greatergrace.org/who-we-are/bishop-charles-h-ellis-iii/>.

³⁸ “Rosa Parks Honored by Thousands at Funeral,” *NBC News*. November 03, 2005, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/9893832/ns/us_news-life/t/rosa-parks-honored-thousands-funeral/#.XJlJuaJhKhPY.

³⁹ David Dennis, “Jasper Williams’ Eulogy For Aretha Franklin Was A Disgrace,” *NewsOne*, September 2, 2018, <https://newsone.com/3824748/jasper-williams-eulogy-aretha-franklin-disgrace/>.

“Freeway from Love” as an anthem for the Motor City.⁴⁰ Owners of the Cadillacs were permitted to attend the celebration of life, although it was initially intended to be a private funeral.

In addition, the day before the funeral, Greater Grace told Fox 2 Detroit that the service would be open to 1,000 members of the general public.⁴¹ Thousands of people gathered to pay tribute and celebrate Franklin's homegoing with appearances from her family, Stevie Wonder, Chaka Khan, Tyler Perry, Marvin Sapp, Smokey Robinson, Ariana Grande, Jesse Jackson, President Bill Clinton and many others. The nation also had access to Franklin's celebration of life because the funeral was live streamed online and broadcasted on BET Networks, HLN, the Word Network, SiriusXM, Fox News, CNN, MSNBC, ABC News Live, and local news networks: WDIV-TV, WJBK-TV, and WXYZ-TV.⁴²

The funeral was scheduled to begin at 10 am and end at 3 pm.⁴³ However, the funeral ran behind schedule and ended up lasting over eight hours. Franklin's celebration of life was described as “unapologetically Black.”⁴⁴ Her impact, including roles as a gospel-soul-R&B artist and political activist, was reflected throughout the entire service by the audience members, music, and speeches. Tons of people greeted each other as they walked into Greater Grace Temple to celebrate the Queen. The funeral began with music and the reading of scripture. There were breath-taking, musical tributes and personal reflections throughout the entire service. There were also acknowledgements and condolences, an obituary, family reflections, personal remarks from Michigan political figures and the former U.S. Attorney General, Eric Holder, and former president, Bill Clinton. After nearly six hours of celebrating the Queen of Soul, Rev. Jasper Williams eulogized Franklin. The funeral ended with a musical tribute from Stevie Wonder and the National Artists, as well as Jennifer Holliday and the choir.

Agent: Rev. Jasper Williams Jr.

Rev. Jasper Williams, Jr. is the senior pastor emeritus of Salem Bible Church, of Salem Baptist Church, in Atlanta. Although Rev. Williams accepted his call to pastor at Salem Baptist Church in November 1963,⁴⁵ Williams told *USA Today* that he has been preaching for 65 years.⁴⁶ According to his personal website, Rev. Williams helped create a senior citizen high-rise in honor of his mother, a day care center, and a free psychological counseling program during his years as pastor

⁴⁰ Cheryl Corley, “Pink Cadillacs Will Line Up For Aretha Franklin's Funeral,” *NPR*, August 29, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/08/29/642871634/pink-cadillacs-will-line-up-for-aretha-franklin-s-funeral>.

⁴¹ “Aretha Franklin's Funeral Opened up to 1,000 Members of the Public,” *WJBK*, August 30, 2018, <https://www.fox2detroit.com/news/local-news/aretha-franklin-s-funeral-opened-up-to-2-000-members-of-the-public>.

⁴² Brian McCollum, “Aretha Franklin's funeral will be livestreamed and broadcast on TV,” *Detroit Free Press*, August 31, 2018, <https://www.freep.com/story/entertainment/music/aretha-franklin/2018/08/27/watch-aretha-franklin-funeral-live-stream/1112178002/>.

⁴³ Amy Huschka, “Aretha Franklin funeral: See the epic program for the six-hour event,” *Detroit Free Press*, August 31, 2018, <https://www.freep.com/story/life/music/2018/08/31/aretha-franklin-funeral-schedule/1155456002/>.

⁴⁴ Tiffany Curtis, “In spite of upsetting moments, Aretha Franklin's homegoing was unapologetically—and beautifully—Black,” *Hello Giggles*, September 5, 2018, <https://hellogiggles.com/news/aretha-franklin-homegoing-unapologetically-black/>.

