

We Won't be Silent Anymore: William Barber's Empowerment and Liberation of the Poor Through Public Lament by the Poor

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In 2022, Rev. Dr. William Barber led more than 100,000 people in the Mass Poor People's and Low Wage Workers' Assembly and Moral March on Washington and to the Polls. The event was a rebirth of the Poor People's Campaign initiated by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. before his death in 1968. Like the 1968 campaign, Barber attempted to solidify a diverse coalition to call attention to and demand action to reduce the plight of poor Americans, and like King, Barber framed the undertaking as an act of prophetic public lament. In this study, I uncover highlights of Barber's conception of prophetic public lament, including elements previously unseen in prophetic rhetoric scholarship. First, Barber insisted that poor and oppressed people should have the opportunity to publicly lament for themselves. Second, Barber claimed that public lament by poor and oppressed persons was not only cathartic but had significant functional potential. Finally, Barber emphasized the transcendent nature of public lament. This essay's analysis of Barber's use and description of prophetic public lament provides insights for both rhetorical scholars and social movement rhetors.

Keywords: Lamentation, Mass Poor People's and Low Wage Workers' Assembly and Moral March on Washington, Poor People's Campaign, Prophetic Lament, Social Movement Rhetoric, William Barber

On June 18, 2022, more than 100,000 people gathered in Washington, DC, for the Mass Poor People's and Low Wage Workers' Assembly and the Moral March on Washington and to the Polls.¹ In addition to those physically present at the event, millions watched the event's livestream and followed on social media.² The event was a rebirth of the 1968 Poor People's Campaign initiated by Martin Luther King Jr. before his death.³ Rev. Elizabeth Theo Harris and Rev. William Barber led the renewed Poor People's Campaign, and while both were key to planning the 2022 event and both spoke at the gathering, it was Barber who served as something of a master of ceremonies for the assembly. Barber, a Black preacher widely praised as a powerful orator and perhaps

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¹ For the sake of space and clarity, I will refer to this event as "2022 Mass Poor People's" for the remaining essay.

² William J. Barber II, "Poor People's and Low Wage Workers' Assembly and Moral March on Washington and to the Polls," YouTube, filmed June 18, 2022, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yw-7TOs1nl8&list=PPSV>. Jack Jenkins, "Poor People's Campaign Holds Major DC Rally to Combat Poverty," Religion News Service, June 21, 2022. <https://religionnews.com/2022/06/18/poor-people-s-campaign-holds-major-dc-rally-to-combat-poverty/>. Kyle Swenson et al., "Poor People's Campaign Marches, Rallies in District," Washington Post, June 28, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2022/06/18/poor-people-s-campaign-dc-march/>.

³ "About," Poor People's Campaign, n.d. <https://www.poorpeople'scampaign.org/about/>. Shaunee Miranda, "Poor People's Campaign Rallies in Washington to Mobilize Low-Income Voters," NPR, June 18, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/06/18/1106059594/poor-people-s-campaign-rallies-in-washington-to-mobilize-low-income-voters>.

the most dynamic and well-known communicator of theologically-infused progressive social activism of our time,⁴ chose to use this large event to highlight other people's voices. More specifically, and of particular interest to this study, Barber organized and facilitated a massive public event in the nation's capital that lifted the voices of poor people. While one might be expected to share an event stage with leaders of partnering organizations and ideological allies to build a diverse nationwide social movement, Barber's program was unique in that he shared the stage and the microphone with poor and oppressed persons from around the nation.

In the face of economic barriers and social divisions, Rev. William Barber constituted and empowered a diverse social movement of poor and low wage workers by providing a platform for the poor to publicly lament their suffering. In this study, I show ways that Barber's use of public lament in theologically-infused political action rhetoric stretches our understanding of the genre of prophetic lament and provides strategic insights for constituting and empowering social movements. I begin this study with an overview and description of event structures and formats that provided space for poverty-impacted individuals to speak about their situations. I have included some examples of these powerful public laments. Next, I provide background on prophetic lamentation by reviewing some current scholarship. Then, I look at Barber's framing and use of public lament in the 2022 Mass Poor People's, highlighting key insights he provided into and ways he expanded the genre. Finally, I suggest lessons this event may provide for future social movement rhetoric.

This essay will be of interest to scholars and practitioners of social movement rhetoric, organizing rhetoric, and general rhetorical theory, as well as religious rhetoric practitioners and scholars. While the primary rhetor, Barber, was a pastor, and some of the rhetoric could be categorized as religious in content, genre, and form, the event analyzed in this essay was not a religious event. This essay examines key aspects of the rhetoric at a large event that was intended to help build a broad coalition of persons of various religions as well as people with no affiliation with religion in a national anti-poverty social movement. Furthermore, it should be noted that, rather than being siloed into designated religious spaces, religious rhetoric has been highly influential in numerous social movements in America. Some rhetoric scholars have even claimed religious rhetoric must be considered in order to gain an accurate understanding of the American Civil Rights Movement.⁵ Finally, the lines of separation in the naming and framing of religious and secular, or natural and supernatural, are, just like any rhetorical lines of separation, porous and flexible. In fact, Burke claimed that there was a transcendent element to all rhetoric, and he even turned to religion and theology for insights into how all rhetoric, not just religious rhetoric, functioned⁶. Likewise, this essay seeks to inform scholars and practitioners, regardless of their personal views on religion, of some rhetorical functions of an expansion to an ancient genre of religious rhetoric as utilized in a contemporary social movement.

⁴ Peter Laarman, "A Third Reconstruction? Rev. William Barber Lifts the Trumpet," Religion Dispatches, January 19, 2022. <https://religiondispatches.org/a-third-reconstruction-rev-william-barber-lifts-the-trumpet/>. Cleve R. Wootson, "Rev. William Barber Builds a Moral Movement," Washington Post, October 27, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/06/29/woe-onto-those-who-legislate-evil-rev-william-barber-builds-a-moral-movement/>.

