

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: NANNIE H. BURROUGHS' RHETORICAL
LEADERSHIP DURING THE INTER-WAR PERIOD

Ann Michele Mason, Doctor of Philosophy, 2008

Dissertation directed by: Robert N. Gaines
Department of Communication

Although frequently praised for her rhetorical abilities and widely recognized as an influential leader in the African-American community, Nannie Helen Burroughs' speeches and writings have been the subject of little scholarly treatment.

The quest for freedom and equality in America, Burroughs believed, would be satisfied through individual and collective struggle, and while she never advocated directly the use of physical force, she often evoked martial themes—using terms such as battles, enemies, crusades, weapons, and sacrifice—along with ideas related to movement and progress, to motivate action among African-Americans. These ideas, complemented by her stylistic tendencies, inspired continued action during a time when basic citizenship rights seemed out of reach for many African-Americans.

This rhetorical tendency seemed most strategic during the 1920s and 1930s, a time when African-Americans experienced a renewed and seemingly coordinated assault on their identity as American citizens. They found their constitutional right to vote threatened, their social and economic status weakened, and their identity as American

citizens undermined. Burroughs would skillfully combine various styles of discourse to match her rhetorical goals and the demands of the audiences she addressed. More specifically, she employed a clear, vivid, energetic style to awaken and enlist African-American audiences, to empower politically, provide vision, and to rehabilitate identity during the period between the two world wars.

NANNIE H. BURROUGHS' RHETORICAL LEADERSHIP DURING THE INTER-
WAR PERIOD

by

Ann Michele Mason

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Robert N. Gaines, Chair
Professor Jeanne Fahnestock
Professor Kathleen E. Kendall
Professor James F. Klumpp
Professor Shirley W. Logan

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Preface

Kelly Miller, dean of Howard University, once called Nannie Helen Burroughs “a dynamo of feminine energy;” attempting to write about her sometimes felt like trying to capture the wind in my hands. She seemed to move at an extraordinary pace, touching down with great force in nearly every aspect of African-American life for over six decades; tracking her movement during any given time period was no easy task.

Born at the close of Reconstruction in Orange, Virginia, Burroughs (1875-1961) moved as a young child with her mother to Washington, D.C. where she would live most of her life. Her mother, Jennie Poindexter Burroughs, worked as a domestic servant while Burroughs attended the city's public schools. After high school graduation in 1894, Burroughs traveled to Philadelphia where she worked as a book keeper and stenographer for *The Christian Banner*, a baptist periodical. When *Banner* editor Lewis Jordan moved to Louisville, Kentucky to head the Foreign Mission Board of the National Baptist Convention, Burroughs followed, expanding her efforts beyond the offices of the Foreign Mission Board to organize local industrial and self-help clubs. In 1900 she was elected corresponding secretary to the newly-formed Woman's Convention of the National Baptist Convention, a post she would hold until 1948; Burroughs continued to lead the organization as president, a position she occupied until her death in 1961. As an outgrowth of her work with the Woman's Convention, Burroughs returned to Washington in 1909 to open the National Training School for Girls and Women where she lived and worked full-time as president until her death in 1961.

The work required to cultivate two new organizations—the Woman's Convention and the National Training School—would have exhausted the energy of most people, but Burroughs successfully built each institution while applying considerable effort in other directions. She was a founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, a board member of the National Urban League, the National Association for Colored Women, the National League of Republican Colored Women, and the National Association for Negro History, among other organizations. Youth, women's, and inter-racial groups sought her advice and guidance, and she freely complied with many requests for assistance. A featured speaker before a staggering range of religious, civil, and political groups around the country, Burroughs delivered hundreds of speeches a year; her written work was published widely in African-American newspapers and periodicals. During the last twenty years of her life, she battled cancer while working, at what seemed to be an accelerated pace, to promote a “crusade for brotherhood, equality, and righteousness” in America. When she died in May 1961, she left behind millions of organized and determined African-American citizens who soldiered on in the quest for justice.

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Chapter One: Nannie Burroughs' Quest for Freedom

*"To measure up to our responsibility and opportunity in this crisis, we must make no little plans. They have no magic to stir one's blood. We must make big plans for a long, hard campaign."*¹

~Nannie H. Burroughs, 1922

Introduction

During the thick of the depression, when the temptation to despair was great, and the tendency toward apathy constant among African-Americans, Nannie Burroughs responded to a critic who doubted that her efforts would do much good during such tumultuous times,

Some of us are working, writing, praying, living, sacrificing and fighting for better things. We are laboring to develop a type of Negro that will take it upon himself individually and collectively to labor to deliver the group from this body of death. . . . Some of us are working to build up the Negro's mental, moral, and spiritual equipment so that he will have within himself the kind of power that overcomes every handicap and every barrier.²

Her brief reply contained a fierce and eloquent defense of her life's work, describing the kind of person, the kind of citizen, she hoped to cultivate among African-Americans—one who was self-possessed, intelligent, confident and active—even in the face of overwhelming obstacles. The quest for American citizenship, Burroughs believed, would be satisfied through individual and collective struggle, and while she never advocated directly the use of physical force, she often evoked martial themes—using terms such as battles, enemies, crusades, weapons, and sacrifice—along with ideas

1 "Twenty-Second Annual Report," *Journal of the Forty-Second Annual Session of the National Baptist Convention* (Nashville: National Baptist Publishing, 1922), 33.

2 Nannie H. Burroughs to Mr. I. Willis Cole, Editor, 12 July 1933, Nannie Helen Burroughs Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter NHB Papers)

related to movement and progress, to motivate action among African-Americans. These ideas, complemented by her stylistic tendencies, inspired continued action during a time when basic citizenship rights seemed out of reach for many African-Americans.

Historians have characterized Burroughs' life as one devoted to the "uplift of the black woman." Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, in her account of the black Baptist women in America during 1880-1920, traces Burroughs' influence, noting her exceptional use of the written and spoken word to inspire, encourage, and mobilize thousands of African-American women across America.³ Higginbotham has described Burroughs as "the most articulate and dynamic voice" in the movement for social and political freedom in the black Baptist church.⁴ Although frequently praised for her rhetorical abilities and widely recognized as an influential leader in the African-American community, Burroughs' rhetorical work has been the subject of little scholarly treatment. Current scholarship, such as Higginbotham's, highlights Burroughs' work with the Woman's Convention of the National Baptist Convention, and the National Training School in Washington, D. C., a school Burroughs founded for young women in 1909,⁵ and while these studies feature

3 Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Woman's Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

4 Evelyn Brooks, "Religion, Politics, and Gender: The Leadership of Nannie Helen Burroughs," *Journal of Religious Thought*, 44 (Winter/Spring 1988) 9.

5 See Casper Layer Jordan, "Nannie Helen Burroughs," *Notable Black American Women*, ed. Jessie Carney Smith (Detroit: Gale Research, 1992): 137-140; Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "Together and in Harness: Women's Traditions in the Sanctified Church," *Signs* 10 (1985): 678-699; Evelyn Brooks Barnett, "Nannie Burroughs and the Education of Black Women," *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and Images*, eds. Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1978): 101-108; Evelyn Brooks Barnett, "Nannie Helen Burroughs," *The Dictionary of American Negro Bibliography*, eds. Rayford W. Logan and Michael R. Winston, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983): 201-205; Evelyn Brooks, "Religion, Politics, and Gender: The Leadership of Nannie Helen Burroughs," *Journal of Religious Thought* 44 (1988): 7-22; Gerda Lerner, ed. *Black Women in White America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975); Sharon Harley, "Beyond the Classroom: The Organizational Lives of Black Female Educators in the District of Columbia," *Journal of Negro Education* 51 (1982): 254-265; Lolita C. Boykin, "Integrating Natural Coping and Survival Strategies

an important and constant aspect of Burroughs' life, they do not explain fully her influence in the larger culture, or more specifically, how her use of language facilitated a long and productive career. Historian Sharon Harley has asked perceptively, "How is it possible for a woman, who was a major figure on the black political, economic, and social landscape for the first six decades of this century, and whose views foretold some of the most compelling intellectual and ideological debates of the last four decades, not to have been given fuller consideration by scholars?"⁶

Responding to Harley's question, I shall, in this dissertation, consider Burroughs' rhetorical leadership in the broader African-American community, and how she applied a set of characteristic ideas and stylistic features to inspire action during a period of African-American history marked by dashed hopes, economic distress, and increased racial hostility. As we shall see, Burroughs used language to convince African-Americans of their rightful status as American citizens—to awaken and enlist, to inspire intelligent and coordinated action, to foster militant protest among African-Americans during the period between the two world wars.

of African-American Women into Social Work Practice: Lessons Learned From the Works of Nannie Helen Burroughs." Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University, 2003; "Nannie Helen Burroughs: The Black Goddess of Liberty." *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 81, No. 1 (Winter - Autumn, 1996): 62-71. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "The Feminist Theology of the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1900," In *Class, Race, and Sex: The Dynamics of Control*, edited by Amy Swerdlow and Hanna Lessinger, 31-59. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983; Karen A. Johnson, *Uplifting the Women and the Race: The Educational Philosophies and Social Activism of Anna Julia Cooper and Nannie Helen Burroughs*, New York: Garland Publishing, 2000; Traki L. Taylor, "Womanhood Glorified": Nannie Helen Burroughs and the National Training School for Women and Girls, Inc. 1909-1961," *The Journal of African American History* Vol. 87 (2002): 390-402. Only one dissertation considers Burroughs' writings, Sandra Lynn Robinson, "Specializing in the Wholly Impossible: A Rhetorical Analysis of Phronesis and Kairos in the Writings of Nannie Helen Burroughs". Ph.D. diss., Texas Woman's University, 2007.

6 Sharon Harley, "Nannie Helen Burroughs: The Black Goddess of Liberty," *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 81, No. 1/4, (Winter - Autumn, 1996), pp. 62-71.

In this chapter I examine Burroughs' reputation as a writer and speaker, her leadership in the African-American community during the inter-war period, my approach to the study, and the organization of this dissertation.

The Word as a Weapon: Nannie Burroughs' Rhetorical Leadership

When Nannie Helen Burroughs was born in 1875 justice and equality remained elusive for most African-Americans. As Burroughs began her national career in 1900, black Americans had experienced nearly four decades of freedom from slavery, yet at the dawn of the new century, many found themselves shackled by disfranchisement, segregation, discrimination, and violence. Lacking capital, political power, institutional fortitude, and social equality, the power of the word remained one of the African-American's few available resources.⁷ Burroughs possessed a fierce confidence in the written and spoken word, and she employed both tirelessly during her lifetime to promote the development of American democracy. During the difficult days of World War I, Sarah Willie Layton, Burroughs' colleague and President of the Woman's Convention, proclaimed, "The great battles of the world have not been decided by musket and sword, those that have changed the course of civilization have been fought upon the field of intellect and the weapons that have decided these battles have been those of clear, orderly

⁷ There seems to be some confusion regarding Burroughs' birth date which has been listed as 1878, 1879, and 1882. Two pieces of information make these dates seem unlikely, even impossible, and point, instead, to a birth date of 1875: 1) The 1880 U. S. Census records Nannie Burroughs as a five year-old in the household of her maternal grandparents, the Poindexters, along with her parents John and Jennie Burroughs, and her three-year old sister, Maggie Burroughs. 2) Her graduation from high school in 1894 seems to support the birth date of 1875 as well since most high school seniors listed in the District of Columbia Public School records are 18 years or older. She was listed among the 1894 graduates from M Street High School in "Colored Pupils Pass," *Washington Post*, 17 June 1894.

intense thought [and] forceful expression.”⁸ Careful thought and forceful expression would mark Burroughs' leadership among African-Americans. The *Washington Tribune* described her role in the community as fundamentally rhetorical, “Burroughs can always be counted to raise her voice in protest against the injustices heaped upon the Negroes of America. She is always to be found in the forefront of those battles that are urged to better conditions among our people.”⁹

Burroughs addressed black and white audiences throughout the country; while encouraging African-Americans toward full citizenship, she simultaneously assailed the country's power structure, arguing for institutional, political, and legal change. She urged black Americans to fight the discrimination and racial prejudice that crippled their lives. She demanded that white Americans reject the attitudes and policies of racism. She challenged both races to cooperate in building a just society. Burroughs envisioned a new social order, one composed of all races participating fully and productively in the life of the nation. Accordingly, she employed her rhetorical skill toward achieving this vision.

At the opening of the twentieth century, Burroughs quickly established a reputation within the African-American community as a widely-respected leader and forceful orator. A prolific writer and frequent speaker, Burroughs' words issued forth from America's church pulpits, auditorium platforms, local fraternal halls, periodicals,

8 “Minutes from Woman's Convention,” *Journal of the Eighteenth Annual Session of the Woman's Convention Auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention* (Nashville: National Baptist Publishing Board, 1918), 272. The original contains a typographical error which I have corrected.

9 From the *Washington Tribune*, quoted in *The Worker* (1944): 7.

and newspaper pages. She delivered thousands of speeches on behalf of the Woman's Convention of the National Baptist Convention, the National Training School, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the National Urban League, the National League of Republican Colored Women, and the Association for Negro History, along with other organizations. Her written discourse reached millions through the pages of nationally-circulating African-American newspapers and periodicals.