⁴⁵ “About Jasper Williams Jr.,” Jasper Williams Jr. Ministries, accessed March 1, 2018, <https://jasperwilliams.com/name>. Accessed March 26, 2019. <https://jasperwilliams.com/about-jasper-williams/>.

⁴⁶ Niraj Warikoo, “Aretha Franklin eulogist, Rev. Jasper Williams' sermons are diverse, political,” *USA Today*, September 5, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/people/2018/09/05/aretha-franklin-eulogy-rev-jasper-williams/1199650002/>.

of the church.⁴⁷ While pastoring, he also graduated from Morehouse College in 1972 with a major in sociology and a minor in religion.⁴⁸

Prior to the funeral, Rev. Williams was described as “the best in the African-American spiritual experience.”⁴⁹ Based on reviews of his sermons, Williams was clearly supportive of the civil rights movement. Some of his critiques, however, have targeted the role that integration has played in fewer black-owned business and control.⁵⁰ After some of Rev. Williams comments, many were left wondering why he was selected to eulogize Franklin. The Queen’s nephew, Vaughn Franklin, told the *Detroit Free Press* that Aretha Franklin did not ask Rev. Williams to eulogize her. Rather, the family asked him to perform the eulogy because he eulogized her father, sister, and brother.⁵¹

Along with eulogizing other family members, Rev. Williams asserts that there’s a “commonality” between him and the Queen of Soul, having shared a common experience/neighborhood during their childhood. Rev. Williams was a friend of the Franklin family who knew her family from their early days following migration from the south. The Williams and Franklin families grew up together on Lucy Street in Memphis. Both families had originated in Mississippi, and when they came to Memphis, they both came for the purpose of pastoring. That connection and similarity – rooted in the Deep South – likely played a significant role in the family’s choice in who would offer the eulogy for Aretha Franklin.⁵²

Act: Eulogy at Aretha Franklin’s Celebration of Life

Before eulogizing Franklin, Rev. Williams sang the hymn, “Father, I Stretch My Hands To Thee,” a song that he had recorded and released on a previous album. Following the song, Rev. Williams began eulogizing Franklin by describing that God crowned her as the Queen of Soul a long time ago by associating her title with the beginning of life in Genesis 2:7: “and man became a living soul.” Rev. Williams continued to focus on the soul as a core spiritual entity, highlighting Franklin’s soulful nature as he explained soul music. Then he referred to C. L. Franklin’s 1955 album, *The Twenty-Third Psalm*, and Rev. Williams repeated C.L. Franklin’s assertion that: “Soul is for the heart to define. Nobody can really say what soul is. As close as we can come to defining soul is to say that soul is that part of man that is a little bit like God.” Rev. Williams went on to describe how man is losing his soul and souls being saved is the only thing that matters.

Williams continued with this trajectory, moving his rhetorical focus from “man” to Black America. Directly articulated, he argued that “Black America has lost its soul.” This assertion was offered after bringing awareness to Franklin’s activism and impact in the area of civil rights, and utilized as a means to challenge the crowd to examine the progress of Black America post-integration. While focused in the past, Rev. Williams pondered on the benefits of segregation. He described how Black America had a thriving economy during the times of Jim Crow and that segregation “forced us [Black America] to each other rather than forcing us on each other.” He critiqued

⁴⁷ “About Jasper Williams Jr.”

⁴⁸ “About Jasper Williams Jr.”

⁴⁹ Bankole Thompson, “Rev. Jasper Williams of Atlanta to deliver Aretha Franklin eulogy,” *Detroit News*, August 20, 2018, <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/detroit-city/2018/08/20/rev-jasper-williams-atlanta-deliver-aretha-franklin-eulogy/1047690002/>.

⁵⁰ Warikoo, “Sermons are diverse, political.”