⁵ Davis Houck and David Dixon, eds., *Rhetoric, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965*, vol. 1 (Baylor University Press, 2006)., Gary S. Selby, *Martin Luther King and the rhetoric of freedom* (Baylor University Press, 2008)., Keith D. Miller, *Martin Luther King's Biblical Epic*, (University Press of Mississippi, 2011).

⁶ Kenneth Burke, *Rhetoric of Religion* (University of California Press, 1970).

Public Lament at the Assembly

In this analysis, I treat the entire June 18, 2022 assembly as a rhetorical text. There are, of course, numerous elements that compose such a massive text, and every analysis must make choices of what elements of a text to explore. I have chosen to highlight the event program, the laments of poor people (This is done through representative anecdotes.), and numerous quotes from event organizer and master of ceremonies William J. Barber II about the event and the larger movement he invited the audience to join. First, I describe the event program to both provide an overview of the assembly and reveal the extent to which time was designated for public lament by poor people. Next, I provide representative examples of words of lament spoken by poor people at the event. Later in the paper, I examine William Barber's words that provided rhetorical definition framing of the public lamentation by poor at the 2022 Mass Poor People's.

Rhetoric and Function of the Event Program

The design and structure of the six-hour 2022 Mass Poor People's provided spaces for dozens of poor people and low wage workers from various backgrounds and circumstances and from around the nation to publicly lament their pain and suffering in front of a crowd of more than 100,000 in the nation's capital and millions of people following online. The primary speaking slots for them to give their public lamentations were in seven clusters of three to five "impacted persons" who lamented their own struggles, followed by a response speech from a national leader in poverty relief work. In each of these speeches of public lament, which included individuals from thirty states, the speaker gave their name, their state, and a small piece of their story in anywhere from one to three minutes. Additionally, more poor people shared their laments on video. There were six different videos, some featured individual stories and others included laments by multiple individuals. A third space for public lamentation by persons impacted by poverty was provided by the requirement that each leader of a partner organization who spoke at the event had to include a presentation by a poor person involved with their organization. Dozens of poor people voiced their public laments because of this requirement. Finally, the program included a few additional spaces for laments by poor people who were involved with nationally reported tragedies, for example, the mass shooting at a grocery store in Buffalo, New York, and the water crisis in Flint, Michigan⁷.

Examples of Poor People's Public Lament

Having described key aspects of the program design that provided time and space for low wage workers and poor people to publicly lament their suffering in front of millions of people at the 2022 Mass Poor People's, I will now share examples of public lament that were representative of the lamentations shared from the stage at the rally. Below are quotes from the speeches of four speakers who presented in different clusters of poverty-impacted speakers between hours three and five of the event. The speakers were from different states, as were all of the speakers in these clusters. They also reflected the diversity of age, race, and ethnicity among the poor people and low wage workers displayed on the event stage and videos.

⁷ Barber, "Poor People's and Low Wage Workers' Assembly and Moral March on Washington and to the Polls," Filmed June 18, 2022, YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yw-7TOs1nl8&list=PPSV>.

Guadalupe de La Cruz of Florida:

I'm a daughter of immigrants who were farm workers for many, many years. My family often lived paycheck to paycheck. They worked under some of the harshest conditions in south Florida, exploited and abused. Today, I find myself in some of those same positions as my parents. I'm a single mother and can't afford an emergency. And we have been living in the state of emergency for years.⁸

Jesse Crow of Indiana:

They are taking food from our children's mouths, and they say that they will take our children from us if we are not able to feed our kids. So, they make it harder for us to feed our kids. And that ain't right.⁹

Kaari Dean of Oklahoma:

I grew up in Inco, Oklahoma, where there are jobs that lack the guarantee of living wages. This caused my family to experience food insecurity, job instability, and poverty in one of the most successful countries in the world. We are barely getting by. Although I moved away, I am still in poverty. I can't leave poverty. I am seventeen, a child, yet the country has already failed me. This is wrong.¹⁰

Bedale Jefferson of Michigan:

We should not have to fight so hard. Simply for our children to have safe water and clean air. Clean air to breathe. But all over this country we're fighting just the same. And you can't stop now. I will not stop. I'll not step back. I'm here with you. And I won't be silent anymore!¹¹

While each speech of lament at 2022 Mass Poor Peoples was unique in style and details, and they were given by people from a diversity of backgrounds, lifestyles, and residencies, the speeches contained some common themes of content and emotion. The speakers expressed that life was difficult, more difficult than it should be and that their hardships existed despite their efforts to move beyond them. Most speakers identified that, while their specific situation was unique, they knew the audience shared their general struggles as poverty-impacted people. The speakers also claimed that there were people to blame for making their lives so difficult, certain people with wealth and power. Finally, while speakers shared their sorrow and exhaustion, they also expressed a determination to work for the elimination of their suffering and the sufferings of all people impacted by poverty in America. The content and tone of these speeches, as well as the larger context of the themes and stated goals of the 2022 Mass Poor People's, portray and expand characteristics of the genre of public lament and, as I will argue later in the essay, what some call prophetic lament.

⁸ Barber, "Poor," 3:07.

⁹ Barber, "Poor," 3:25.

¹⁰ Barber, "Poor," 3:42.

¹¹ Barber, "Poor," 4:43.