Burroughs first attracted national attention in 1900 when she delivered a riveting speech, "How the Sisters are Hindered from Helping," at the National Baptist Convention's (NBC) annual meeting. Burroughs' contemporaries remembered the speech as a highlight of the 1900 NBC convention, describing it as one "which seems to have electrified the assembly."¹⁰ Elected at the 1900 convention as the corresponding secretary of the newly-formed Woman's Convention, the position put Burroughs in direct contact with audiences across the country. She was received enthusiastically, as noted in an account of a speech she delivered before the Georgia Baptist State Convention in 1902:

Men with gigantic interest, matchless eloquence, fervent devotion, put new life into the work and crystallized a greater sentiment on our National organization. These men played their part, then passed off the stage. Friday night Miss N. H. Burroughs appeared before the Convention for the first time, and like Saul, towered head and shoulders, above the men in Israel, for the magnetism of her speech, the earnestness of her appeal, the nobleness of her work, all of which combined called for such an ovation that has not been given in the annals of our "Distinctive Baptist" work. Demosthenes in playing the orator's part at Athens, Cicero against Catiline, Paul on Ma[rs'] Hill, never were more effective than

10 L. H. Hammond, *In the Vanguard of a Race* (Richmond: Williams Printing Company, 1922), 14.

Nannie Helen Burroughs.¹¹

When the speech concluded, “Tears flowed from some; applause was deafening from others; while young and old, white and black, cast money at her feet with an enthusiasm that has never been equaled in the history of our Convention,” recalled one who had heard her speak.¹² Burroughs' reputation spread rapidly beyond black Baptist circles to the larger African-American community. By 1906, the nationally-circulating newspaper *Washington Bee* judged her to be among “the most gifted and bravest speakers in the Negro race.”¹³ Moreover, when she delivered a speech in 1907 in Charleston, South Carolina the *People's Recorder* covered the event, highlighting the force of Burroughs' rhetorical skills. Calling her the “star attraction” of the convention, and the “matchless leader of both women and men,” the writer observed:

Miss Burroughs is easily the most able, learned and cultured young woman it has ever been our privilege to listen to in a public address. Her very great ability as a platform speaker enabled her to at once get the entire attention of her audience and then to hold them in an eager vise of happy anticipation to the end of her pleasing remarks. The Great Baptist denomination and the entire Negro race have in Miss Nannie H. Burroughs a very able representative in helping to make sentiment for the downtrodden, the poor, the needy and the oppressed. She is smooth, dignified, polished, courteous, self-possessed, and by the exercise of all these good graces wins her way at once to the heart of her audience, and makes a warm place therein for the work she represents.¹⁴

Her speeches would provoke similar excitement until her death nearly sixty years later. While her audiences included Booker T. Washington and many who had been born into slavery, Burroughs' influence extended to the generation of women and men who

11 "Miss Burroughs Given an Ovation," *National Baptist Union*, 28 June 1902.

12 Ibid.

13 "The Way Out," *Washington Bee*, 24 February 1906.

14 "A Strong Woman Complimented," *National Baptist Union*, 15 June 1907.

would lead the twentieth-century civil rights movement — Martin Luther King, Jr., Juanita Jackson Mitchell, Ella Baker, Ralph Abernathy, and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., among others.¹⁵ Her impact upon this generation seems evident in a letter Thurgood Marshall sent Burroughs in 1954 thanking her for the many ways in which she had encouraged him over the years, “[A]ll of us are forever indebted to you for the long hard fight you have made for our people. You will forever be an inspiration to all of us.”¹⁶ Two years later, a young Martin Luther King, Jr., summoned the eighty-one year old Burroughs to Alabama to speak at the Montgomery Improvement Association’s Non-Violent Institute, an event marking the one-year anniversary of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. When Burroughs did not reply immediately to his request, King sent a second telegram imploring her, “As the first leader of Negro women in America it is imperative that you come to give hope to the thousands of women who are paying the price of sacrifice in our struggle.”¹⁷

Following her death in 1961, Burroughs was remembered as one of the nation's great African-American leaders. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., addressing Howard University’s 1966 graduating class, challenged the graduates to reclaim “the image of black greatness gone before.” Placing Burroughs among a list of bold, influential, and revolutionary leaders, Powell queried the audience:

Will one black woman here today dare to come forth as a pilgrim of God, a

15 The Nannie Helen Burroughs Papers (NHB Papers) at the Library of Congress reveal the vast extent of Burroughs’ rhetorical endeavors. The collection contains numerous invitations to speak, references to her speeches and writings, and correspondence recording the influence of her discourse.

16 Marshall to Nannie H. Burroughs, 27 August 1954, NHB Papers.

17 King to Nannie Burroughs, 2 November 1956; and King to Nannie Burroughs, 12 November 1956, NHB Papers.

Sojourner Truth--as a black Moses, Harriet Tubman, or a Nannie Burroughs? Will one black man here today dare be a Denmark Vesey, a Nat Turner, a Frederick Douglass, a Marcus Garvey, a W.E.B. Du Bois or a Malcolm X?¹⁸

Opinion Leader among African-Americans

Part of Burroughs' rhetorical appeal was her ability to discern and analyze the most salient problems confronting the African-American community, summarize her analysis concisely, formulate practical solutions to problems, and convey them through clear, forceful discourse. Burroughs' astute analysis of social, economic, and political issues, combined with her candid manner of expression earned her the position as a highly-respected opinion leader among African-Americans. Mary Waring, president of the National Association of Colored Women attributed Burroughs' leadership to her "foresight," and keen understanding.¹⁹ Following Burroughs' speech at a mass meeting in Lakeland, Florida, a white woman rose to her feet and exclaimed, "I do not deal in superlatives, but Miss Burroughs has given us a matchless address. She is not only up to date in her understanding and analysis of great questions, but she is fifty years ahead of our time."²⁰ William Pickens spoke favorably of her influence within the African-American community, offering the following assessment of her reputation:

No other person in America has so large a hold on the loyalty and esteem of the Colored masses as Nannie H. Burroughs. She is regarded all over the broad land as a combination of brains, courage, and incorruptibility. Her name would recommend anything to about ninety per cent of the Negroes worth helping or

18 Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. "Can There Any Good Thing Come Out of Nazareth?" in Philip S. Foner, *The Voice of Black America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972) 1031. Burroughs was a frequent visitor in the Powell home and spoke often in the New York City's Abyssinian Baptist Church, where Powell and his father, Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., served as ministers for decades.

19 Mary Waring to Burroughs, 7 April 1933, NHB Papers.

20 Burroughs to Mrs. Mary McLeod Bethune, 24 January 1934, NHB Papers.

working with.²¹

Burroughs' discourse was designed to elicit action, and Africa-Americans across the nation recognized the power of her discourse to accomplish things. Howard University professor Kelly Miller called her a woman “of energy and force” whose dynamic personality “bring[s] things to pass.”²² Miller praised Burroughs' ability to get things done, “There is no speaker on the American platform who can excel her in quaint, piquant, original, homely, powerful presentation of the truth that strikes home and brings the response.”²³ The minutes of the 1914 Woman's Convention conveyed the efficacy of her words, noting that Burroughs' annual address was presented “in such a forceful and instructive manner that all were moved to take hold afresh and push the work forward.”²⁴

Burroughs often addressed themes related to citizenship, from large topics like the political and economic structure of the nation to more personal matters such as employment and bodily hygiene. She instructed audiences how to vote, protest Jim Crow practices, deliver speeches, keep homes, manage businesses, attend conferences, and procure employment, all designed to integrate African-Americans fully into American society. Illustrations from American history and the Christian faith supported her arguments. Burroughs used biblical allusions, references, and imagery familiar to the

21 Pickens, a well-known writer, speaker and field secretary for the NAACP, was also a trustee for Burroughs' school. See *Trustees Give Facts About the National Training School*, NHB Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C., 17.

22 Kelly Miller, Howard University sociology professor and dean, was a nationally-known columnist for the African-American press. See Kelly Miller, “The National Training School,” *Washington Evening Star*, 31 May 1926.

23 “Kelly Miller Says,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 21 August 1927.

24 *Journal of the Thirty-fourth Annual Session of the Nation Baptist Convention*, (Nashville: National Baptist Publishing Board, 1915), 155.

African-American audiences she addressed. Employing themes from the Hebrew exodus story and warnings from Old Testament prophets, she created parallels between twentieth-century African-Americans and ancient Israelites, emphasizing their relationship with God, and the action needed to claim the promised land. Making use of the more immediate past, Burroughs appropriated American history for her African-American audiences, adopting Revolutionary history as their own, reinterpreting slavery to highlight the strength of character forged in bondage, wielding the U. S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence with scripture-like authority, Burroughs sculpted for her audiences—readers of the national press, attendees at commencement ceremonies, participants at political rallies— a compelling vision of American citizenship.

Action as the Foundation to Citizenship

Burroughs' forceful and concise style suited well her philosophy toward action. She considered one of her primary goals to be “stimulat[ing] people to action.”²⁵ Language should inspire effort among audience members, she believed, and during the 1927 annual meeting of the WC, Burroughs challenged her audience to think carefully about commitments made during past conventions and consider the outcome generated by such language:

Let us take a retrospective view of the reports and addresses of the past seven years and see how many of the plans, recommendations and resolutions, that were received with enthusiasm and applause and accepted as a part of our program, have been worked on or worked up and worked out by us.

Definite plans, recommendations and resolutions are necessary objectives, for organizations of this kind, but they are not worth the paper on which they are

²⁵ Burroughs to Alice Browne, 17 February 1954, NHB Papers.

written, nor the time it takes to read them, nor the energy expended in dreaming of their fulfillment, unless there is serious and constant effort put forth by the constituency towards their realization.²⁶

During the economic depression of the 1930s she spoke often of the importance of action. She wrote to a friend in 1934, “if you want anything in this world in a crisis like this, you will have to wake up and go after it. Those who do not go ahead now will have to go behind.”²⁷ Burroughs fashioned this sentiment differently in a humorous classification of people. Writing for the *Baltimore Afro-American*, Burroughs mused, “Figuratively speaking, there are five classes of people: mud sills, door mats, stepping stones, hound dogs and bull dogs. . . . the mud sills will be walked over; the stepping stones will be walked upon; the hound dogs will be kicked around; and the bull dogs will get what they go after.”²⁸

Burroughs' style commanded attention and generated response from audiences around the country. The composition of her texts featured varied sentence structure, combining short, quick sentences with well-devised periods. At times she transposed the natural order of her sentences to intensify their effect. Exclamations, questions and declarative sentences punctuated her discourse, keeping audiences engaged and receptive to her arguments. Burroughs often used enumerated lists—reasons offered in explanation, a list of actions to be taken—to focus and guide her readers. Imagery made her ideas vivid, even in her earliest speeches and writings we see metaphor used to create

26 “The Hour is Come,” *Twenty-Seventh Annual Report Woman's Convention*, 1927, 7, NHB Papers.

27 Burroughs to Elizabeth Butler, 29 January 1934, NHB Papers.

28 Nannie H. Burroughs, “Nannie Burroughs Says Hound Dogs Are Kicked, but Not Bulldogs,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 17 February 1934. Although she identifies five “classes of people,” she omits “door mats” as she describes the outcome of each.

momentum, “Every backward movement in history is like a receding wave—the preparation for a forward advance to a higher floodmark.”²⁹ She employed similar methods to provoke action from her readers in the following passage from a *Baltimore Afro-American* editorial. Responding to a poem which had been published the week before, Burroughs mocked the “self-pitying, sycophantic, poetry prattle,” submitted by the poet. “You ask in a piteous tone, what will become of us?,” Burroughs taunted. She counseled self-determined action instead of whining:

Mr., Mrs., or Miss Hazel asks poetically, “Shall no one lend a hand?” No! The Negro has his two hands and from now on he will get what he wants. Fighters for his emancipation did lend hands when his hands were chained. They did not stop until they were unchained and a weapon (the ballot) was put into his hands, with which he could defend himself.

Do you recall that when Israel lived in the midst of a strong race that they complained all the time about their burdens? Finally, God had a talk with Moses, Israel's great leader. Moses's excuse was that his people did not have weapons with which to fight their battles. God asked Moses only one question—what is in thine hand?” And Moses said, “A rod.” Jehovah commanded him to use it. The rod seemed so insignificant that Moses hesitated. Finally, he decided to obey God. Israel was delivered. The Negro will have to do the same thing.³⁰

Missing from her discourse is long, detailed, or philosophical discussion of problems. Instead, she usually summarized a situation in quick, pointed language and called for change. Her discourse stands in marked contrast to the elevated, abstract, philosophical prose of W. E. B. Du Bois, as seen in the following paragraphs taken from his famous essay on education, *Of the Training of Black Men*:

So here we stand among thoughts of human unity, even through conquest and

29 “A Clarion Call to Duty,” *The Colored American*, 5 April 1902, 2.

30 Nannie H. Burroughs, “Nannie Burroughs Says Hound Dogs Are Kicked, but Not Bulldogs,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 17 February 1934.

slavery; the inferiority of black men, even if forced by fraud; a shriek in the night for the freedom of men who themselves are not yet sure of their right to demand it. This is the tangle of thought and afterthought wherein we are called to solve the problem of training men for life.

Behind all its curiousness, so attractive alike to sage and *dilettante*, lie its dim dangers, throwing across us shadows at once grotesque and awful. Plain it is to us that what the world seeks through desert and wild we have within our threshold, — a stalwart laboring force, suited to the semi-tropics; if, deaf to the voice of the *Zeitgeist*, we refuse to use and develop these men, we risk poverty and loss. If, on the other hand, seized by the brutal afterthought, we debauch the race thus caught in our talons, selfishly sucking their blood and brains in the future as in the past, what shall save us from national decadence? Only that saner selfishness, which Education teaches men, can find the rights of all in the whirl of work. . . . To stimulate wildly weak and untrained minds is to play with mighty fires; to flout their striving idly is to welcome a harvest of brutish crime and shameless lethargy in our very laps. The guiding of thought and the deft coordination of deed is at once the path of honor and humanity.³¹

Du Bois considers issues of identity, freedom, education, and employment, yet the style of his discourse differs from Burroughs'. Using language more immediate and accessible, Burroughs, like Du Bois, sought the “guiding of thought and the deft coordination of deed,” but she communicated her concerns more directly and concretely, as seen in the statement below deploring the lack of job opportunity available to African-Americans:

America and philanthropists have given Negroes a billion dollars to get second hand knowledge out of books but they have not given them a ghost of a chance to earn outside of domestic service or common labor. The policy has been to open the school door wider to him, and to shut the factory door tighter. Teach him, but don't employ him—that's the age-old policy.³²

Pithy, vivid, and framed by antithesis, Burroughs concisely summarizes and

31 W. E. B. Du Bois, “Of the Training of Black Men,” in *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 69-70.

32 Nannie H. Burroughs, “Women Must Wage Economic Fight,” *The Southern Broadcast*, 29 September 1934.

condemns the inherent contradiction between educational opportunities offered and labor opportunities denied to African-Americans.