⁵¹ Brain McCollum, “Aretha Franklin family responds to eulogy: ‘Distasteful, offensive,’” *Detroit Free Press*, September 4, 2018, <https://www.freep.com/story/entertainment/music/aretha-franklin/2018/09/03/aretha-franklin-family-responds-eulogy/1188364002/>

⁵² Warikoo, “Sermons are diverse, political.”

that Black America got what they marched for and was rewarded with integration, and that led to loss of Black America's economy and soul. Following this statement, Rev. Williams then asks rhetorically, "Where is your soul, Black man?" This question then prompted a series of comments regarding absent fathers and questions regarding if a Black woman can "raise a black boy to be a man." This flow of consciousness then transitioned to comments regarding the Black Lives Matter movement, the focus of our analysis.

Rev. Williams made comments regarding black-on-black crime and the Black Lives Matter movement. Specifically, he strongly asserted that:

It amazes me how it is that when the police kills one of us, we're ready to protest, march, destroy innocent property. We're ready to loot, steal, whatever we want...But when we kill 100 of us, nobody says anything. Nobody does anything...If you choose to ask me today—Do black lives matter? Let me answer like this: 'No. Black lives do not matter. Black lives will not matter...Black lives should not matter. Black lives must not matter. Until black people start respecting black lives and stop killing ourselves, black lives can never matter.

Following these comments, Rev. Williams ended his remarks regarding #BlackLivesMatter by asking what will Black America do that will turn the race around. He then transitioned into other topics related to traditional views on the home arguing that "anytime we stray away from God's design for what the home is supposed to be, havoc will be our results." Ultimately, he urged Black parents to fulfill their God-given roles.

Agency: The 'Soul' of Traditional African American Preaching

From the start of this time in the pulpit, Rev. Williams embraced elements of traditional African American preaching as the means to achieve his objective for the comments. As described earlier, this was seen in various aspects of Williams' style, delivery, and message content. According to Hamlet, the primary purpose of traditional African American preaching is "to win souls for God."⁵³ Rev. Williams' focus on "soul" mirrors exactly that which has been deemed essential to traditional African American preaching. Additionally, Hamlet captures other aspects of his rhetorical performance within her description of key elements central to the Black church:

Through the use of dramatic storytelling, identification of heroes (both biblical and from within the culture), and use of repetition, poetic diction, and rhythm, the organizational culture of the African American church develops into a symbolic world where identification with the scripture as well as cultural history is enhanced and celebrated and creates a way for people to make sense out of what is going on around them and within their lives.⁵⁴

Rev. Williams rhetoric also conjured up the experience of *nommo*, which as described by Asante, identifies the power of the word to generate and create reality within a particular rhetorical context.⁵⁵ Consistent with Hamlet's description, this Afrocentric concept is central to traditional African American preaching.

⁵³ Janice D. Hamlet, "The Reason Why We Sing: Understanding Traditional African American Worship," in *Our Voices: Essays in Culture, Ethnicity, and Communication*, ed. Alberto Gonzalez, Marsha Houston, and Victoria Chen, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 112-117.

⁵⁴ Hamlet, "The Reason Why We Sing," 112-117.

⁵⁵ Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980).

The core rhetorical message enacted by Williams was centered around the metaphor of the soul. Earlier on within his comments, he shared that the subject focus of his eulogy was: “Aretha: The Queen of Soul.” Drawing from her famous designation, the gist of his message was that “God is the soul in people” and that humankind generally, and the Black community more specifically, is losing their soul. In this context, Williams conceptualized soul as the part of people that is of God. As described by Burke,⁵⁶ his honest, spiritual assessment is that “Black America has lost its soul.” Once this has been established, Williams provided evidence to support his assertion. First, he called out African American men, who from his vantage point, “aren’t acting as God intended” something that has resulted in too many African American children being born out of wedlock. While this was his core criticism, the forcefulness of his comments asserting that “Black mothers can not raise Black boys to be men” received significant attention from critics – despite being applauded by people in the church. Second, Williams critiqued the role that integration has played in splintering the Black community. Specifically, he discussed the impact economically, socially, culturally, and spiritually.

There was a time when we as a race had a thriving economy. I remember we had our own little grocery stores. We had our own little hotels. They weren’t big and fancy, but they were ours. As bad as the days of Jim Crow and segregation were...it forced us to each other instead of forcing us on each other. We quickly began to realize that as a people, all we really have is one another.

Both of these assertions are common themes heard within traditional religious rhetoric.