Recent Scholarship on Public Lament

Much of the scholarship on public lament has focused on the ancient world, more specifically on public lament in ancient Hebrew prophetic and poetic writings. While those writings took place in a very different context than the text of this study, the scholarship offers several pertinent insights about public lament. Brueggemann argued that public lament was a social gesture of resistance. The act of raising voices in lament was both a refusal to submit to established powers and truths and an assertion of an alternative reality.¹² In this, Brueggemann claimed lament was both an articulation of grief and an act of hope.¹³ Cottrill, in her study of lament in the ancient Hebrew Psalms, claimed that lament was both an articulation of powerlessness and empowerment.¹⁴ While not diminishing the damage caused by pain, she claimed that verbalization of lament provided the power of both individual agency and social influence.¹⁵ Cottrill argued that this empowerment through lament was for personal and social restoration.¹⁶ Giffone's study of the rhetoric of the Book of Lamentations claimed that lament in the ancient world was primarily concerned with the preservation of a group and functioned as a method to strengthen the bonds of a community, especially in times of crisis.¹⁷ These scholars agree, and this is the current scholarly consensus, that public lament in ancient Hebrew writing was both theological and social/political.¹⁸ This blending of the theological and social/political at least suggests that public laments can simultaneously be prophetic laments.

Some scholars of lament in ancient writings have argued and demonstrated that ancient lessons of lament should be applied in the modern world.¹⁹ Lament has certainly been a significant part of the Black Church tradition in America.²⁰ Baily has argued that shared human experiences of pain and oppression allow scholars to understand oral lament across culture and history as she compared

¹² Walter Brueggemann, "Lament as Wake Up Call," in *Lamentations in Ancient and Contemporary Cultural Contexts*, eds. Nancy C. Lee and Carleen Mandolfo (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 223.

¹³ Brueggemann, "Lament as Wake Up Call," 225.

¹⁴ Amy C. Cottrill, "The Articulate Body: The Language of Suffering in the Laments of the Individual," in *Lamentations in Ancient and Contemporary Cultural Contexts*, eds. Nancy C. Lee and Carleen Mandolfo (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 103.

¹⁵ Cottrill, "The Articulate Body," 109.

¹⁶ Cottrill, "The Articulate Body," 104.

¹⁷ Benjamin D. Giffone, "The timeless, unifying rhetoric of Lamentations," *Old Testament Essays* 25, no. 3 (2012): 534-558.

¹⁸ Brueggemann, "Lament as Wake Up Call," 225. Robert Williamson Jr., "Lament and the Arts of Resistance: Public and Hidden Transcripts in Lamentations 5," in *Lamentations in Ancient and Contemporary Cultural Contexts*, eds. Nancy C. Lee and Carleen Mandolfo (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 67. Fiona C. Black, "Public Suffering? Affect and the Lament Psalms as Forms of Private-Political Depression," in *Reading with Feeling: Affect Theory and the Bible*, ed. Fiona C. Black and Jennifer L. Koosed (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019), 71.

¹⁹ Brueggemann, "Lament as Wake Up Call," 225. Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002). Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2015). William Blaine-Wallace, *When Tears Sing: The Art of Lament in Christian Community* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2020). Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller, *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005). Nancy C. Lee and Carleen Mandolfo, eds., *Lamentations in Ancient and Contemporary Cultural Contexts* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008).

²⁰ Timothy Fritz and Trisha Posey, eds., *Lament and Justice in African American History: By the Rivers of Babylon* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2023). Anne Streaty Wimberly, Nathaniel D. West, and Annie Lockhart-Gilroy, eds., *From Lament to Advocacy: Black Religious Education and Public Ministry* (Nashville, Tennessee: Wesley's Foundry Books, 2020).

ancient Hebrew lament with the lament of African American slaves.²¹ Blending ancient and contemporary worlds, Marzouk's article on intercultural religious worship services, decolonialism, and the book of Psalms identified lament as an avenue to the empowerment of the oppressed and a pathway to relational healing with other oppressed persons, their oppressors, and the Divine.²² These studies argue that the prophetic function of the public lament exists beyond the ancient world.

In recent years, there has been scholarship on the ability of public lamentation to strengthen or create bonds between people who may not share a common religious tradition. Hanley's article on the genre of tragic plays advances the argument that choreographed expressions of grief and rage can empower and unify marginalized communities.²³ That same year, Elkins and Allen published an analysis of a 2010 public memorial service for twenty-nine coal mine workers killed in a West Virginia mine explosion. Their study revealed the ability of a ceremony of public lament, more specifically, a secular ceremony with some familiar religious overtones and an emphasis on personal narratives, to establish bonds in a large and diverse, even divided, group.²⁴ While these articles were not case studies of social movements or mass protest assemblies, they do provide insights into ways public lament can empower and unify diverse groups of oppressed people, such as those gathered at the 2022 Mass Poor People's.

Johnson has done significant research into lament as prophetic rhetoric in the Black Church tradition. Not to be confused with the private lament as an expression of grief by an individual, Johnson observed that a prophetic declaration of lament made it public.²⁵ A public lament was rhetorical in that it both opened the possibility for an external audience to understand the grief of suffering people and provided suffering people a sense that they were not alone²⁶. Johnson stated that in public lament, a prophet had a primary function to "speak out on behalf of others and to chronicle their pain and suffering."²⁷ In such cases, Johnson described the prophet as one who took the private lamentations of the oppressed and made them public through prophetic lament in a public platform. In making the lament public, according to Johnson, the prophet provided a record of the "pains and sufferings of the people the prophet claims to represent and gives voice to the voiceless."²⁸ Furthermore, Johnson has clarified that lament was not a rhetorical strategy to change the conditions causing hardship and suffering.²⁹ On the contrary, he argued that prophetic lament was a public expression that provided some comfort for those who suffer in knowing that their plight was not private, but has been seen.³⁰

²¹ Wilma A. Bailey, "Lament Traditions of Enslaved African American Women and the Lament Traditions of the Hebrew Bible," in *Lamentations in Ancient and Contemporary Cultural Contexts*, eds. Nancy C. Lee and Carleen Mandolfo (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 162.

²² Safwat Marzouk, "Intercultural Worship and Decolonialization: Insights from the Book of Psalms," *Religions* 14, no. 2 (January 28, 2023): 152. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020152>.