Just how the difference in styles influenced audience response may be better illustrated by comparing the reaction to Burroughs' speech with that of Max Yergan, when the two occupied the same stage. Yergan, well-known and the principal speaker at the 1937 National Negro Congress, "read a well-prepared scholarly address on 'Imperialism and the Negro People.'" The audience, according to the newspaper account, "appeared listless" while Yergan spoke, but when Burroughs addressed the crowd, they were "were electrified by a brief impromptu address" she delivered. "Rous[ing] the audience to fever pitch," Burroughs told the audience, "Don't fool yourselves. Do not sit up here, all snug and complacent, and think you are going out of here to deliver somebody. The masses are ready to deliver you. . . . You have got to re-identify yourselves with the masses. And when you get ready to get something done, you will find a response from them that will be amazing."³³

When Juanita Jackson, organizer of Baltimore's City-Wide Young People's Forum, pleaded with Burroughs to come and speak to the group of young professionals and activists who met weekly during the early 1930s, Burroughs declined for the time being, suggesting to Jackson others who might inspire the group. Jackson replied to Burroughs, who was a frequent and favorite Forum speaker,

The secretary read to our officers the letter you sent saying that you had suggested names of those who would take your place. They howled!! They said that could never be! We decided on new tactics. We will wait until you've gone into the

³³ "Re-identify Yourselves With Masses; Says Miss Burroughs," *Washington Tribune*, 11 February 1936.

“deep South” and come back with a burning message that will just suit us, stimulate us, awaken us from our lethargy—then we will write again. In your anxiety to set us afire, (to give us what we need) you will immediately consent. . . we hope . . . and pray.³⁴

Martin Luther King, Jr.’s comment to Burroughs in 1958 underscores this ability to inspire and to convey concisely her ideas, “Your remarks after my address were magnificent. You said in a few words more than most people could say in hours. It is always a real inspiration to listen to you.”³⁵

Jessie Daniel Ames credits Burroughs, in part, with prompting her to organize the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL), an organization of white southern women who would conduct a powerful anti-lynching campaign in the South during the 1920s and 1930s. Ames named one of Burroughs' speeches as the impetus for her own commitment to end lynching. When Burroughs delivered a speech before the Texas Commission on Interracial Cooperation in 1922, Ames, president of the ASWPL, recalled that Burroughs came before the group and, “said that lynching was carried on for the protection of white women and when the white women got ready to stop lynching, they'd stop it and it wouldn't be stopped before.”³⁶ About the forcefulness of Burroughs' words, Ames said, “That speech was not more than ten minutes long, but when she sat down my head was sunk because the responsibility had been put on me.”³⁷ Ames description of Burroughs' words, “the responsibility had

34 Juanita Jackson to Nannie Burroughs, 18 January 1932, NHB Papers.

35 Martin Luther King, Jr., to Nannie H. Burroughs, 18 September 1956, NHB Papers.

36 Jessie Daniel Ames, “Reminiscences,” p. 34, reported in Ann Wells Ellis, “The Commission on Interracial Cooperation, 1919-1944: Its Activities and Results,” PhD diss., Georgia State University, 1975, 59-60.

37 Ibid.

been put on me,” along with the stated desire of the CWYPPF leadership that Burroughs bring, “a burning message that will just suit us, stimulate us, awaken us from our lethargy. . . .” point to her ability to galvanize audiences. The masses, Burroughs believed, “possess the potential energy and willingness to move forward,” if only properly inspired.³⁸

These qualities, the ability to understand and deftly analyze issues related to the African-American community, her concise and energetic style of discourse, and her overall tendency to speak in such a way that encouraged action situated Burroughs well for leadership during the inter-war period.

Burroughs' Leadership During the 1920s and 30s

That she had developed the stature to lead by the 1920s is undisputed, the evidence testifies to her influence, not only among African-American women, but in the larger community as well. Burroughs' conception of citizenship, refined and sharpened during her early work with the Woman's Convention, guided her leadership during the 1920s and 1930s, a critical time for the African-American community. The end of World War I brought a renewed assault on black identity as the Ku Klux Klan grew steadily during the early 1920s. By 1924 the Klan boasted of a membership of four million, its influence reaching into all parts of American life; as many as sixteen members of Congress were said to belong to the organization.³⁹ D. W. Griffith's 1915 film, *Birth of a Nation*, re-released in 1923, added to the pervasive feeling of racial oppression. David

³⁸ “Twenty-Third Annual Report,” 25.

³⁹ Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 279.

Levering Lewis credits the reissue of the motion picture with, “the reshaping of the national memory through film. . . . encoding the white South's version of Reconstruction on the DNA of several generations of Americans,” and providing a justifying narrative for lynching.⁴⁰ The 1929 market crash and ensuing economic depression only exacerbated the effects of white supremacy. During this period, NAACP membership dwindled—at its peak, membership reached 139,000, but by 1928 only 23,500 people held membership in the organization.⁴¹ Marcus Garvey had questioned the very possibility of black citizenship in America, and although his influence diminished after he was convicted of mail fraud and deported in 1927, his critique resonated throughout the inter-war period. An editorial published in the *Pittsburgh Courier* expressed well this nagging and pervasive doubt plaguing African-Americans, “I, therefore, see no future for the Negro in the United States. Our loyalty on the battlefield does not count. . . . What future has the rising generation in America? None. . . . Let us come together and intelligently map out a program for the exodus of the Negro from the United States and thus show the world we are not afraid to pioneer. This is the only solution.”⁴²

While acutely aware of the nation's shortcomings, Burroughs believed that America offered African-Americans the greatest chance for freedom and equality, and through her language she attempted to make the idea of American citizenship attractive. During this period, especially, she encouraged collective activism in the form of political

40 David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000), 86-7.

41 Donald J. Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks, & Lily-Whites* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 15.

42 Samuel Barrett, “The Solution,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 30 December 1933.

participation, mass protests, and boycotts; Burroughs also advocated hard work, self-respect and individual initiative. Her leadership was critical during this time; she urged people not to give up, but to renew their efforts at achieving full citizenship. When African-Americans heard Woodrow Wilson's call to the American people on 2 April 1917 to "make the world safe for democracy," many believed that fighting for democracy abroad would make possible freedom and equality at home. At the close of the war, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote, "We are cowards and jackasses if now that the war is over, we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our own land. *We return. We return from fighting. We return fighting.*"⁴³ Despite his eloquent call to arms, the African-American community would quickly learn that the forces of hell in America were formidable, and they were bent on quelling such determination as expressed by Du Bois and Burroughs. When the Woman's Convention convened that September, Burroughs lamented, "the spirit to 'put the Negro back into his place' is abroad in the land."⁴⁴

During this period Burroughs' seemed to be most fully engaged in a range of vital organizations related to African-American life, providing amply opportunity for leadership. She maintained an active publishing schedule in the African-American press, served as NAACP board member during a critical transition in the organization, promoted a national anti-lynching campaign, chaired the committee on Negro Housing for the President's Committee on Home Building and Home Ownership, started the

43 W. E. B. Du Bois, "We Return," *Crisis* (May 1919): 13-4.

44 *Journal of the Nineteenth Annual Session of the Woman's Convention Auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention* (Nashville: National Baptist Publishing Board, 1919), 219.

National Association of Wage Earners, participated in several inter-racial groups, led the National League of Republican Colored Women, and campaigned for political candidates, while continuing her duties as the president of the National Training School and corresponding secretary of the Woman's Convention.

Burroughs' correspondence, preserved in the Nannie Helen Burroughs Papers at the Library of Congress, illuminates her thoughts and activities from the mid-1920s. A fire at the National Training School in 1926 destroyed most of Burroughs' personal papers prior to this period. Since these documents provide valuable contextual information, it seems logical to start an investigation of her rhetorical strategies during this time period.

Rationale for Study

While her place in education, religion and community service has been documented, Burroughs' contribution to American public address has gone largely unnoticed. She has been left out of recent scholarly anthologies and public address texts created for the purpose of recognizing the rhetorical achievements of African-American and women rhetors.⁴⁵ This seems a curious omission given the length of Burroughs'

⁴⁵ Burroughs has been omitted from recent anthologies designed to recognize the rhetorical achievements of African-American and women rhetors of the twentieth century. See Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon, *Rhetoric, Religion and the Civil Rights Movement 1954-1965* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006); Richard W. Leeman, *African-American Orator: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996); Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, *Women Public Speakers in United States, 1925-1993: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994); Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, *Women Public Speakers in United States, 1800-1925: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993); *Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century*, eds. August Meier, Elliott Rudwick and Francis L. Broderick, (New York: Bobs-Merrill Company, 1971); Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, *Man Cannot Speak For Her*, (New York: Greenwood Press) 1989; Jamye Coleman Williams and McDonald Williams, *The Negro Speaks: The Rhetoric of Contemporary Black Leaders* (New York: Noble and Noble Publishers, 1970). Only Boulware provides brief commentary on Burroughs as a speaker. See Marcus Hanna Boulware, *The Oratory of Negro Leaders 1900-1968* (Westport: Negro

public career, the vast number of speeches delivered and articles written, the range of topics addressed, and the number of organizations on whose behalf she spoke. Although she frequently represented the Woman's Convention and the National Training School, Burroughs' voice reached well beyond the National Baptist Convention circles to the larger African-American community. Her written discourse reached millions of men and women through the pages of nationally-circulating African-American newspapers such as *Baltimore Afro-American*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, *St. Louis Dispatch*, *Philadelphia Tribune*, *Chicago Defender*, *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, *New York Age*, *The Crisis*, and various magazines. Although these texts are accessible, they have received little or no critical attention.⁴⁶ As a rhetor, Burroughs warrants such attention for at least two reasons: 1) the length, scope and importance of her rhetorical career; and 2) the testimony by her peers of her exceptional rhetorical skill. A scholarly account of Burroughs' rhetorical activity will highlight an overlooked facet of her professional life; it will also enhance our knowledge of African-American discourse, an important, yet underdeveloped part of American public address history. Enrique D. Rigsby has argued that "a more exhaustive body of rhetorical history must be created before we will be able to understand fully the civil rights movement and the role of rhetoric in the movement."⁴⁷ Richard Leeman, tracking the publication of articles in Speech Communication journals and academic books, expressed dismay at the insufficient attention afforded African-American

Universities Press, 1969) 103-105. Lerner provides excerpts from two of Burroughs' writings in Gerda Lerner, ed. *Black Women in White America*, New York: Vintage Books, 1975.

46 Although many of Burroughs' written texts have been preserved in African-American newspapers, there are no edited papers or collections of her writings and speeches.

47 Enrique D. Rigsby, "African American Rhetoric and The 'Profession'," *Western Journal of Communication*, 57 (Spring 1993): 194-5.

discourse given the "community's history of powerful oratory."⁴⁸ In his survey of the field, he notes a swell of interest in African-American oratory in the field of Speech Communication published during the 1970s, the decline of attention suffered during the 1980s, and the renewed focus on African-American discourse over the past few years.⁴⁹ By looking at Burroughs' rhetorical efforts during the 1920s and 1930s we can begin to understand more broadly the foundations of the twentieth century civil rights movement.

This dissertation will feature a historical-critical examination of Burroughs' discourse. The historical perspective contextualizes Burroughs' rhetorical activities in the larger African-American community. Working from primary sources, including manuscripts, correspondence, convention proceedings, and newspaper articles, the dissertation provides a general historical account of Burroughs' rhetorical activities—her rhetorical education, where she spoke, what she said, the audiences she addressed, and in some instances, her intention in speaking, along with the response her discourse generated. Besides providing an account of Burroughs' rhetorical activity, the historical elements of the study addresses, in part, what David Zarefsky conceives of as, "rhetorical history," or "history as a series of rhetorical problems, situations that call for public persuasion to advance a cause or overcome an impasse. . . . on how, and how well, people invented and deployed messages in response to the situation."⁵⁰ The historical perspective contributes generally to an understanding of African-American oratory

48 Richard Leeman, *African-American Orators: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), ix.

49 Leeman xi-xiv.

50 David Zarefsky, "Four Senses of Rhetorical History," in *Doing Rhetorical History: Concepts and Cases*, ed. Kathleen J. Turner, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 30.

during the early twentieth century, it also establishes the context for a critical analysis of Burroughs' discourse.

The critical perspective allows for a more narrowly-focused examination of Burroughs' skill—highlighting the rhetorical choices she made in response to specific situations as these choices are made manifest in three of her texts. Although Burroughs' career spanned over sixty years, for this dissertation I shall attend to three representative texts that responded to specific needs in the African-American community during the 1920s and 30s. These texts feature three main themes Burroughs addressed throughout this period in her effort to strengthen African-American citizenship—power, vision, and identity—and represent common themes and stylistic choices she employed. Each text also represents a typical form of discourse through which Burroughs addressed the African-American community, namely: (1) a deliberative essay distributed widely through the Associated Negro Press; (2) a major epideictic speech delivered before a large audience; and (3) a judicial piece, an editorial written exclusively for a particular newspaper, in this case, the *Baltimore Afro-American*. A close examination of these three texts reveals Burroughs' particular rhetorical strategies, and thereby accounts, in part, for her rhetorical success and influence among twentieth-century African-Americans during the inter-war period.