This line of reasoning provided an easy transition to criticisms on ‘black-on-black crime’ which he argues has taken more lives than anti-black violence at the hands of the Klu Klux Klan. This is the context from which his controversial comments regarding the Black Lives Matter movement are offered, including the statement: “Until black people start respecting black lives and stop killing ourselves, black lives can never matter.” Taken collectively, each of the content areas here generally relate to a traditional “we have to do better” message to a largely marginalized community. In this regard, they can be understood as a call toward agency, self-efficacy, and cultural empowerment. Within his post-eulogy response to emerging criticism, Rev. Williams further explained:

I think this is a juncture where I don’t think anybody can do anything for us but us. And until we reach down on the inside of ourselves and touch our souls, and decide that this is enough, it’s time to turn around. Until that happens, it doesn’t make a difference about how much money the government will give or whatever the case is.

Agent’s Purpose and State of Mind: Speaking Truth to Power

Purpose, or the motive, of the agent, is the final element in the pentad. Additionally, the agent’s state of mind is another important consideration in determining the motive that informs the message.⁵⁷ In this regard, state of mind is the attitude of the agent, something that serves as a form of preparation for the act. One’s purpose and/or state of mind are not always readily accessible to anyone other than the agent. Yet, in this case, Rev. Williams provided some interesting insight to these issues during an interview the following week. “I saw what is happening in Black America

⁵⁶ Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*.

⁵⁷ Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*.

today that is really leading us to lose our soul, so to speak," Williams stated. In this midst of criticism over some of this rhetoric, Pastor Williams stood firm in the content of the eulogy and reiterated several key points as a sign of the confidence in his message. In no uncertain terms, he used the interview as means to explain how he was speaking truth to power: "I meant no harm and yet I meant the truth."

Within his eulogy, Rev. Williams acknowledged that "the eyes of the world are on us;" in this context "us" explicitly refers to African Americans. His focus, consequently, is on the Black community, what is wrong, and what can be done to "come back home" to God. As such he understands the occasion as one where the passing of Aretha Franklin – the Queen of Soul – can be used to "bring about real change." "The Queen [of Soul] did what she could, it's time now for us to do what we can," Rev. Williams implored those in attendance. It is this explicit rhetorical motive that informs the agency used to throughout his eulogy.

While it appeared that many at Greater Grace Temple understood the intended purpose of Rev. Williams' eulogy, others – especially those tuning in to the telecast of the funeral – appeared to understand the purpose of a eulogy differently. Some, it appears, understood a eulogy to be a celebratory tribute to the deceased, a means to honor their life and articulate the legacy that they have left behind. A eulogy, in this vein, should be comforting to the bereaved. This line of thinking is evident in descriptions that some viewers were "baffled by [Rev. Williams] dire language killing the celebratory mood of the home going of one of the world's greatest voices."⁵⁸ This seemingly difference in what the purpose of the act (eulogy) should be (comfort for the bereaved? celebration of life? call to action?) contributed to the backlash regarding Rev. Williams' comments regarding the Black Lives Matter movement which many determined was ill-timed, inappropriate, and/or offensive.

Within his post-eulogy interview comments, Rev. Williams repeated his opinion that Black lives "cannot matter, will not matter, should not matter, must not matter until black people begin to respect their own lives." He further explained that the reaction to his comments were rooted in a misunderstanding: After seven hours of waiting for his turn to speak, he had limited time to deliver his message which did not allow him to explain the nuances of his message. Specifically, he shared:

I tried to do the best that I could under the circumstances and situations. We all mess up sometimes...Sometimes you don't preach as good as you know you can and after sitting there seven hours all the preach I had in me was gone, and I just took the opportunity of doing the best that I could under the circumstances and situations I was in.

Rev. Williams' desire is for people to understand his heart and intention "instead of making mockery or creating difficulty or spins opposite of what I am intending." Within the interview, he shared how "that's what hurt more than anything else." Again, Rev. Williams explains how his eulogy was offered as a means to honor Aretha Franklin, something that was a challenge given the setting:

I feel that in honoring her, I picked out various issues that are going on within our community and made that part of the forefront...I just took the opportunity of doing the best that I could under the circumstances and situations I was in.