²³ Danielle Hanley, "Choreographing Affective Solidarity: The Choral Politics of Responding to Loss," *Theory & Event* 25, no. 4 (2022): 889-892.

²⁴ Heather Murray Elkins and Jeffery S. Allen, "Public Lament and Intra-Faith Worship in an Appalachian Context," *Religions* 13, no. 7 (July 4, 2022): 620. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13070620>.

²⁵ Andre Johnson, "The Prophetic Persona of James Cone and the Rhetorical Theology of Black Theology," *Black Theology* 8, no. 3 (June 9, 2010), 273. <https://doi.org/10.1558/blth.v8i3.266>.

²⁶ Andre E. Johnson, *The Forgotten Prophet: Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and the African American Prophetic Tradition* (Lexington Books, 2012), 14.

²⁷ Johnson, *The Forgotten Prophet*, 14.

²⁸ Johnson, "The Prophetic Persona," 281.

²⁹ Johnson, "The Prophetic Persona," 273

³⁰ Johnson, *The Forgotten Prophet*, 15.

In an article that overlaps both our quest to understand the genre of prophetic lament and how it might be expressed in an American social movement, Johnson & Stone have written about the prophetic rhetoric of Martin Luther King Jr.³¹ Of particular interest to this essay is their analysis of King's establishment of the original Poor People's Campaign. Johnson & Stone argued that King took on the prophetic role by publicly lamenting the plight of the poor. They stated that King "gave a voice to those not able to speak and be heard."³² This observation was consistent with Johnson's extensive findings on prophetic rhetoric and, more specifically, prophetic lament in that the primary rhetor and agent in the rhetorical act was the prophetic figure who made public the private lamentations of those who suffered.

Barber's Poor People's Prophetic Lament

William Barber's rhetoric about and through the design of the 2022 Mass Poor People's, provides some divergence from and expansion of Johnson's conceptions of prophetic lament. In this section, I highlight several characteristics of Barber's prophetic lament. First, Barber expanded lament to include space for poor and oppressed people to publicly lament for themselves. Barber certainly spoke in lament on behalf of the poor, but he also created space and a platform for the poor to publicly lament their own stories and suffering. Second, Barber claimed that there were several rhetorical functions for public lament. Barber framed public lament as an avenue for constituting a diverse and powerful movement of poor people who spoke for themselves and liberated themselves. Barber also claimed there would be a persuasive function of the public lament of the poor people to motivate outsiders to join the work to reduce poverty. Finally, Barber defined the public lament of the poor as a type of mystical ritual that would invoke the presence and action of the Divine.

The Poor Speak for Themselves

Perhaps the most striking rhetorical choice in William Barber's design of the 2022 Mass Poor People's, as well as a major point of divergence from Johnson's findings on prophetic lament, was the inclusion of public lamentations by individuals impacted by poverty. This was a significantly different choice than only giving the public platform to professional speakers, experts in poverty relief policy, and leaders of poverty relief organizations who are not identified as poor themselves. It was also different from relying on a prophet figure from outside of the suffering group to give a public voice to the grief of the suffering group. The choice of speakers and the amount of time they receive communicates who an organization's leadership values. The large volume of time designated for poverty-impacted people to speak at the large inaugural national gathering communicated that the Poor People's Campaign valued poor people. The speaking lineup and the framing around it suggested that this was a movement by and for poor people.

While the event displayed many outstanding communicators among poor people and low wage workers, at times, it was clear that the person at the microphone was not trained as a public speaker. However, even in instances where a speech would not have passed an assignment in an Introduction to Public Speaking class, the content of the personal stories and raw emotion of the public

³¹ Andre Johnson and Anthony Stone, "'The Most Dangerous Negro in America': Rhetoric, Race and the Prophetic Pessimism of Martin Luther King Jr.," *The Journal of Communication and Religion* 41, no 1 (Spring 2018), 8-22.

³² Johnson and Stone, "'The Most Dangerous Negro in America,'" 14.

lamentations carried tremendous rhetorical power. The speakers embodied and personified the abstract category of poverty and the data often shared by leaders working in poverty relief organizations. Furthermore, the speakers could speak about poverty with the authenticity and authority of firsthand experience. In his attempt to build a social movement of poor people and low wage workers, Barber highlighted speakers with whom this group could identify. This rhetorical choice made it more likely that, in seeing public lament by people they identified with, more poor people would join the movement that highlighted them.

During the event, Barber clarified that it was an intentional choice to give impacted people the platform to speak and lament for themselves:

Now you notice something today. Have you noticed that nobody came today to speak for people? We promised at the beginning of this movement that we would build a stage for impacted people to speak. Not everybody can see some of your signs, but you have to hear and love what you see happening today. We're modeling what you ought to do in your states and in your cities.³³

Barber added, "Too often people who have been an organizational head, it's good to hear the head but we need to hear the people. And that's why today nobody came to speak for people. The people speaking for themselves. That's what will change this."³⁴ Barber seemed to recognize that the choice of providing a platform for the poor to speak was unique enough that he needed to clarify the intent to the audience. He also encouraged the audience to replicate this action—providing public space for the poor to lament—on a local level. Finally, he made the bold claim that the public lament of the poor would change the conditions that oppressed poverty-impacted people. While this claim was not immediately explained or supported, Barber made numerous claims about the functions of public lamentation for the poor.

Before exploring Barber's claims of the functions of public lament by the poor, I will discuss perhaps the most dramatic example of Barber providing a microphone for a poverty-impacted person to speak for themselves. While several Spanish-speaking poor people spoke at the event, in one instance, Barber told a person to speak without a translator. Barber explained:

While this was an extreme case, it highlighted Barber's rationale for having poverty-impacted people publicly lament for themselves. Barber explained that he viewed communication as a deeply emotive experience, and something embodied by the speaker. This is also an example of Burke's argument for the primacy of identification in rhetoric, "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your way with his."³⁵

Burkean identification suggests the key rhetorical significance of Barber's choice to have poor people publicly voice their lament at the 2022 Mass Poor People's, as well as his repeated definition that the poor speaking on the platform were representative of a larger population who the movement consisted of and advocated for, was that it helped unite diverse groups of people in points of common understanding by providing them rhetors with whom they could identify³⁶.