Close Textual Analysis

This study features an examination of Burroughs' discourse generally informed by the critical perspective known as “close reading.” Rooted in the formalist tradition of

literary studies, this critical perspective arose in the communication field as a corrective to what Stephen Lucas observed as the tendency in public address scholarship to “get so caught up in the minutiae of a speaker’s background, education, personality, and career as to all but ignore his or her discourse.”⁵¹ The close reading, put simply, “seeks to study the relationship between the inner workings of public discourse and its historical context in order to discover what makes a particular text function persuasively.”⁵² This soon evolved into an approach to rhetorical criticism called “close reading,” a perspective that views the critical object with sustained attention. This sustained engagement with the text seeks to reveal how the text, “creates a complex structure of meaning by imbricating the formal and ideational dimensions of language. A rhetorical discourse . . . becomes a verbal construction that blends form and content into a concrete whole—a whole that assigns meaning to a region of shared public experience and solicits an audience to embrace the meaning it constructs.”⁵³ Highlighting the relationship between text and context, this critical approach considers how the merging of style and argument responds directly to contextual exigencies. Such an approach is particularly useful when dealing with African-American rhetorical discourse due to the necessary textual recovery work and historical analysis needed to make African-American rhetors, their texts, and their

51 Stephen E. Lucas, “The Renaissance of American Public Address: Text and Context in Rhetorical Criticism,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 74 (1988): 245. For similar analysis, see W. Charles Redding, “Extrinsic and Intrinsic Criticism,” *Western Speech*, 21 (1957): 100; G. P. Mohrmann, “Elegy in a Critical Grave-Yard,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 44 (Fall 1980): 272; and Michael C. Leff and G. P. Mohrmann, “Lincoln at Cooper Union: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Text,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 60 (1974): 346-358.

52 Carl R. Burghardt, *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*, (State College, PA: Strata Publishing), 545.

53 Michael Leff and Andrew Sachs, “Words Like Most Things: Iconicity and the Rhetorical Text,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54 (Summer 1990): 255.

rhetorical history more widely available. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has made a similar argument about African-American literary texts, urging scholars to produce “close readings, more and more detailed explications of African-American literature.” He has suggested that the authors, “get lost because no one writes about them. Producing a strong reading on any of these texts is a way of bringing them back from obscurity.”⁵⁴ Shirley Logan argues, more specifically, that the discourse of black women, “long overlooked,” deserves critical attention.⁵⁵

My examination of how Burroughs' rhetorical strategies respond to specific aspects of the historical context during the inter-war period will be guided, in part, by looking at how her ideas were expressed stylistically. Burroughs' encountered in her high school rhetoric class a stylistic theory which seems to have been influential in shaping her discourse. This theory, contained in Brainerd Kellogg's *A Text-book on Rhetoric* (1893), and considered in greater detail in chapter two, will loosely guide the analysis of her texts. Kellogg suggested that when faced with circumstances that demanded action, an energetic style of discourse would best meet those needs. By blending appropriately an energetic style, which subsumes perspicuity and imagery, with wit, which effectively “reforms bad manners and morals,”⁵⁶ Burroughs cultivated a style of discourse well-matched for her rhetorical goals and the needs of the African-American community. In the next chapter, we shall look more closely at the details of Kellogg's advice.

54 Charles H Rowell, “An Interview With Henry Louis Gates, Jr.” *Callaloo* 14 (Spring 1991): 448.

55 Shirley Wilson Logan, *We Are Coming: The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Black Women* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), xii.

56 Kellogg, 255.

Organization of the Dissertation

The dissertation will proceed in the following manner. Chapter two considers Burroughs' rhetorical development—the influence of her family, church and surrounding community, along with her formal education and early speaking experiences. From her family and church Burroughs learned self-determination, pride, and faith. At school in Washington, D. C. she was introduced to a view of language which encouraged the use of thoughtful, energetic discourse to promote social change—a perspective enhanced by the oratorical tradition of the surrounding African-American community. Her early training, both informal and formal, oriented her toward a rhetorical perspective of careful thought, expressed eloquently, resulting in practical action.

Chapter three considers an area of practical action Burroughs thought crucial to citizenship—political power. She advocated intelligent use of the ballot most of her life, and when the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution granted women the right to vote, Burroughs made political participation a high priority. She campaigned tirelessly for the Republican party during the 1928 presidential campaign, delivering speeches, issuing press releases, and writing essays urging African-Americans to vote for Herbert Hoover. Following the election, Burroughs' essay "What the Negro Wants Politically," appeared amidst a frenzy of post-election analysis, directly addressing the results of the election and laying the groundwork for future political change. The article, published widely through the black press, represents Burroughs' characteristic rhetorical tendencies, presenting in clear, forceful prose an incisive analysis of a pressing political or social problem, and then providing a detailed, practical solution to the problem.

Chapter four considers how Burroughs crafted a vision for the race in her 1934 address at Tuskegee Institute, “The Challenge of the New Day.” One of the few extant full speech manuscripts in the Burroughs' corpus, she responded to two exigences facing the African-American community during the early 1930s: the economic depression, particularly in the south, and the need for vision among African-Americans. Burroughs' visionary ideas combined with martial themes, conveyed in clear, energetic prose work to overcome the material reality of the depression, inspiring confidence and encouraging action among her various audience members.

Chapter five highlights the issue of African-American identity. Following one of the decades' most infamous racial riots, the Harlem Riot of 1935, government officials and black leaders across the country investigated the cause of the riot, speculating for weeks about the conditions that precipitated the riot. In response, Burroughs offered a radically different account of the causes of the riot in “The Declaration of 1776 is the Cause of the Harlem Riot.” Published in the *Baltimore Afro-American*, one of the most widely-circulating African-American papers in the nation during the 1930s, Burroughs skillfully uses the language and ideology of the American Revolution to re-frame the riot, shift the blame to American lawlessness, and craft an American identity for her audience.

Taken together these chapters will provide an account of Burroughs' rhetorical influence, meeting three distinct exigences in the African-American community during the 1920s and 1930s, namely the need for power, vision and identity. Although the study examines in detail only three of her texts, this narrow focus will provide a clearer sense

of Burroughs' rhetorical skill. The next chapter will explore the development of her rhetorical skill.

Chapter Two: Burroughs' Rhetorical Training and Development

Introduction

One especially influential family story passed down to Nannie Burroughs tells of the pride, determination, and hope that would become part of her character. About her maternal grandmother, Maria Poindexter, Burroughs recalled,

My grandmother was what she proudly called 'an F.F.V. Slave.' They tell me that she was a most remarkable woman. She was a seamstress and a philosopher. They tell this interesting story of her attitude towards slavery.

She would say: "Yes, honey, I was IN slavery, but wasn't no slave. I was just in it, that's all. They never made me hold my head down and there was a whole pa'cel of Negroes just like me; we just couldn't be broke. We obeyed our masters and mistresses and did our work, but we kept on saying 'deliverance will come.' We ain't no hung-down-head race. We're poor, but proud."

That proud Virginian would say "hold your spirit up inside, chile, hold your spirit up, and that helps you to hold your head up. Don't let your spirit down."

Honey, they slaved my body, but they didn't slave my mind. I was thinking high myself, and some day we colored folks is goin' to live high. Walk together, children, don't get weary. There's a better day a-coming in dis here land.¹

The confidence and faith exhibited by Maria Poindexter during the trials of slavery would sustain her granddaughter throughout a lifetime of struggle. Burroughs would learn early about the harsh reality of post-Reconstruction America, but her family and community would teach her valuable lessons about the power of hope and of language to confront inequality and oppression.

¹ Nannie H. Burroughs, "Only God, Negroes Can Understand Negro Philosophy," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 27 September 1930. F.F.V. refers to "First Families of Virginia."

This chapter examines how Burroughs' background, her family, community and education—both formal and informal—developed her rhetorical orientation and prowess. I shall argue that from her family and church Burroughs encountered faith and an appreciation of oratory; her formal rhetorical instruction in the District of Columbia schools methodically encouraged the development of careful thought and forceful expression; and finally, the surrounding community fostered a lively interest in social and political protest, while offering venues for Burroughs to practice her speaking and writing skills. These influences early in Burroughs' life would prepare her well for an active and effective rhetorical career. We will examine the rhetorical nature of her early career at the close of the chapter.

Rhetorical Education in Washington D.C. Schools

During her early school days in Washington, D.C., Burroughs was taught to read analytically and speak forcefully. Divided by race into two divisions, the District of Columbia public school system stood nationally among the best educational opportunities for African American students during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.² Although chronically underfunded, the division for African-American students possessed a talented and well-trained staff who surmounted financial obstacles and utilized limited resources to provide students a solid education. These educators considered cultivating proficiency in the written and spoken word a vital part of the education at all levels.

Extant records from the District of Columbia public school system reveal the goals of

2 See Lillian Dabney, "The History of Schools for Negroes in the District of Columbia, 1807-1947," (Ph.D. dissertation, Catholic University of America, 1949); Mary Church Terrell, "History of the High School for Negroes in Washington," *Journal of Negro History* Vol. 2, No. 3 (July 1917): 252-266.

language education in both the primary and secondary schools during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Throughout the 1880s the staff worked to establish a solid language program at all grade levels focusing on grammar in the early grades and rhetoric in the later years; by the close of the 1890 school year Superintendent George F. T. Cook reported the results of their labor:

In no other subject has a greater revolution occurred than in that of language-teaching. There has been a general awakening, a veritable renaissance. . . . Instead of learning language as something for the schoolroom and recitation alone, pupils are made to see and understand that it is a valuable and potent factor in the development of thought and in the actual affairs of life. Appreciating its power and fully alive to the new spirit which actuates and permeates the profession to-day, the teachers have put their shoulders to the wheel intelligently and earnestly. From the very first moment of the child's entrance into school, an eye of vigilance is turned upon this subject.³

The 1888-1896 Board of Trustees reports convey consistent attempts by the teachers to cultivate careful thought as the prerequisite of eloquent expression. This intellectual focus started early as Burroughs and her classmates learned to read. Teachers taught the elementary students to “read with care, thereby cultivating a correct habit of expressing thought from the printed page.”⁴ Cook's description of reading suggests the program's goals, as students were taught:

not merely pronouncing words as they occur on the printed page, but . . . rather the act of gathering thought from words. Words are vessels of thought and pupils should be taught to gather from them that which they contain and to express it properly with the voice. What one does not comprehend well of that he cannot talk well. Good reading renders the author's meaning clear, forcible and expressive. The power to do this may be acquired by very young children,

³ *Report of the Board of Trustees of the Public Schools of the District of Columbia, 1889-90*, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1890):166. (Hereafter BOT).

⁴ BOT, 1890, 165.

provided they are well taught and made to understand the lessons to be read.”⁵

Burroughs' analytical abilities perhaps germinated in her grade school classroom as she and the other students learned to read thoughtfully. Attentive reading facilitated effective expression, and the elementary students developed their expressive abilities by responding frequently, in writing and speech, to the material they read in class. Through meticulous training and intentional role modeling, the teachers methodically built the students' rhetorical skills. Cook emphasized the importance of their influence, urging them to “be masters of the language, . . . in the daily employment in the schoolroom of language that violates none of the canons of good usage.”⁶ Books offered additional models for the students. Considered an indispensable component of the language curriculum, Cook lobbied for a growing collection of good literature, hoping to create in the students a “taste for reading,” and “the habit of choosing good books.”⁷ Strong libraries, he argued, would “serve as a wall of defense against the evils of the street and poolroom amusements which lead to idleness, viciousness, and depravity,” while increasing the vocabulary and promoting “a correct habit of expression” in oral and written discourse.⁸ Through the attention given to analytical reading, frequent expression, and effective role-modeling, the District of Columbia school system offered Burroughs a strong foundation in language—an education that continued during her years at M Street High School.

Burroughs remembered her time in high school as “a glorious experience with

5 BOT, 1890, 162-3.

6 BOT, 1893-94, 168.

7 Ibid.

8 BOT, 1893-94, 168.

great personalities like Julia Mason Layton, Mary Church Terrell, Dr. Mildred Gibbs and F. L. Cordozo.” Parker Bailey was the first person to tell her she could speak, and she considered Anna J. Cooper “the most dignified person” she had ever met.⁹ Burroughs’ education accelerated during her time at M Street High as she was exposed to these influential role models and rigorous rhetorical training.

Originally called the Preparatory High School, the first high school for African-American students in Washington, D.C. opened in November 1870, and was governed during the first three decades by several talented and influential leaders. Mary Jo Patterson, an early principal of the school (1871-1884), and later one of Burroughs’ teachers, strongly influenced the high school culture. The first woman of African descent to have graduated from college in the United States, Patterson graduated from Oberlin College in 1862. Mary Church Terrell wrote of Patterson’s presence at the school:

It is easy to imagine what an impetus and an inspiration such a woman would be at the head of a new school established for the youth of a race for which high standards and lofty ideals had to be set. She was a woman with a strong, forceful personality, and showed tremendous power for good in establishing high intellectual standards in the public schools.¹⁰

F. L. Cardozo, principal of the school during Burroughs’ tenure at M Street High, and one of her favorite teachers, brought to the school a rich educational and professional background. Cardozo attended Glasgow University where he won scholarships in Latin and Greek, and then completed in two years the three-year theology course at the London School of Theology. Upon returning to the United States, he led a New Haven,

⁹ Una Roberts Lawrence Papers, (URL Papers) Southern Baptist Historical Archives, Nashville, TN.

¹⁰ Terrell, 252-266.

Connecticut church, and participated in South Carolina politics before coming to M Street High.¹¹ These and other talented teachers such as Mary Church Terrell and Anna Julia Cooper created a rich intellectual and rhetorical environment for Burroughs.