⁵⁸ Ricky Riley, "Twitter Comes For Rev. Jasper Williams' Chain After Delivering A Baffling Eulogy At Aretha Franklin's Funeral," *Blavity*, accessed March 1, 2019, <https://blavity.com/twitter-comes-for-rev-jasper-williams-chain-after-delivering-a-baffling-eulogy-at-aretha-franklins-funeral>.

In this regard, the rhetoric offered within the post-eulogy interview provided insight into the dominant ratio that Williams emphasizes: purpose-scene. He perceives the purpose of his comments to persuade Black America to reflect on the life and legacy of Aretha Franklin and “get their soul back.” Taking himself – as a mere messenger of God’s word – out of the equation, he focused on the challenges of the larger-than-life public event that had developed which limited his ability to deliver. Consistent with traditional African American preaching, he concluded his interview with an articulation of faith that the value of his message will ultimately be heard:

I believe that when someone with prophetic witness comes forward – it might be weeks, or months or years later – people will say, ‘This is what he was trying to say in terms of possibly giving hope and waking people up to say, let’s get that soul back.’

In short, according to Williams, Aretha Franklin trusted him to deliver the eulogy. Given this, he believed that she, as a civil rights movement participant, would be pleased with his attempt to do “something to turn black America around.”

Conclusion: Identification with an Ultimate Meaning of Life

At the core of Burkeian analysis is the genuine desire to understand the motive of communication, and the ways in which motive is tied to identification and/or division with an audience. As such, Burke’s analytic framework appears especially relevant to explore the rhetoric performed at a celebration of life – especially that which invokes comments regarding the question if black lives matter in the 21st century U.S. socio-political landscape. The previous sections utilized the dramatic pentad to promote a holistic understanding of Rev. Williams’ comments regarding the Black Lives Matter movement within his eulogy of Aretha Franklin. Alternatively, we can also further engage the drama described within his eulogy. In this rhetorical context, he critiqued how racial integration has contributed to the current state of the “soul-less” African American life (i.e., scene) and thwarted their search for the ultimate meaning of life (i.e., purpose). Accordingly, he called upon the agents (i.e., African Americans) to turn back to God (e.g., agency) as a necessary individual and communal act of cultural pride. This second-level analysis further informs the meanings generated through his critical focus on the Black Lives Matter movement.

Within our analysis, we argue that the senior pastor emeritus prioritized a purpose-scene dominant ratio in explaining that his motive – to utilize the Queen of Soul’s passing as a means for Black American ‘to get their soul back’ – was challenged by the uniqueness of the scene (e.g., the length of the service, the limitations of time, diverse international audience). Given the local audience within the predominately African American Greater Grace Temple in Detroit (MI), Rev. Williams’ traditional Black preaching style appeared the appropriate agency from which to achieve his purpose through successful identification. Much of the controversy regarding his Black Lives Matter comments, however, were generated from the larger audience viewing the televised act around the world, many of which experienced division with Williams’ rhetoric. The far-reaching power of the media was not lost on Rev. Williams, who shared: “I started preaching when there was no media. Here we are today with social media. I started preaching when no one was looking... and I’m privileged to preach at a time when everyone looks.”⁵⁹ The ‘privilege’ that he alludes to here also comes with a responsibility to understand the diverse audiences will have varying degrees of identification with the agent of the message.

⁵⁹ Warikoo, “Sermons are diverse, political.”

Identification, according to Burke, refers to the common ground that exists between speaker and audience;⁶⁰ it can exist through material things, ideals, or more formal organizational ties.⁶¹ This is a crucial element for rhetorical success in that Burke argues that effective persuasion cannot emerge without identification. The substance inherent to Rev. Williams' delivery of the eulogy at Franklin's funeral appeared to be sufficient for the audience gathered at the local scene; his occupation, personal characteristics, field of experience, and beliefs and attitudes were aligned with many of the individuals present. His traditional African American preaching style⁶² and attention to familiar social, cultural, and financial issues facing Black America assisted in establishing identification. What was less apparent in this immediate time and space, however, was how identification may have been lacking between Rev. Williams and the larger televisual audience, which demographically was significantly different than the local audience. We conclude our paper by providing some insight into this point of analysis.