³³ Barber, "Poor," 6:13.

³⁴ Barber, "Poor," 6:14.

³⁵ Kenneth Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives* (University of California Press, 1969), 55.

³⁶ Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 20 – 22, 55 – 56.

Functions of the Public Lament of the Poor

While serving as the master of ceremonies of the 2022 Mass Poor People's, Barber defined functions of public lament by the poor. In his framing of what was happening at the event, Barber argued that public lament offered more than just catharsis for the poor. Over the course of the event, Barber claimed that public lament by the poor could constitute a unified movement of poverty-impacted persons, provide a sense of empowerment and liberation for poverty-impacted persons, and persuade upper- and middle-class Americans to take action to relieve poverty. My discussion of these claims is focused on the rhetorical functions of Barber's definitions and framing of public lament by the poor. In this rhetorical analysis, I do not evaluate the accuracy of Barber's claims in the results at or following the 2022 Mass Poor People's.

Lament is constitutive.

Like King's 1968 Poor People's Campaign, Barber's 2022 Poor People's Campaign faced the challenge of building a shared identity among diverse individuals and groups from around the nation and across multiple social divisions. Barber claimed that public lament had the ability to build bonds of connection and identification among diverse groups of people. In sharing laments, individuals from different backgrounds, situations, and locations could identify common struggles and common sorrows. Impacted people realized that they were not alone. They heard stories and weeping that Barber rhetorically connected to their own stories and weeping. Additionally, the visual of diverse groups of people standing together on the podium as they shared their individual stories further reinforced the wide scope of this community of poor people and low wage workers. Public lament by poor people rhetorically constituted a shared identity, ideology, and narrative of poor people among those participating in and watching the 2022 Mass Poor People's through techniques identified by rhetorical scholars. Burke wrote that rhetoric could create identification where there was division³⁷ and that identification was needed if there was to be persuasion.³⁸ Notable for this essay, Burke specifically claimed, "We are clearly in the region of rhetoric when considering the identifications whereby a specialized activity makes one a participant in some social or economic class. 'Belonging' in this sense is rhetorical."³⁹ Black presented the idea that, in the text, rhetors create a persona of an audience who would support their argument by stating favorable ideological positions in the text they create⁴⁰. Building on the work of Burke and Black, and perhaps even more relevant for this study, Charland claimed that identity was formed as soon as an auditor engaged in a discourse in which the rhetor defined their identity.⁴¹ Furthermore, Charland claimed that when an audience identified with the rhetor's narrative about the people of that identity, then the audience shared in the experiences and struggles created in the narrative, even to the extent that they were ideologically constrained to take the next steps in the rhetor's narrative.⁴² The struggles depicted in the public lament of the poor at the 2022 Mass Poor People, along with

³⁷ Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 22-25.

³⁸ Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 55.

³⁹ Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 28.

⁴⁰ Edwin Black, "The second persona," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56, no. 2 (April 1, 1970): 109–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335637009382992>.

⁴¹ Maurice Charland, "Constitutive rhetoric: The case of the people québécois," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73, no. 2 (May 1, 1987): 133–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638709383799>.

⁴² Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric," 140-141

the framing that they represented the millions of poor and Low Wage workers in America, rhetorically became the shared struggles of the auditors who identified with the speakers and could potentially become shared lament and united action for the renewed Poor People's Campaign.

Barber was explicit in defining the shared identity between the groups of lamenting poor people on the stage and the diverse auditors in the crowd and online. He declared unity in the diversity of people on the stage, "We are going to hear from the greatest small leaders and survivors of this country, impacted people we have coming to the stage. They're all coming together. As we stand together, if you will notice at this podium, nobody ever stands by themselves."⁴³ Barber went on to claim that the unity in diversity on the stage was a unity in diversity that included the audience. While reminding the audience of the importance of listening to the various speakers during this six-hour event, Barber defined a shared humanity and shared lament for the speakers and audience, "You know this nation doesn't wanna listen to us, but can't we listen to us? Turn your neighbor and say, I'm not tired. I'm not tired because I hear myself on the stage."⁴⁴ Barber's definition of a united identity among diverse types of poor people and low wage workers and the definition of a shared story found in each of the public laments by poor people rhetorically constitute a united identity, ideology, and narrative of poverty-impacted people in America who suffered together, lamented together, and will work for change together.

Barber further constituted this community of poor and low wage workers by defining them as different from the nation's wealthy and powerful. The definition of what poor people were not would rhetorically strengthen their shared identity.⁴⁵ Barber explained the divisions among the poor through a claim about the actions and intentions of the nation's powerful, who he further distanced from the poor with the designation "they":

You notice in this country, they try to make out like poverty, just a Black issue or brown issue. And then they try to pit white against Black. They say a state like Mississippi, they think it's gonna automatically be a certain color, but this movement, you can't figure us out 'cause we all together.⁴⁶

Later in the event, Barber further blamed the group's divisions on actions by the nation's powerful throughout a longer history of America. He heightened the urgency for the poor people to overcome those divisions "they" had imposed for decades:

I want you all to look at this picture on this stage because this is the kind of coalition that can fundamentally change. That's why they worked so hard to keep us from one another. Dr. King said in 1965 that the great fear of the aristocracy in this country would be for the masses of poor Negroes and the masses of poor white folk to come together and build a political voting block that could change the economic architecture of the country. Well today, if we can get white farmers together with Black folk and Latinos and Asians and natives, that's what this is all about.⁴⁷

⁴³ Barber, "Poor," 2:22.

⁴⁴ Barber, "Poor," 3:19.

⁴⁵ Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 25. Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 24-25.