M Street offered students three courses of study—academic, scientific, or business—during the early 1890s, and regardless of the chosen area of study, English remained the most important subject in the curriculum. Burroughs reportedly pursued the scientific course.¹² The requirements of the four-year course of study included three years of English and German, Algebra, Trigonometry, Geometry, Zoology, History, English History, and Physics or Chemistry, along with the electives French, Botany, Chemistry, Advanced Chemistry, Physics, Mineralogy, Advanced Physics, Political Economy, History, Surveying, Geology, Analytical Geometry, and College Algebra.¹³ The rigorous curriculum sharpened the student’s powers of observation, judgment, and expression. As in the elementary grades, Burroughs’ high school English classroom was governed with a view toward “cultivating the pupil’s power of expression and creating in

11 Terrell, 258.

12 Most sources incorrectly report that Burroughs studied Domestic Science and Business at M Street High. This is impossible, since, according to school records, the high school did not offer a course of study in Domestic Science during Burroughs’ time at the school. See BOT, 1893-4, 174-76. Burroughs provided two different accounts of what she studied at M Street High. In a letter to Booker T. Washington, she wrote that she had undertaken the scientific course. See Burroughs to Booker T. Washington, 18 February 1896, Booker T. Washington Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Later, probably sometime during the 1930s, she recounts that she undertook the academic and business courses. See Una Roberts Lawrence Papers, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archive, Nashville, TN. Also, many sources erroneously report that Burroughs graduated from M Street High School in 1896. Burroughs actually graduated in 1894. This is corroborated by at least two sources: 1) The *Washington Post* lists her among the 1894 graduates of M Street High--See “Colored Pupils Pass,” *Washington Post*, 17 June 1894, 10; and 2) Furthermore, Burroughs, writing to Booker T. Washington in February of 1896, stated that in addition to finishing the Scientific course at M Street High, she had completed one year at a Business College in Washington, D.C. The sequence of events mentioned in the letter point to a 1894 graduation.

13 BOT, 1894-95, 155-7.

him an appreciation of good literature.”¹⁴

Brainerd Kellogg’s *A Text-book on Rhetoric*

The goals of the larger language curriculum solidified among the high school students as they studied rhetoric in their second year using Brainerd Kellogg’s *A Text-Book on Rhetoric*. Kellogg’s view effectively complemented and extended the intellectual orientation of the city’s rhetorical education. His definition of rhetoric, “the Study which teaches us how to invent thought, and how to express it most appropriately in words,” reflects the connection between thought and speech emphasized in the wider curriculum.¹⁵ His view of rhetoric also highlighted the practical use of language, a perspective that would have been especially useful to Burroughs and other African-American students as they argued for civil rights. This “eminently wholesome discipline,” Kellogg argued, “prepares one for the affairs of life,” as it, “compels us to think . . . stimulates inquiry, provokes the student to silent and open disputation, compels to a balancing of reasons, and develops an independent judgment.”¹⁶ Instruction at M Street High, based on Kellogg’s theory of rhetoric, highlighted intellection as a prerequisite for utterance. Intellection, considered one of three activities associated with invention, encourages thought about the material gathered for composition (discovery), and precedes judgment about selecting material for a speech. While this may seem insignificant, this kind of approach to education may explain, in part, Burroughs’ role as commentator/interpreter in the African-American community. As this tendency toward

¹⁴ BOT, 1893-94, 176.

¹⁵ Brainerd Kellogg, *A Text-Book on Rhetoric* (New York: Clark & Maynard, 1882), 14.

¹⁶ Kellogg, 17-8.

Careful thought preceded her speech, Burroughs' style also reflected Kellogg's advice on the merging of thought and structure, as she aptly combined various styles of discourse to match her rhetorical goals and the demands of the audiences she addressed. Burroughs sought to inspire action, and the blending of her ideas with the style of her language facilitated this desire.

Moving to Action: Stylistic Fusion of Perspicuity, Imagery, Energy, and Wit

Burroughs' habit of mind, along with her power of expression, developed continuously as she advanced through school. Kellogg, in particular, provided detailed guidance regarding effective language use—and his influence emerges throughout Burroughs' written and spoken prose. Burroughs apparently adopted Kellogg's advice, infusing her discourse with an effective combination of perspicuity, imagery, energy and wit—qualities Kellogg considered important in motivating an audience to act.¹⁷ But more specifically, perspicuity and imagery made clear the thought, energy provided force, while wit supplied potent persuasive material.¹⁸

Perspicuity, in Kellogg's view, formed the foundation for all other virtues of style, "Perspicuity is to other qualities of speech what light is to colors—that by which they exist and are seen."¹⁹ Accordingly, perspicuity captivates and holds the audience's

¹⁷ Although Kellogg's qualities of style--perspicuity, imagery, energy, wit, pathos and elegance--each contributed to effective prose, he considered certain qualities of style better suited for particular aims.

Overall, Kellogg considered the best style one which makes "the thought distinct or forcible." Kellogg, 171.

¹⁸ Kellogg, 136-7, 162.

¹⁹ Kellogg, 85.

attention, “mak[ing] them see what you see and see it as clearly.”²⁰ Kellogg specifically relates perspicuity with energy as follows:

perspicuity is essential to energy, since what is indistinct is not seen, and is not felt; imagery conduces to energy, as it presents the thought more graphically than plain language can do it: but energy employing these grand qualities of style, is something different from them. A thought may be perfectly distinct, and may be expressed in a figure; but it may not concentrate upon itself one's whole attention, and powerfully affect him.²¹

And while clarity promoted interest and attention, vividness and wit kept audiences attentive and made them responsive. Figures such as antithesis, exclamation, hyperbole and allusion heightened the audience's interest and emotional response—contributing to an energetic style of discourse. Other figures of speech—asyndeton, brachylogia, anaphora and epistrophe—created speed in the texts by delivering ideas in compact form or repetitiously—a tactic that contributed to an energetic style. Used gently or wielded fiercely, humor proved a good strategy for refuting arguments or distracting and re-orienting a distraught audience.

The energetic style itself Kellogg viewed as appropriate for awakening a sense of duty, or putting forth an act of the will.²² While not all thought was to be expressed with energy, Kellogg suggested that persuasive discourse should be marked by this characteristic, especially “weighty” thoughts:

But when the thought is weighty, and its comprehension demands exhausting effort, when upon its acceptance something vital seems to depend, especially when feeling respecting some duty is to be awakened, and the putting forth of an act of the will is to be secured, then the thought must be expressed with great

²⁰ Kellogg, 86.

²¹ Kellogg, 136.

²² Kellogg, 136-7.

earnestness. The speaker or writer will then be aroused to strong feeling, and his passion will pervade his thought as light fills the air, guiding him in the choice of words and in the construction of his sentences.²³

An energetic style conveyed the thought “so forcibly as to produce a profound effect, so stamping itself upon his memory that it cannot be forgotten.”²⁴ Energetic prose, according to Kellogg, should chiefly employ strategic word choice and order, declarative and imperative sentences, occasionally punctuated by interrogation, dialogue, exclamation, and vision. Kellogg summarizes his advice for achieving energy in the following passage:

Words and figures of speech should be chosen for vigor rather than for beauty. Keep to the concrete as far as possible, and array specific instances in the way of illustration and proof. . . . While deep feeling may characterize the oration as a whole, yet each paragraph should begin colloquially, and deepen in thought and emotion as it proceeds, the burden growing heavier to the close. Long sentences and periods are in place here--great momentum cannot be attained if the stops are frequent. Great variety, especially in the kind, the length, and the character of the sentences used, should distinguish the oration.²⁵

The rhetor might employ several techniques to create energetic prose including the use of specific words that have “a narrow breadth of meaning, are more readily understood and produce a deeper impression than those whose meaning is broader . . . [specific words] prevent the reader's wasting his energy upon the *language*, and enable him to bestow it upon the *thought* expressed.”²⁶ Energy also arises from careful composition of phrases, such as transposing the natural order of the subject and predicate. Kellogg suggests that “what is customary does not attract attention, what in any

23 Ibid.

24 Kellogg, 136.

25 Kellogg, 203.

26 Kellogg, 137.

noticeable respect is unusual at once becomes prominent. To place a word or phrase or clause where it usually stands in the sentence is not in any way to distinguish it; but to place it out of its wonted position is to proclaim that a heavier burden of thought is laid upon it than it ordinarily bears,” In the natural order of sentences the more important words are placed in the predicate, moving them to the beginning of the sentence is “to give them the greatest possible emphasis that position can bestow.”²⁷

Burroughs employed this advice throughout her written and oral discourse. Whether writing a newspaper editorial or speaking to an audience of thousands, Burroughs’ energy captivated and motivated people across the nation. She often began her texts colloquially, asking her audience a question, amusing them with humor, and then moving to a more substantial argument, as seen in the following opening to an editorial she wrote when W. E. B. Du Bois resigned from the NAACP:

Well, well, we are about to start another World War. Every time Dr. William Edward Burghardt Du Bois gives a command we get belligerent. About eighteen years ago, he told us to “close ranks” and we literally took the place. Now, here in the year of our Lord 1934, he commands us to **submit to segregation** and we are up in arms again. You would think that the world is coming to an end, because one man “does not choose to fight” segregation any longer.

Why all this astonishment and ranting over such an incidental thing as Dr. Du Bois's changing his mind and sheathing his sword? That's what minds are for and that's what swords are for. Furthermore, this is a free country. Any man who is hired can quit when he pleases. A person who is getting paid to solve the Negro problem is no exception to the rule. Dr. Du Bois is at least or at last honest.²⁸

Kellogg identified wit as vital in initiating social reform, and although not as common or necessary a quality as perspicuity, Kellogg deemed wit a particularly

²⁷ Kellogg, 140.

²⁸ Nannie H. Burroughs, “Du Bois Honest at Least?” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 28 April 1934.

strategic tactic, calling it “invaluable, almost indispensable, in the discussion and the reformation of bad manners, morals and institutions.”²⁹ The use of wit “denotes a power in the thinker to detect hidden and pleasing relations between ideas,” producing “a quality of style resulting from the union of seemingly unrelated ideas—a union producing surprise and pleasure.”³⁰ Wit, “is often belligerent, and then it pricks the 'swim-bladders' on which pretension or pomposity floats, or shoots its sharp arrows at follies and vices and meannesses and wickednesses wherever it finds them.”³¹

Burroughs often sported devastating humor in her speeches and writings, exposing foibles and foolishness as she humorously delivered her critique. A brief analysis of the opening segment from Burroughs’ famous “Unload Your Uncle Toms” speech captures her characteristic blend of clarity, energy, and wit as she castigates ineffective leadership:

The Negro must unload the leeches and parasitic leaders who are absolutely eating the life out of the great struggling, desiring mass of people. Chloroform your Uncle Toms. Negroes like that went out of style 70 years ago. They are relics and good for museums. I don't care whether they are in the church as the preacher, in the school as the teacher, in the ward as a politician—the quickest way to get rid of them is the best way, and the sooner the better. They are luxurious, expensive, unworthy. The Uncle Toms are greater enemies than Tillman or Cole Blease has ever been to the Negro race. They have sold us for a mess of pottage. We got the mess but not the pottage. The question, "What am I going to get out of it?" must get out of our thinking. This race would have been 100 years advanced if it had not been for this thought uppermost in the minds of our so-called leaders.³²

29 Kellogg, 186.

30 Ibid.

31 Kellogg, 188.

32 "Burroughs delivered 'Unload Uncle Toms' to 'an applauding crowd of 2500' at the City-Wide Young People's Forum at Bethel A. M. E. Church on 15 December 1935. The text is reported in the *Afro-American*. See "'Unload Your Uncle Toms,' Says Nannie Burroughs: Fighting Woman Educator Tells What Race Needs," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 23 December 1935.

In this passage, speed is achieved by word choice—using common, everyday words, figures of speech—antithesis, parallelism and hyperbole—and a combination of quick, sharp, sentences coupled with longer, rhythmic periods. Metaphor heightens emotion as we imagine corrupt leaders as parasites draining the energy of the mass of common, every-day, hard-working women and men.

The theoretical instruction Burroughs received in school was quickly put into practice, first in the classroom, and later in the larger community.

Practice in the Classroom

Burroughs had ample opportunity in class to practice the rhetorical lessons as the high school students sharpened their rhetorical ability through continual classroom practice. The theoretical instruction, Kellogg believed, should be implemented by “exhaustive practice in composition,” placing “the pupil in possession” of the art of rhetoric, “by drawing it out of him, in products, through tongue and pen.”³³ Kellogg offered students seventy-eight lessons to aid their development of style, after tackling twenty-two lessons that perfected their organizational skill. He underscored the importance of practice in the introduction to the treatise:

. . . were rhetoric to end with teaching the pupil how things should be done, its study would not be fruitless. Rhetoric bears its full fruit, however, only when, in addition to this, it leads the pupil to do them as they should be done. Not rhetoric in the memory alone, enabling one to criticise, but rhetoric that has worked its way down into the tongue and into the fingers, enabling one to speak well and write well, is what the pupil needs.³⁴

³³ Kellogg, 4.

³⁴ Kellogg, 16.

The overall school curriculum encouraged practice as a way of reinforcing the rhetorical theory learned in class. The students practiced argumentative discourse and “engaged in debates with great enthusiasm.”³⁵ Burroughs and her fellow students displayed their rhetorical skills for teachers, classmates, and the larger community, holding oratorical exercises in each classroom every Friday afternoon, and assembling before the entire student body monthly for school-wide exercises. The students eagerly anticipated these exercises, and considered it a great honor to be selected to perform. Cardozo reported to the Board of Trustees at the close of one school year:

These exercises are of great benefit and pleasure to the pupils, displaying and developing talents that would otherwise remain dormant and unknown, and inspiring confidence in the performers. They are a pleasant diversion at the close of the week, and are looked forward to by the pupils with eagerness.”³⁶

During her years in the Washington D.C. public schools, Burroughs learned many techniques she would use when speaking and writing publicly. After high school, she had hoped to attend Emerson School of Expression, but lack of money prevented her from going to Boston to study oratory. She took extension courses in law—from La Salle—and in short story writing from Columbia University. At Strayer Business College she became an expert stenographer, and encountered a teacher who encouraged her to write.³⁷ As Burroughs’ formal education fostered her rhetorical development, her church and neighborhood simultaneously inculcated rhetorical principles as well.