Rev. Williams' eulogy of Aretha Franklin reached millions of people – from all walks of life – who tuned in to watch the home going service for the Queen of Soul. Millions more watched his comments regarding the Black Lives Matter movement via post-funeral news coverage and social media posts. Some people physically present at Greater Grace Temple reacted affirmatively to Rev. Williams' rhetoric. They appeared to understand and support the messages shared given his ultimate motive. Others, however, did not. These included some who questioned the appropriateness of his comments given the act and scene. Reportedly, Stevie Wonder called out 'Black Lives Matter!' following his comments as a sign of protest.⁶³ Yet, the vast majority of the controversy regarding Rev. Williams' statements were generated by younger viewers who appeared to have great difficulty in identifying with the substance of the eulogy. This included many younger African Americans whose connection with the traditional Black church is (at best) strained and/or (outright) critical. As noted by Riley, Rev. Williams' rhetoric was reflective of a southern Black Baptist tradition steeped in misogyny and respectability politics.⁶⁴ More specifically, his eulogy was akin to a "plantation style speech" which reinforced sexist thinking, white supremacy, homophobia, victim blaming and slut shaming – issues that reveal a major disconnect between older, more conservative church members and younger, more progressive African Americans.⁶⁵ This generational disconnect is further informed by the contentious relationship between established religious organizations and the Black Lives Matter movement.⁶⁶

Unlike traditional civil rights movements, Black Lives Matter movement did not originate as an explicitly spiritual or faith-based form of activism. This distinction represented a new tradition of racial justice that is not centered around the Black church. Some members of the movement resist and/or fiercely critique organized religion, particularly the Black church.⁶⁷ As established earlier in our paper, the founding principles of the movement were intentionally inclusive to address the ways in which certain African Americans' lives had been marginalized in traditional Black liberation movements. This includes a diversity of individuals who were lesbian/gay/bisexual, disabled, undocumented, and gender non-binary. As such, the Black Lives Matter movement challenged the patriarchal culture and heteronormative gender roles of the traditional Black church,

⁶⁰ Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*.

⁶¹ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

⁶² Hamlet, "The Reason Why We Sing," 112-117.

⁶³ Dennis, "Jasper Williams' Eulogy For Aretha Franklin Was A Disgrace."

⁶⁴ Riley, "Twitter Comes For Rev. Jasper Williams."

⁶⁵ Riley, "Twitter Comes For Rev. Jasper Williams."

⁶⁶ Edgar and Johnson, *The Struggle over Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter*.

⁶⁷ Edgar and Johnson, *The Struggle over Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter*.

issues that some believed were explicitly and implicitly reinforced within Rev. Williams' comments.⁶⁸

We conclude our analysis by connecting the controversy of Rev. Williams' comments regarding the Black Lives Matter movement at Franklin's funeral with a larger tension that exists between traditional religious perspectives and those of more contemporary social justice activists.⁶⁹ While surface-level questions about the appropriateness of his comments given the occasion stimulated our desire to engage in further analysis, engaging the text through Burke's dramatic pentad provided multiple opportunities to understand the ultimate motive(s) behind Williams' rhetoric. Some critics continue to take issue with the agency through which he sought to achieve his purpose, however, many simultaneously respect his intention to use the occasion to improve the lives of African Americans. Acknowledging the nuanced complexity of this rhetorical text is important to understand the inherent tensions of larger social movements. The fact of the matter is that many African American churches were largely silent in the early days of the Black Lives Matter movement; their lack of formal participation was noted by many of the millennial generation. Yet, some Black churches were heavily involved from the start.⁷⁰ And while the movement arose as a secular movement, this doesn't mean that participants were necessarily "non-religious" or "anti-religious."⁷¹ In this sense, rhetorical identification, or lack thereof, based on false binaries does little to advance the mission of racial social justice movements as a whole. Consequently, we encourage readers to take the insight generated through our analysis of controversy highlighted throughout the paper as a means toward greater understanding of the tension between traditional and more contemporary activist leadership within the African American community. Ultimately, the common goal is that all people generally, and African Americans more specifically, "might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (John 10:10 KJV).

⁶⁸ House, "Crying for Justice," 13-27.

⁶⁹ Edgar and Johnson, *The Struggle over Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter*.

⁷⁰ Edgar and Johnson, *The Struggle over Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter*.

⁷¹ Edgar and Johnson, *The Struggle over Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter*.