⁴⁶ Barber, "Poor," 4:41.

⁴⁷ Barber, "Poor," 5:18.

This framing of divisions as something created to maintain their oppression helped rhetorically constitute the united poverty-impacted people by giving them a shared enemy, a shared history, and shared hope that a united movement would have the power to make the desired change.

Lament is empowering.

Closely connected to the constitutive function in Barber's framing of public lament is its ability to strengthen those who participate in speaking and listening to lamentations of poor people. In the narrative Barber created in the 2022 Mass Poor People's, the rhetorical poor people are empowered as they make their grief and suffering known in public. Barber used religious texts to make the connection between public lament and empowerment:

There is a kind of crying that after you're broken it starts strengthening you. That's what the scripture mean when it says blessed are they that mourn, and what it means by there's a sound of Rachel mourning because her children are no more, she will not or he will not be satisfied and we will not be satisfied.⁴⁸

Barber explained that by naming their pain and the oppression they face, poor people were better able to address their pain and oppression. In lifting their voice, even in lament, there was a reminder that they were empowered with a voice and the power to speak. In Barber's rhetoric, the act of identifying with others as people with similar stories and struggles and the promise of empowerment when joining in shared public lament provided rhetorical motivation to take up the work of the Poor People's Campaign.

While lamenting the suffering of poor people in their oppression, Barber repeatedly framed this public lament as a source of strength for a united poor people and low wage workers movement. He defined the unified poor people in public lament with the metaphor of an army. Barber declared with urgency and passion:

The army is here now. ... We hear there were upward of 150,000 people (here) and millions online. ... The closing is simply this. There's an army rise and it's going to break (every chain). Y'all believe there's an army rising? Look at your neighbor say, 'There's a nonviolent truth-telling, powerful, moral fusion, Ain't gonna be silent, Ain't going nowhere army rising. I'm in it. I've suited up. I'm ready. And we are going to break every chain.'⁴⁹

In the assembly's closing moments, Barber emphasized that the rhetorical diverse masses of poverty-impacted people had been united in their public lament and had become a powerful army for social change. He called upon the audience at the event and online to realize their (rhetorically constructed) identity as an army and to encourage others to join this rhetorical army:

In closing, look at somebody that doesn't look like you and tell 'em I'm glad to be in the army with you. Those of you that got gray hair, God has kept you alive for one more fight. Those of you that are middle aged like me, God is telling you to fight. 'cause You living off the fights of other people. And those of you that are young, God is saying,

⁴⁸ Barber, "Poor," 4:56.

⁴⁹ Barber, "Poor," 6:48.

it's time for you to sign up, but we all in it together. And can't nobody tell you, you can't get in this army 'cause of who you love or 'cause of the color your skin or 'cause of what religion you have or don't have the Lord. All you got to be and all you got to be to get in this army is a human being created by a mighty creator. All you gotta be is somebody that wants to do justice and drive the land to repentance so we can have reconstruction and revolution and revivals. Are you in the army?⁵⁰

For the second persona⁵¹ created by Barber at the 2022 Mass Poor People's, the public lament of the poor was a transformative empowerment of the poor. In the narrative progression⁵² that unfolded during the event, the poor progressed from victims of oppression through public lament to a powerful army for great social change.

Lament is liberating.

Poor people in Barber's rhetoric were empowered to do a particular kind of work. This work was announced through a trope that Barber used alongside the metaphor of the lamenting poor as a powerful army. In a section of a quote introduced in the previous section, Barber defined what the rhetorical army would do with their power. He called on the crowd to say to their neighbors, "There's a nonviolent truth-telling, powerful, moral fusion, Ain't gonna be silent, Ain't going nowhere army rising. I'm in it. I've suited up. I'm ready. And we are going to break every chain."⁵³ Barber declared that when his rhetorically created poor people find power in their collective public lament, they would use their collective power to "break every chain." This well-known trope for freedom was introduced as the climactic conclusion of that particular sentence, but it returned with force for the final image of the event. Barber concluded the 2022 Poor People's by asking auditors in person and online to sing with the choir on stage who emphatically repeated three phrases, "there's an army rising up," "break every chain," and "I hear the chains falling" in a gospel-style melody that lasted for eight minutes.⁵⁴ The trope of breaking chains was not to be missed.

The breaking of chains is a long-standing trope of freedom and liberation that has been used in political, social movement, and religious rhetorics. In the trope, the act of breaking chains that hold someone in bondage serves as the vehicle that informs understanding of freedom, particularly when freedom is an abstract concept rather than a physical reality. Various speakers at the event, including Barber himself, used freedom in relation to economics⁵⁵, reproductive rights⁵⁶, gender identity⁵⁷, racial discrimination⁵⁸, and voting rights⁵⁹. Furthermore, Barber used freedom to define the Poor People's Campaign and create contrast with those who this rhetorical army struggled against, "Which side are you on? I'm on the freedom side. How many of y'all are on the freedom side!" With the term freedom being used frequently and in a variety of ways during the event, the trope breaking chains provided a unifying image, emotional inspiration, and historical-cultural

⁵⁰ Barber, "Poor," 6:49.

⁵¹ Black, "The Second Persona."

⁵² Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Univ of California Press, 1973), 71.

⁵³ Barber, "Poor," 6:49.

⁵⁴ Barber, "Poor," 6:54-7:02.

⁵⁵ Barber, "Poor," 3:27, 4:52, 5:01, 6:34.

⁵⁶ Barber, "Poor," 5:06.

⁵⁷ Barber, "Poor," 6:30.

⁵⁸ Barber, "Poor," 2:50, 3:18.

⁵⁹ Barber, "Poor," 3:17, 6:26.

grounding for the invitation to join this new social action movement that highlights the laments of the poor.