35 BOT, 1893-94, 177.

36 BOT, 1894-95, 172.

37 URL Papers.

Rhetorical Education in the Community

The rigorous formal training developed in Burroughs a careful, disciplined approach to language, while the surrounding community provided a spirited example of language in building community and shaping individual minds. At school she mastered rhetorical theory and practiced her newly gained rhetorical skills, but in Washington's larger African-American community Burroughs' education extended well beyond the classroom exercises. An oratorical and literary hotbed, late nineteenth-century Washington offered perhaps the nation's most fertile spot for a budding African-American orator. Her formal training encouraged careful thought and meticulously-crafted prose; however, the community gave her weighty topics to contemplate and real-life speakers to emulate.

Late nineteenth century African-American oratorical practice developed, in part, out of eighteenth and nineteenth century American slave culture. Identifying vocal expression as a transforming agency in black communities, Arthur Smith locates this tradition in the African heritage conveyed to the slaves in America:

Unable to read or write English and forbidden by law in most states to learn, the African in America early cultivated his natural fascination with Nommo, the word, and demonstrated a singular appreciation for the subtleties, pleasures, and potentials of the spoken word which has continued to enrich and embolden his history. Thus, in part because of strict antiliteracy laws during slavery, vocal communication became for a much greater proportion of blacks than whites the fundamental medium of communication. . . . As in African society, so in early African communities in America. . . the word influenced all the activities of men, all movement in nature. . . Everything appears to have rested upon the life-giving power of the word, life, death, disease, health, and as the career of Nat Turner demonstrates, even liberation.³⁸

38 Arthur L. Smith, "Socio-Historical Perspectives of Black Oratory," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 56

Fascination with and reliance upon the spoken word continued after the abolition of slavery. Following the war, this oratorical force gained new momentum as freed slaves in the south and their northern neighbors faced crippling discrimination and pervasive poverty, many saw language as the most valuable asset black Americans possessed. Foner and Branham argue that nineteenth-century African Americans “conferred extraordinary importance upon the development and use of oratorical skills” as these linguistic tools secured “both social reform and individual advancement.”³⁹ Along with oratorical skills, African-American literacy increased steadily through the nineteenth century. Denied access to mainstream rhetorical venues, black Americans developed alternate sites for literary production and public debate such as church and local literary societies.

The church richly facilitated Burroughs’ rhetorical training, providing a public sphere where she could observe men and women honing oratorical skills as they debated important social and political issues of the day. Lincoln and Mamiya suggest that the black church was “the only stable and coherent institutional area to emerge from slavery,” and the churches were “not only dominant in their communities but they also became the womb of black culture and a number of major social institutions.”⁴⁰ The churches became the incubator of oratorical culture as well and Burroughs was introduced to this tradition early in life. Foner and Branham described the black

(October 1970): 264.

39 Philip S. Foner and Robert James Branham, eds. *Lift Every Voice: African American Oratory, 1787-1900* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 2.

40 C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 17.

churches as

provid[ing] important venues for political oratory and organizing that placed the locus of control over moral and social reform within black communities. . . . Safer than most public gathering places and more susceptible to black control than most other venues for speech, black churches offered consistent audiences for speakers promoting social organization and reform. . . . For African Americans denied access to public parks, meeting halls, and theaters, black churches provided essential space for both secular and religious gatherings.”⁴¹

From her earliest days, Burroughs was involved in the black Baptist church. Her father, John Burroughs was an itinerant preacher, speaking in Virginia, Washington, D.C., and Maryland pulpits.⁴² “He called himself ‘Another Paul,’” Burroughs recalled of her father who died in 1938.⁴³ “His parents & his favorite sister spoiled him. They seemed to have thought he was ‘too smart’ to do ordinary work & he concurred in their opinion. . . . For that reason his wife decided to make her home in Washington where she could secure employment and their child could get an education.”⁴⁴ In Washington, Burroughs would encounter people and opportunities that facilitated her rhetorical development. Her participation in the black Baptist Church continued when Burroughs moved with her mother, Virginia, to Washington, D.C. where she became active in the life of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church. Living near the church, Burroughs went to everything “that looked like it would help her ‘get religion,’” she recalled. Even as a child, she “begged to get on programs and ‘speak pieces.’”⁴⁵ Her pastor, Walter A. Brooks, himself a man of notable oratorical skill, became Burroughs’ mentor and, as she would later confess, one of the

41 Foner and Branham, 4. See also Logan, *We are Coming*, xiii.

42 URL Papers.

43 URL Papers.

44 URL Papers. It is not clear when Burroughs’ younger sister Maggie died, or when her mother left her father.

45 URL Papers.

greatest influences in her life. He had a “fine bearing,” and spoke “kindly words to the children of the church,” she said of Brooks. He had “that intangible something that made [me] want to be like Jesus.”⁴⁶ Brooks was considered “one of the most progressive men in the Baptist denomination because he was surely in touch with the times and its demands as no other man of his day.”⁴⁷ His oratorical style was characterized as “eloquent, logical, forcible, and convincing. His writings were fluent and piercing. He possessed an unusual capacity for remembering all of the leaders of his day. . . .”⁴⁸ A. W. Peques described Brooks as “scholarly in his address, his style energetic, his diction precise. . . . He was always a conspicuous and influential figure in the national gatherings of the Baptists.”⁴⁹ Personally and rhetorically, Burroughs had a good role model in Brooks. He remained her close friend and mentor until his death.

Burroughs’ rhetorical life grew out of the black Baptist church which provided a public place where one’s rhetorical skills could be put into practice. In addition to providing a place for oratorical expression, the church profoundly shaped Burroughs’ understanding of racial, economic, and social issues. The black Baptist church instilled in her faith in God’s justice and deliverance for the oppressed.

Much emphasis was placed on oratorical expression in the church where preaching was a dynamic, interactive experience for most black congregations. But preaching was not the only source of rhetorical expression, and at Burroughs’ Nineteenth

46 URL Papers.

47 Edward A. Freeman, *The Epoch of Negro Baptists and The Foreign Mission Board*, (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 51-52.

48 Ibid.

49 A. W. Peques, *Our Baptist Ministers and Schools* (Springfield: Willey and Company, 1892), 358.

Street Baptist Church, along with other Washington, D. C. African-American churches, literary societies met regularly, providing more opportunities for community members to develop their own talent while appreciating others' rhetorical skills. According to Elizabeth McHenry the nineteenth century literary societies not only created a more literate population, but "furthered the evolution of a black public sphere and a politically conscious society."⁵⁰ This phenomenon was deeply entrenched in the Washington D.C. culture by 1890 as a host of accomplished writers and compelling speakers lived in Washington. Mary Ann Shadd Cary, Anna Julia Cooper, Frederick Douglass, Walter Brooks, Mary Church Terrell, Robert Terrell, Kelly Miller, and Alexander Crummell were among the many who frequented literary clubs such as the Bethel Literary Society and the Christian Endeavor Society. The literary culture in Washington, according to Wilson Moses, preceded by a couple of decades and provided some of the underlying structure for the Harlem Renaissance. Moses describes this culture as:

dominated by flinty old black nationalist preachers who had come of age before or during the Civil War. There were Puritanical, committed to 'practical religion,' and hostile to the characteristic expressions of the backwoods revival and the store front church. They took their politics seriously, preached the necessity of adjusting to industrial democracy, and advocated temperance.⁵¹

These literary societies met weekly in churches throughout the metropolitan area, generating interest among community members. The black press promoted the meetings, announcing upcoming events and covering the weekly gatherings. Local preachers,

Howard University professors, lawyers and public school teachers participated

50 Elizabeth McHenry, "Rereading Literary Legacy: New Considerations of the 19th-Century African-American Reader and Writer," *Callaloo* 22.2 (1999): 478.

51 Wilson Moses, "The Lost World of the Negro, 1895-1919: Black Literary and Intellectual Life Before the 'Renaissance'," *Black American Literature Forum* 21 (Spring-Summer 1987): 65-67.

frequently as members and featured speakers. Professor H. M. Brown, the physics and chemistry instructor at M Street High School, was considered “one of the most profound teachers in the country,” and gained city-wide acclaim when he delivered a public lecture “with startling utterance on the Negro question” at one of the city’s literary society meetings.⁵² District school teachers attended these meetings regularly, many of them members of Bethel Literary Society, perhaps the largest and most popular of the groups. These literary societies became important educational resources in the African-American community, raising vital political, social, and religious topics, building literary and argumentative skills, and providing general intellectual stimulation. Invited speakers presented papers on a wide range of topics, sometimes igniting public debate among those in attendance. The meetings often became quite lively, with audience members sometimes debating for hours positions introduced by the scheduled papers. Occasionally participants staged a public debate such as the one introducing the proposition, “Resolved: that the pen is mightier than the sword.”⁵³

Burroughs would have gleaned much from observing and participating in the literary culture of Washington where she heard political debates, poetry readings, and orations. The *Washington Bee* reported a typical Tuesday evening meeting: a heated debate was held featuring as the main speaker, the honorable C. H. J. Taylor who delivered a “most eloquent and logical argument” on “the proper course for the Negro to take in politics.” Taylor argued that political activity would do more to advance the race

⁵² *Washington Bee*, 6 January 1894; *Washington Bee*, 30 December 1893.

⁵³ *Washington Bee*, 13 January 1894.

than “any other business inviting his attention.” After Taylor finished speaking, Jesse Lawson spoke up in support of Taylor’s proposition. But W. Calvin Chase, the well-known and controversial editor of the *Washington Bee* disagreed, arguing that too much time had been wasted on politics and that more time devoted to business would advance the race further. Many others joined the fray, according to the *Bee*’s published account. “Lawyer Jones” retorted, “the Negro is just where he was before he jumped from the Republican limb to the Democratic limb,” ending his statement by declaring, “Now, in the name of God, what other limb will Mr. Taylor suggest!” Taylor replied that he “saw nothing good in the Democratic party. It was the party that has oppressed the negro and is still oppressing him.” Remarks were made by several other participants, and the meeting closed as Taylor “challenged any man to an hour’s discussion on the subject . . .” claiming that he would prove his point about politics being the best course of action to take.⁵⁴ Other topics offered provocative fare for Washington’s African-American residents, introducing theological, historical, philosophical, political and practical issues such as: “Which is More Vexatious, the White Problem or the Black Problem?” “The People are Demanding Restoration of Suffrage,” “Gratitude and Courage,” “Heroes of the Anti-Slavery Struggles,” “Eminent Musicians of the Negro Race,” “The Negro in Journalism,” “Dress as a Fine Art,” and “The Year 2000 and What of It?”⁵⁵

The black press kept Burroughs and other Washington residents abreast of the city’s rhetorical events. The *Washington Bee*, in particular, covered the literary scene

54 “C. H. J. Taylor at the Literary,” *Washington Bee*, 28 October 1893.

55 See *Washington Bee* 28 April 1894; *Washington Bee* 17 March 1894; *Washington Bee* 14 April 1894; and J. W. Cromwell, *History of the Bethel Literary and Historical Association*, (Washington: Press of R. L. Pendleton, 1896), 4, 6, 7, 11.

faithfully, documenting the featured topics, speakers, and details of the literary society proceedings. The paper also reported other church activities, paying attention to the Sunday morning sermons delivered in Washington's black churches. For example, the 31 March 1894 edition encouraged "[l]overs of eloquence and sound theology" to hear Reverend Benjamin's Sunday night sermon, "God, the Negro and the American People."⁵⁶ The following month, the paper urged readers to visit the Metropolitan A.M.E. Church to hear Frederick Douglass—"old man eloquent"—deliver his famous oration, "Self Made Man."⁵⁷

As an assistant for the *Washington Bee's* editor, W. Calvin Chase, Burroughs was well-informed about the rhetorical and literary events in Washington. Like Walter Brooks, Chase served as an important rhetorical figure in Burroughs' early life. A lawyer, historian of the black press, and one of the best-known newspaper editors in the nation, Chase offered Washington's African-American community pointed commentary regarding social and political injustice. As lynching continued unabated in the South, Chase criticized the *Washington Post* for "suppressing the outrage in the South." Calling the newspaper, "a rebel sheet," Chase ran the following headline: "The Washington Post Says--But Who Cares What the Washington Post Says?"⁵⁸ His fierce attacks on injustice attracted national attention. When the *Lynchburg Counselor and Herald* described the

⁵⁶ Benjamin's preaching became somewhat of a sensation in Washington, drawing huge crowds and increasing the popularity of Pisgah A.M.E. Zion church. Chase wrote of Benjamin, "His elegant language and eloquent tongue would have done credit even to Rome." See *Washington Bee* 14 April 1894; *Washington Bee*, 31 March 1894.

⁵⁷ *Washington Bee*, 21 April 1894.

⁵⁸ W. Calvin Chase, "The Washington Post Says--But Who Cares What the Washington Post Says?" *Washington Bee*, 24 April 1894.

Bee as “probably more interesting and more feared than any Negro paper in the country,” Chase retorted that the *Bee* was “feared because it stings without regard to class, race or color.”⁵⁹ Chase supported Burroughs' first endeavor to organize a movement in Washington, D. C. Following high school graduation, Burroughs and six other graduates met in August 1895 to open a black-owned dry goods store. Burroughs, as the leader of the group, delivered a speech to community leaders requesting their support. When the *Washington Post* reported the meeting—incorrectly stating that the store would serve black customers only, Burroughs quickly fired back in a letter to the *Post*, “While the enterprise will be run by colored men and women, believe us we earnestly solicit the patronage of both black and white. Trusting that you will ever remember that our doors shall be thrown open to both black and white, and that every man shall be treated as a man, regardless of the color of his skin.” Although the group met at least twice during the fall of 1895, it is unclear whether they succeeded in opening the store.⁶⁰

Burroughs observed and participated in this lively rhetorical community, appearing as a featured speaker as early as 1901 with an address before the Congressional Lyceum entitled, “The Merits and Demerits of Negro Leaders of the 19th Century.”⁶¹

59 See “A Large Crowd at John Wesley Church,” *Washington Bee*, 27 June 1894; W. Calvin Chase, *Washington Bee* 16 December 1893.

60 “For Colored People Only,” *Washington Post*, 14 August 1895. Burroughs wrote an editorial two days later correcting the Post. See Nannie Burroughs, “Not for ‘Colored People Only,’” *Washington Post* 16 August 1895. See also “The Colored Dry Goods Company,” *Washington Post*, 21 August 1895; Baltimore leaders discussed and applauded the idea as well, see “Need Better Schools,” *Washington Post*, 13 September 1895.

61 The Congressional Lyceum met at Lincoln Memorial Church at the corner of 11th and R Streets, N. W. in Washington D. C. The *Washington Bee* announced Burroughs' address and upcoming scheduled papers for the month: “Colored Soldiers in American Wars,” (February 10) by Prof. N.E. Weatherless of M Street High School, and “The Implied Constitutional Powers of the President,” (February 24) by Thomas L. Jones, Esq. See *Washington Bee*, 9 February 1901.

When Burroughs spoke to a record-breaking crowd at the Bethel Literary Society in 1906, Chase was among those who responded to a speech in which she considered the question, “Does the American Negro know where he is going?” Using words “most piercing and eloquent” Burroughs unleashed a scathing critique of African-American leaders Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Kelly Miller. The *Washington Bee* reported, “While she compliments them all, she asserts that their methods will not liberate the negro and give him that which will tend to make him an American citizen.”⁶² Malcolm Jack Chisum, conveyed his impression of the event to Booker T. Washington in a letter:

It was my good fortune to attend The Metropolitan Literary Society’s meeting tonight. Miss Nannie Burroughs spoke and in her speech she raked you mercilessly, before she got through she raked also Bishop Turner, Prof. Du Bois, Mr. Kelly Miller and “all” the colored men in Washington D.C. This gave me a chance and I brought the house down by flaying her in a nice sort of way and closing with the statement that while we were at a loss we would be glad to have her find us, especially so, since we were informed (by her) that she had more brains than Profs. Washington, Kelly Miller, Du Bois, Bishop Turner and all the men in Washington rolled into one. She’s a dangerous little tramp. . . .⁶³

Chism's account underestimates Burroughs' performance at Bethel that night. The *Washington Bee* reported that the record-breaking crowd gave Burroughs a standing ovation—the paper concluded its commentary on her speech with effusive praise, “She is no doubt the greatest female orator in the country. Her equals cannot be found. When she went abroad last year, she revolutionized Great Britain. The English people think she

62 “The Way Out,” *Washington Bee*, 20 February 1906. “Negroes Address American Public,” *Washington Post*, 6 August 1906.

63 Melvin Jack Chisum to Booker T. Washington, 20 February 1906, printed in *Booker T. Washington Papers*, Louis R. Harlen, ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 530.

is the greatest woman orator in the world.”⁶⁴ Burroughs’ performance at the 1906 meeting suggests that she had absorbed the spirited critique of racial issues common to the surrounding community. With its intrepid press, active pulpit and vibrant literary community, Washington’s robust rhetorical environment nurtured Burroughs as her writing and speaking skills developed. Her family and the community, along with the District of Columbia school system would prepare her well for her foray into public life; she would use these rhetorical skills to fuel a long and productive career as a civil rights leader. Her first national appearance occurred rather unexpectedly at the 1900 National Baptist Convention meeting.

Burroughs and the Establishment of the Woman's Convention

Burroughs would use and develop her rhetorical skills in her work with the Woman's Convention. Relatively unknown among black Baptists, twenty-five year-old Burroughs delivered "How the Sisters are Hindered from Helping" at the annual meeting of the National Baptist Convention in Richmond, Virginia. Burroughs recalled many years later that when she spoke, “the fire works began.”⁶⁵ Burroughs remembered the event as a controversial one, ““Who is she anyhow?”” rang all through the house. 'Sit down! Where did you come from?' were some of the commands and questions fired” at Burroughs. Walter Brooks was sent for to take the “little upstart” out so that she didn't disturb “the leaders,” and it took several hours to launch the new organization.⁶⁶ Others recalled her performance differently. Her speech, in the words of one of the delegates

64 “What I Saw and Heard,” *Washington Bee*, 3 March 1906.

65 URL Papers.

66 Ibid.

attending the meeting, “captivated the Convention.”⁶⁷ Another observer recalled the impact Burroughs had at the September 1900 meeting:

It can be said of her as of Ruth of old: ‘God hath sent you to the kingdom for such an hour as this.’ It was at the time when Negro Baptist women were unorganized, lethargical, that Dr. L. G. Jordan the Secretary of the Foreign Mission Board had urged them to form a national body. Indeed, for four years the Foreign Mission Board had urged harnessing of the great gospel energy of our women.”⁶⁸

In her speech, Burroughs had accomplished what her predecessors were unable to achieve for they had been promoting such an organization since 1895. She would also display what would become her rhetorical trademark: Through a subtle understanding of her audience and strategic exploitation of the broader context in which she spoke, Burroughs’ words energized her listeners, skillfully depicting the black Baptist women as confident, assertive, and equipped with a plan for tackling the mission work of the convention. Although the opening of the speech seems a bit more formal than her later discourse, we can see her energetic style developing in the text:

We come not to usurp thrones nor to sow discord, but to so organize and systematize the work that each church may help through a Woman's Missionary Society and not be made the poorer thereby. It is for the utilization of talent and the stimulation to Christian activity in our Baptist churches that prompt us to service. We realize that to allow these gems to lie unpolished longer means a loss to the denomination. For a number of years there has been a righteous discontent, a burning zeal to go forward in his name among the Baptist women of our churches and it will be the dynamic force in the religious campaign at the opening of the 20th century. It will be the spark that shall light the altar fire in heathen lands. We realize, too, that the work is too great and the laborers too few for us to stand idly by while like Trojans the brethren at the head of the work under the convention toil unceasingly.(1)

We come now to their rescue. We unfurl our banner upon which is inscribed this

⁶⁷ “A Worthy Young Woman,” *National Baptist Union*, 5 March 1904.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

motto, "The world for Christ. Woman, arise, He calleth for thee!"(2) ⁶⁹

Burroughs' depiction of the women in the speech placed them squarely within the progressive, onward march of the black Baptists by characterizing them as having a "righteous discontent, a burning zeal" to be part of a "dynamic force in the religious campaign at the opening of the twentieth century." National Baptist Convention President E. C. Morris characterized the National Baptist Convention as representing "the largest and most invincible army of Negro Christians in the world, as well as a sisterhood of churches which has done more toward lifting up the masses of an emancipated race than any other denomination among other people." ⁷⁰ The year before, during the 1899 convention, Morris, in his annual address praised the "unparalleled progress," made by the Convention. He proclaimed, "that in the onward movement of the great army of God in the world Negro Baptist are a potent factor." ⁷¹ One year later Burroughs capitalized upon his words, portraying the women as an equally potent force in the onward movement.

Burroughs blended appropriately striking ideas with clear, compelling imagery and energetic prose as she opened her speech. Rather than asking the men for permission to organize, Burroughs immediately placed black Baptist women at the ready and eager service of the Convention. Her opening words conveyed this notion powerfully, "We

69 "Minutes," *Journal of the Twentieth Annual Session of the National Baptist Convention* (Nashville: National Baptist Publishing Board, 1900), 196.

70 See "President's Annual Address," in E. C. Morris, *Sermons, Addresses and Reminiscences and Important Correspondence* (Nashville: Townsend Press, 1993), 87.

71 "President's Annual Address," delivered at the National Baptist Convention at Nashville, Tennessee September 1899. Text reprinted in Morris, 107-127.

come. . .," and the next few sentences establish this idea further: "We realize," "we realize," "we come," "we unfurl," and "we have decided." Her word choice accentuated the unity, intelligence, purpose and agency of the women. Burroughs' word choice, along with the composition of the sentences created a strident call to arms for the women in the audience. Once she established the need for the women's help in the larger organization, she unveiled the power of the women declaring, "We unfurl our banner upon which is inscribed this motto, 'The world for Christ. Woman, arise, He calleth for thee!'" The unfurling of the banner suggests organized power, which would have likely emboldened the women in the audience. In the opening paragraphs of the speech Burroughs also convinced the black Baptist men that a woman's organization would supply the larger convention with the necessary resources to accomplish its goals.

Capturing the progressive mood of the country and the church's enthusiasm for world missions, Burroughs' speech conveyed an optimistic and progressive vision for the black Baptist women, creating in them a sense of urgency and a call to purposeful action that would complement and extend the mission of the National Baptist Convention. Burroughs' words were immediately influential—by the end of the conference the NBC had approved the establishment of the auxiliary Woman's Convention.(WC)⁷²

Burroughs' rhetorical power would develop rapidly in her leadership role with the convention, first as corresponding secretary (1900-1947), and later as president (1948-1961). Through persistent speaking and writing, Burroughs systematically educated and encouraged millions of women as the Woman's Convention grew to become the largest

⁷² "A Worthy Young Woman," *National Baptist Union*, 5 March 1904.

group of African-American women in the world. Higginbotham has described the Women's Convention as "crucial to broadening the public arm of the church and making it the most powerful institution of racial self-help in the African-American community."⁷³ The cultural significance of the Woman's Convention to African-American women cannot be underestimated as it:

legitimated a new form of representative politics. The convention afforded black women, though denied participation in the electoral procedures of the official public culture because of race and gender, the opportunity to learn about and participate in the rudiments of self-government. . . . It constituted a black women's congress, so to speak, where women as delegates from local churches, district associations, and state conventions assembled as a national body, discussed and debated issues of common concern, disseminated information outward to broader female constituencies, and implemented nationally supported programs.⁷⁴

The skills and confidence gained through participating in the Woman's Convention prepared millions of African-American women for community service, political activity and ultimately, for full citizenship.

Commencing the march of the black Baptist women, Burroughs would join the efforts of other women in the convention to lead African-American women. With determination and persistence, Burroughs steadily built the organization—largely through her rhetorical efforts as the convention's corresponding secretary. The black Baptist women provided the initial sphere of empowerment for Burroughs. She, in turn, shaped the organization as it grew in number and increased in influence during the early 20th century. Burroughs, through her tireless rhetorical endeavors became the driving

⁷³ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 1.

⁷⁴ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 151.

force behind the rapid growth and success of the Woman's Convention. As newly-elected corresponding secretary, she oversaw all communication with convention members and the public, traveling throughout the country, inspiring rural and urban women through speeches, personal letters, tracts, and a weekly column in the *National Baptist Union*. Burroughs and the other leaders of the convention knew that keeping in constant touch with the women was critical to success--either by letter, through the pages of the Baptist newspaper, *The Mission Herald*, or by a visit from Burroughs. Burroughs described her visits as locating "quiet and obscure women, who knew not their talents, and we have brought them forth, given them inspiration and work, developed them into some of the strongest and most resourceful women of the age, if known only among their own people."⁷⁵ Burroughs found "in all the churches hundreds of our sisters ready and willing to work, if only enlisted and told what to do."⁷⁶ The personal contact with Burroughs accomplished much by way of inspiring the women to action. Along with her visits, she offered practical advice on a range of subjects through a regular column in the *National Baptist Union*, entitled, "The Woman's Department." Among the wide variety of topics she addressed, Burroughs included columns on mothering, setting up local meetings, labor issues, religious topics, political topics, and reading lists. Her columns in the *Union* combined advice, social critique, and practical instruction, sometimes with the women in mind, but other times directed to a more general audience.

 Laboring 365 days and traveling 32,350 miles, Burroughs reported her activities

⁷⁵ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 184.

⁷⁶ *Journal of the 1901 National Baptist Convention*, 3.

during her second year with the Woman's Convention: 350 speeches delivered, 12,890 letters written, and 8,723 letters received.⁷⁷ By the end of the second year, Burroughs, in her 1902 report to the annual convention, described the outcome of her endeavors:

throughout the entire country women are awakening and enlisting under our banner. . . . in most of the states, there is in existence organizations of women, wither district or state, and we set out to so labor that they might fall in line with us without attempting to revolutioniz[e] things. Our efforts have not been in vain, for the women, East and West, North and South, with clasped hands and consecrated hearts are here in this meeting ready to sing . . . Where He Leads me I will follow.⁷⁸

Her second year of work showed even greater results. Burroughs reported at the annual meeting:

We realized that while we sounded the trumpet that awoke Negro Baptist women in 1901, we had double the work to do this year to keep them awake for until we are fully awakened and consecrated, the zeal will die out, many will say, "Soul, take thy ease." The constant stirring in speech, in writing and in prayer, is absolutely essential to the life of the work.⁷⁹

Through "constant stirring in speech, in writing and in prayer," Burroughs' leadership swelled the membership of the organization. By 1903 the Woman's Convention represented nearly 1 million African-American women.⁸⁰ And while the initial contact with Burroughs inspired the women in their local communities, the annual meetings galvanized the women who went to great lengths and expense to attend the fall convention. These gatherings served, in Burroughs words, as "schools of methods" for local communities:

⁷⁷ "Woman's Auxiliary Convention," *National Baptist Union*, 27 September 1902.

⁷⁸ Nannie Burroughs, "The First Annual Report of the Executive Board Woman's Convention," 1901, 3.

⁷⁹ N. H. Burroughs, "The Second Annual Report of the Executive Board Woman's Convention,"

Birmingham, Alabama, 17-22 September 1902, 4.

⁸⁰ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 151.

Women come up here, get new ideas, new material, new spirit, and go home and infuse and enthuse their sisters. The thousands of workers in local churches who have never been to one of our annual meetings have had the meetings brought to them. A month after we close our Convention, the speeches, reports, songs and suggestions are heard at every crossroad.⁸¹

For many, Burroughs' annual addresses were the highlight of the meeting.