Furthermore, with this combination of metaphor and trope – the poor as an army who will break chains – the poor, through their public lament, would both serve as liberators and receive liberation. The lament of the poor would empower them to free the poor, including themselves, of the oppression which they had collectively and publicly lamented. In Barber’s narrative framing at the 2022 Mass Poor People’s, a key function of public lament is the empowerment of the poor for the task of the liberation of the poor.

Lament is persuasive.

Barber’s definition of the transformative power of public lamentation by the poor was not exclusive to poor people themselves. He claimed that the public lament of poor people could transform, or at least persuade, their oppressors and passive onlookers. This was one way that public lament would empower the rhetorical army to break the chains that held the poor captive. While lament, even public or prophetic lament, has been identified as something outside of classical Western rhetorical forms seeking persuasive functions⁶⁰, Barber infused hope in his rhetoric that public lament of the poor might have a persuasive impact on middle- and upper-class citizens and possibly even government leaders. While the points of identification would likely not be as strong, Barber declared that public lamentation by poor people would powerfully humanize the issue for outsiders and increase the urgency of reducing poverty in America:

We’ve come to put a face and a voice on these numbers of poverty to show that behind them, inside them are real people and real lives. They’re us, we’re them and we won’t be silent anymore. We must say, with our bodies, with our voices, with our organizing, with our preaching, with our standing, even with our suffering and our sacrifices, that we won’t be silent or unseen or unheard anymore.⁶¹

Barber claimed that the powerful humanization of public lament would have a persuasive impact on onlookers who do not identify as poor people or low wage workers, “Millions of people are watching this, and their consciousness is being transformed because we are putting before them the voices they never saw. And how many of you are hearing your own story? We won’t be silent anymore.”⁶² Barber claimed that the power of lament would persuade enough people of the need for action on poverty reduction that it would result in major social change, “this is what we have not done. We’ve not put up the stories, we talk about the numbers, but only when we put the stories and the faces can we change the moral direction of this country and build power and build a third reconstruction.”⁶³ This promise increased the clarity, and perhaps the suasiveness, of Barber’s narrative about the power of the Poor People’s Campaign.

Months before the 2022 Mass Poor People’s, while delivering the Parks-King Lecture at Yale Divinity School, Barber argued for the righteousness of the cause and the effectiveness of the approach. He spoke with urgency and confidence as he encouraged participation:

⁶⁰ Johnson, *The Forgotten Prophet*, 15., Johnson, “The Prophetic Persona,” 273.

⁶¹ Barber, “Poor,” 2:10.

⁶² Barber, “Poor,” 4:30.

⁶³ Barber, “Poor,” 4:26.

We must put a face on these numbers and these realities in this moment. We must build a stage for impacted people to lament, to cry, to force the country and the world to see their faces along with religious leaders, along with the advocate, but to also build power, and to also put before a nation, this nation, a third reconstruction that shows it doesn't have to be.⁶⁴

Barber insisted that there was functional value to public lament by the poor. He claimed it would constitute an empowered movement of poverty-impacted individuals and persuade middle- and upper-class individuals of the need to address poverty, which would result in a massive social and political change that would reduce the suffering of poor Americans.

Public Lament as Mystical Experience

Consistent with existing discourse about prophetic lament, Barber framed public lament by the poor as holding a transcendent and mysterious power. Barber emphatically claimed that poor people publicly practicing corporate lamentation would invoke a transcendent encounter with the Divine and action by the Divine when he addressed students and faculty at Yale Divinity School, encouraging them to participate in the then-upcoming 2022 Mass Poor People's. Barber paraphrased the ancient Hebrew Prophet Amos in support of his claim:

God says to Amos, I want to hear you loud, crying, acting as though something is wrong and you know it. And only when the remnant cries and acts like something is wrong, will I make my visit? I'm not gonna make my visit. If you just pray in a comfortable place, I'm not gonna make my visit if you just preach, I'm only gonna make my visit if they, you go in the streets and lament loudly. And I don't need everybody, but I need a remnant.⁶⁵

Later, Barber expounded on this claim and directly called the seminary community to act, presenting a binary choice between action desired by the Divine that would bring about justice or inaction that would result in continued injustice:

God says, you got a choice to either let this river go along like it's going or to create a watershed moment. And if you will cry out in the street, if you will do that, if you will stand, if you will mobilize, then you can get to justice rolling down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.⁶⁶

Even more explicitly, in the question-and-answer session at Yale, Barber exclaimed that the Divine would "visit" the 2022 Mass Poor People's because the poor will publicly lament:

We must make sure if we're gonna follow the model of Amos, the kind of meeting we must have in the faces of the nation is the meeting where the impacted people become the face and the voice of the meeting, and not just people speaking on behalf of them.

⁶⁴ William J. Barber II, "Parks-King Lecture: 'Reviving American Democracy' with The Rev. Dr. William Barber II," YouTube, filmed February 24, 2022, video, 0:56, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcYx5BBuKT8&list=PPSV>.

⁶⁵ Barber, "Parks-King," 0:35.

⁶⁶ Barber, "Parks-King," 1:05.

And I don't know what it fully means, Dean, when the text says, when God, it says, God says, 'then I'll visit you.' I just wanna find out because I got a suspicion when God visits something, injustice doesn't stay there.⁶⁷

While one might not find it surprising that Barber utilized the possibility of Divine action in a persuasive speech to religious students and teachers,⁶⁸ he used similar claims to frame public lament by the poor when addressing the pluralistic audience at the event months later.

Barber made numerous references to God during the 2022 Mass Poor People's even as he repeatedly referred to the diversity of beliefs, including agnosticism and atheism, held by the members of the Poor People's Campaign. While music is commonplace at public rallies and protests, it was notable that most of the songs led from the stage at the 2022 Mass Poor People's referred to God and were gospel-style music. The event began with almost an hour of leaders of various religious traditions blessing the time and place. Later, Barber rooted the justice of the cause of the Poor People's Campaign in religious traditions, "We know that our greatest moral traditions in scripture call us to stand up, call us to mourn and refuse to be quiet."⁶⁹ Barber even framed the wind blowing on the assembly as a Divine wind and the sun breaking through the clouds as an act of God. Barber also made a direct connection between the public lament of the poor and the presence of, perhaps even the alignment with, the Divine, "So I encourage you to keep sharing your stories. My brothers and sisters keep standing up and keep speaking out. Keep your eyes on the prize and know that God Almighty is with us."⁷⁰ While not formally a religious event or movement, Barber insisted on a supernatural element to the public lament at the 2022 Mass Poor People's. This included a promise of the presence of the Divine, assurance of alignment with the Divine, and hope of intervention by the Divine.

The choice of including the Divine in the definition of poor People's public lament while attempting to build a diverse movement including people of various faiths and no formal faith affiliation may seem risky, and it likely was, but it also brought rhetorical possibilities. Burke noted, "Whether there are gods or not, there is an objective difference in motivation between an act conceived in the name of God and an act conceived in the name of godless nature."⁷¹ It is notable that while Burke identified that most anything could serve as a "god term" in a terministic screen,⁷² he also recognized a difference in the rhetorical function of the term God, the transcendent and ultimate.⁷³ For Burke, this ultimate transcended common ideas with a motivation of "pure ideas."⁷⁴ Burke also noted that the term God carried significant persuasive motivation because it carried "the widest and deepest scope possible."⁷⁵ Barber's rhetorical audience of poor people who have suffered injustice at the hands of the rich and powerful of this world could find hope in a scope that went beyond this world and in the promise of help from one more powerful than earthly leaders.

⁶⁷ Barber, "Parks-King," 1:13.

⁶⁸ It should be noted that Yale Divinity School is a scholarly institution, and many there would carefully evaluate these types of claims.

⁶⁹ Barber, "Poor," 2:07.

⁷⁰ Barber, "Poor," 2:56.

⁷¹ Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 6.

⁷² Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, University of California Press, 1969, 54.

⁷³ Burke, *Rhetoric of Religion*, vi.

⁷⁴ Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 200.

⁷⁵ Burke, *Rhetoric of Religion*, v.

Lessons for Public Lament by the Poor in Social Movement Rhetoric

In this analysis of William Barber's descriptions and use of public lament by poor and marginalized people at the 2022 Mass Poor People's, I have highlighted Barber's positions that prophetic public lament can include poor and oppressed persons lamenting for themselves, public lament has the functions of empowering and unifying the poor and oppressed as well as persuading oppressors and onlookers, and public lament has a mystical, transcendent impact.

Requires a Shared Platform

While this may seem obvious, it is important to note that public lament by the poor and oppressed generally requires someone to share a platform with them. There are, of course, two aspects to this implication. First, a platform, a notable public place—physical, digital, or social—must be available. While there are certainly exceptions, poor and oppressed people generally do not have possession of or even access to large public platforms. Second, the person or group that holds the large public platform must be willing and able to share it with poor and marginalized people. In our case study, William Barber had a large public platform that he shared with the poor. This takes the willingness of a privileged person to step off the platform. It also requires the privileged person or group to be willing to risk the damage of their platform in the messiness of public lamentation by poor and oppressed people.

May be Messy

There are numerous reasons why it can be challenging to share a platform with multiple people: time constraints, conflicting agendas and personalities, as well as style differences and egos. Sharing a public platform with numerous people impacted by poverty can add additional challenges to an already difficult situation. As noted above, poor and oppressed people often lack experience with public platforms. This lack of experience and exposure can, understandably, result in undeveloped skill sets needed when communicating from a public platform, as well as anxiety about the unknown experience of public communication. Additionally, people impacted by poverty often suffer trauma from the very circumstances they are being asked to listen to and publicly disclose in front of strangers when participating in a public lament. In our case study, Barber continually redirected and, at times, chastised both speakers and the crowd for deviating from the event's themes and guidelines and for general unruliness. Practitioners who choose to unleash the power of public lamentation by the poor and oppressed in social movement rhetoric should be prepared to lend additional support and guidance.

Can Invoke Transcendence

My analysis of Barber's use of and rhetoric about public lament highlighted his emphasis on the mysterious aspects of public lament – more specifically, the presence of the Divine. The fact that Barber is a pastor and has advanced theological training might serve as a sufficient explanation for this emphasis, and certainly, not all social movement rhetors will share his theological perspective. However, there is good reason to remain open to some element of mystery and transcendence in future instances of public lament by the poor and oppressed. Even if a rhetor is not a theist, they would benefit from a recognition of the rhetorically transcendent nature of the themes of justice,

shared humanity, and a longing for a better world, as well as a recognition of the mysterious roles of rhetoric and emotion in mass united ritual practices.

Conclusion

In June 2022, William Barber led the Mass Poor People's and Low Wage Workers' Assembly and Moral March on Washington and to the Polls. The event was a significant step in the rebirth of the 1968 Poor People's Campaign initiated by Martin Luther King Jr. before his death. Like the 1968 campaign, Barber attempted to solidify a diverse coalition to call attention to and demand action to reduce the plight of poor Americans. Like King, Barber saw the undertaking as an act of prophetic public lament. However, Barber's use and description of prophetic public lament expanded the understanding of the genre gained from King's rhetoric. Barber insisted that a prophet should not only lament for poor and oppressed people but should also provide a platform for them to lament for themselves publicly. Barber defined public lament by poor persons as not only cathartic but also as having the functional potential to unify and empower diverse groups of poverty-impacted persons and persuade onlookers to work for the liberation of the poor. Finally, Barber used and expanded the rhetorical resources of the mystical traditions of prophetic public lament, expressing hope that the united lament of the poor and oppressed would invoke the presence and action of the Divine. Barber's use and description of prophetic public lament provide insights for both rhetorical scholars and social movement rhetors who continue this work.