Through the speeches, she reported past year's work, established an agenda for the upcoming year, and offered enthusiastic inspiration. Women heard speeches on such issues as the technical education of girls and women, the state of African-American women in general, and the injustice of lynching. Year after year, Burroughs inspired the women to action through her annual addresses which were published and distributed after the convention.

Burroughs' work with the convention rapidly increased her visibility throughout the country among both women and men. After only four years as corresponding secretary, the *National Baptist Union* offered the following assessment of her efforts:

Strong in convictions, forceful in speech, direct in argument, logical in her conclusions, she has steadily grown in popularity with her own denomination and especially so with the women. By voice and pen she has gone forth . . . until the great Baptist womanly heart of this whole country pulsates with a longing for the salvation of the lost at home and abroad as never before. As a writer she is sought by our leading magazines and papers and her articles are read with interest throughout the country.”⁸²

Burroughs' increasing experience and power as a leader prepared her well to address rhetorically the pressing issues among African-Americans during the inter-war

81 National Baptist Convention, *Journal of the Forty-first Annual Session of the National Baptist Convention and the Twenty-first Annual Session of the Woman's Convention, Held in Chicago, Illinois, September 7-12, 1921* (Nashville: Sunday School Publishing Board, 1921), 287.

82 “A Worthy Young Woman,” *National Baptist Union*, 17 September 1904.

period. For the first two decades of her career, she used language strategically to build and galvanize an army of women. In her speeches to the convention, we hear themes that she would sound during the 1920s and 1930s—power, progress, movement, action and identity. In 1919, she talked of mobilizing a “great army of Negroes,”⁸³ adding, “We have talked in war terms so long that no language is rich enough and strong enough to express our sentiments except the language of the trench and the camp.”⁸⁴ Although this vocabulary was common parlance among Americans during the years of the first great war of the twentieth century, Burroughs would appropriate it for other means—joined with a style of language that was crisp and forceful, she would urge African-Americans to take their place in the battle for liberty and equality in America. While she continued to devote a considerable amount of time to the Woman’s Convention and the National Training School during these decades, her influence extended throughout the African-American community. In an effort to facilitate citizenship among African-Americans, Burroughs increasingly turned her attention and her rhetorical skill to the issue of political activity.

83 *Journal of the Thirty-Ninth Annual Session of the National Baptist Convention* (Nashville: National Baptist Publishing Board, 1919), 230.

84 *Ibid*, 227.

Chapter Three: Political Empowerment: “What the Negro Wants Politically”

“What does the Negro want politically? He wants his rights as an American citizen and not simply jobs for a few politicians. That's what he wants. . . . With the ballot in his hand he has a weapon of defense, protection, and expression. Both parties will need his vote and he will learn to use it wisely.”

Nannie H. Burroughs, November 1928

Introduction

Considered “the bitterest and most baffling presidential campaign of more than a generation,”¹ the 1928 presidential campaign had, in Nannie Burroughs’ words, “begun on an elevated platform from which the American people were to discuss their ideals, hopes and dreams”; after weeks of bitter fighting the political debacle “ended in a fight on the side walks of New York over rum, race and religion.”²

The election had indeed started on a hopeful note as the number of potential African-Americans voters swelled to its highest level, giving the race a collective political advantage nationally. W. E. B. Du Bois figured that, all things considered, there were three million African-Americans eligible to vote in the fall election.³ Black leaders marveled at the possibility, “For the first time since his enfranchisement, the colored voter is confronted with an opportunity at a national election to use his suffrage for the ad[v]ancement of his own cause. . . . This election affords the Negro voter in the North an opportunity never before enjoyed by him to help his brother in the South.”⁴

1 Theodore Tiller, “Cross-Currents in Campaign Baffle Prediction, Democratic Declaration,” *Washington Post*, 4 November 1928.

2 “Nannie H. Burroughs, “Negroes Now Demand Political Recognition by Republicans,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 29 November 1928.

3 David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century 1919-1963*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000, 242.

4 Ferdinand Q. Morton, “Smith,” *The Crisis*, November 1928, 368.

The 1928 campaign, however, unfolded with such acrimony that many African-American voters, rather than feeling encouraged by their newly-exercised political power, ended up disgusted and disheartened. Democrats and Republicans alike had shamelessly exploited race to gain favor with the white south, and neither party seemed willing to defend the constitutional rights of African-Americans. Walter White complained bitterly, “Those who have been determined to maintain a degraded status for the Negro have shrewdly concentrated on taking from him his most potent weapon and defense—the right to vote.”⁵ When Republican Herbert Hoover won the election—carrying several formerly-Democratic southern states—one question seemed to echo throughout the African-American community, “What is the political status of the Negro in America?” The lead editorial in the *Philadelphia Tribune* summarized the situation well, “Chanting a song of hate and with a gospel of intolerance upon its lips the solid-South crumbled and fell. . . . The big question in the minds of Negroes is: How will the breaking of the solid-South by the Republican Party affect Negroes?” Will it help them or will it eliminate them from politics?”⁶

Burroughs skillfully answers this question in her essay “What the Negro Wants Politically,” interpreting election results, and arguing convincingly for the collective power of African-Americans. Burroughs, as a Republican National Committee (RNC) spokesperson, campaigned tirelessly for three months, releasing written statements through the press and delivering stump speeches across the upper mid-western and north-

5 Walter White, *How Far the Promised Land?*, New York: The Viking Press, 1955, 65.

6 “The South Crumbles,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 15 November 1928.

eastern regions of the country. Three weeks after the election she wrote, “What the Negro Wants Politically.” The article, published widely in the black press, represents Burroughs’ characteristic rhetorical tendencies, presenting in clear, forceful prose an incisive analysis of a pressing political or social problem, and then providing a detailed, practical solution to the problem. More specifically, Burroughs positions the race as a formidable political force, making demands of the Republican party, and establishing an agenda for African-Americans voters.

Several forces combined to thwart the budding political power of African-Americans. Within the race, disorganization, power struggles, and party dissension diminished the possibility of a unified voting bloc. Within the Republican party, blatant and ongoing discrimination, compounded by the racist campaign tactics used during the fall campaign, left black voters disgusted, demoralized, and uncertain of their political power. The challenge for Burroughs would be to stoke and direct among African-Americans the political enthusiasm generated during the campaign in spite of such discouragement. She would also send a sharp message to the RNC about African-American political power.

An analysis of the text will demonstrate more fully how she accomplished this, but first an examination of the context—the Constitutional controversy, Burroughs’ political leadership, party loyalty, and post-election analysis in the African-American press—will sharpen our understanding of the choices she made in writing her post-election editorial.

The Constitutional Crisis of 1928

The status of the Eighteenth Amendment, and by extension the amendments securing African-American freedom and citizenship, became one of the most highly contested issues during the fall campaign of 1928. Enacted in 1920, the Eighteenth Amendment prohibited “the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors.” Local, state, and federal enforcement of the law proved difficult, if not impossible, making organized crime rampant, political corruption common, and legal resistance employed at every level of society. Increasingly, Americans called for the repeal of the Volstead Act, and Alfred E. Smith, governor of New York and Democratic candidate for president, seemed to indicate that he would overturn, or at least alter, the unpopular amendment, although he never took a definitive public stand on Prohibition. Herbert Hoover openly vowed to uphold the amendment, yet he offered no viable method of enforcement. Kelly Miller succinctly captured the dilemma regarding the issue, “If Hoover is elected, he cannot enforce the Volstead Act; if Smith is elected he cannot repeal it. In any event, the nation is at a moral stand still. Painful experience proves that no organic law can be enforced unless the vast majority of the people want it enforced.”⁷

Regardless of one's commitment to Prohibition, the controversy highlighted the constitutional implications for the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. In her first campaign press release, Burroughs warned readers of the constitutional issues at stake in the election:

The test in this campaign is a test of the strength of the amendments to the Constitution. If the eighteenth amendment is not strong enough to stand—if we

⁷ Kelly Miller, “Hoover and Smith on Prohibition,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 27 September 1928.

vote men into office who sanction its modification or annulment—we might as well sign the death certificate of the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth amendments. . . . Do not vote any man into power who proposes to tamper with the Constitution of the United States and do not forget that the party which Governor Smith represents did not help to write your rights into the Constitution and it should not therefore be given an opportunity to tamper with them. No chain is stronger than its weakest link. If you vote to weaken the eighteenth link, you weaken or jeopardize all of the links.”⁸

Perhaps the growing number of African-American voters alarmed white southerners, prompting an assault on their constitutional rights during the 1928 campaign. The large migration of African-Americans from the rural South to the urban North presented new political opportunities for black voters, and at the same time, heightened fears of white southerners. Less than three percent of the African-American population left the South from 1890 to 1910, but beginning in 1916, large numbers of African-Americans fled the South seeking better employment and an improved quality of life. Some scholars have estimated that nearly one million black citizens migrated north by late 1918.⁹ Adam Fairclough described the situation as momentous, “To many observers at the time. . . the flow of black Southerners to New York, Philadelphia, Chicago and every other big Northern city seemed like a raging, uncontrollable flood. And all agreed that it represented something profoundly significant.”¹⁰ Burroughs monitored the demographic changes, commenting on the issue in her annual speeches to the WC. She interpreted the migration as a welcomed shift in national political power:

Friends, say what you will about his appalling ignorance, his dirt, his boorishness, his shouting and his Jim Crowism, that remnant from down home, patiently and

8 “Nannie Burroughs Urges Support of Republican Party,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 29 September 1928.

9 Franklin and Moss, 341.

10 Fairclough, 89.

properly directed, will become the greatest factor and the most valuable asset in our political, economic, and social adjustment program—not only in the North, but throughout the country. . . . These same migrants are going to show northern Negroes how to send men and women of their race to Congress.¹¹

As the number of eligible African-American voters swelled, Burroughs and other African-American leaders would work diligently to channel this new source of political power; as they worked to cultivate, educate, and mobilize the new voters, southern Democrats sought to mitigate the race's political influence. Some proposed nullifying the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the U. S. Constitution. Known as the “Civil War Amendments,” the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments secured freedom for all who had been enslaved, and citizenship and voting rights for African-American men. Although the Fifteenth Amendment gave African-American men the franchise, local custom quickly stripped away the right to vote. African-Americans living in the south were systematically disfranchised by a variety of means. In 1890, Mississippi disfranchised its black citizens by revising the state constitution to require a two-dollar poll tax before voting; additionally, each potential voter had to demonstrate an ability “to read the Constitution, or to understand the Constitution when read,” as a requirement for registration. Additional southern states adopted the Mississippi model—South Carolina followed in 1895, as did Louisiana (1898), North Carolina (1900), Alabama (1901), Virginia (1901-2), Georgia (1908), and Oklahoma (1910). Other states—Tennessee, Florida, Arkansas, and Texas—excluded black voters by other means.¹² The rancor

11 Nannie Burroughs, “Twenty-Fourth Annual Report of the Executive Board and Corresponding Secretary of the Woman’s Convention, Auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention,” Washington, D.C.: Murray Bros. Printing, 1924, 7.

12 Louisiana extended the Mississippi plan by adding the “grandfather clause,” permitting to vote in the state only those whose grandfathers had been on the electoral roll in 1867. These strategies effectively

behind these maneuvers revealed the deep-seated racial prejudice lingering in the south. Benjamin Tillman, senator from South Carolina, boasted on the Senate floor in 1900 of his state's attempt to disfranchise the African-American voter, "We have done our best. We have scratched our heads to find out how we could eliminate the last one of them. We stuffed ballot boxes. We shot them. We are not ashamed of it."¹³

Some southerners openly called for the annulment of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution as another devious method for disfranchisement. This strategy, pursued primarily in the South following Reconstruction, erupted once again in November 1927 when an editorial in the *New York World* charged Senator Carter Glass of Virginia with inconsistently calling for the enforcement of the Eighteenth Amendment while refusing to send federal agents to Kentucky to supervise state elections. In response to the charge, Glass attacked African-American suffrage, asserting that the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments should be considered null and void. Glass, repeating a popular argument heard in the South since Reconstruction, argued that the amendments were passed "in the passions of war, and constituted an attempt to destroy white civilization in nearly one-third of the nation and to erect on its ruins an Ethiopian state, ignorant, profligate, corrupt, controlled by manumitted slaves, not one per cent of them semi-literate and these led by a band of white miscreants, execrated in figures in the nightmare of reconstruction."¹⁴

reduced the number of African-American voters. For instance, the number of eligible black voters in Louisiana dropped from 130,000 in 1890 to 5,000 in 1900, and in Alabama from 181,000 in 1890 to 3,000 in 1900. See Sean Dennis Cashman, *America in the Gilded Age* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 187.

¹³ Cashman, 190.

¹⁴ "Civil War Amendments Bone of Contention Between Drys and Wets; Issues Declared Forced," *Black*

Outraged by such assertions, the black community challenged Glass. Burroughs was among a group of African-American leaders who responded by signing a memorial, which read, in part:

We urge the sustaining of the entire Constitution of the United States and the enforcement of all its provisions and laws. . . . It is our conviction that every amendment of the national Constitution is as vital a part of fundamental law as is the first article of that instrument; and that every act passed by the lawfully constituted legislative body. . . . If the foregoing is a true statement of the general principle of just government and sane statesmanship, then it is easy to specify: That the 13th, 14th, and 18th amendments to the Constitution should be as honestly enforced as the 5th and 6th. For the statesman the only alternatives are respect or repeal. To flagrantly violate or neglect certain parts of the law is not statesmanship; but it is contemptible and even dangerous politics.¹⁵

Citing local and state disenfranchisement of African-Americans, the signers concluded, “In the last analysis, white people and black people in America have a common interest in the sacredness and the security of the ballot and of all constitutional rights.”¹⁶

African-Americans, while alarmed by Glass’ attack on the Constitution, were hardly reassured by the Republican party’s response to the issue. The RNC included in its 1928 political platform an explicit endorsement of the Eighteenth Amendment, and although African-American delegates pleaded vigorously for their inclusion, party leaders refused to include a plank to enforce the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.¹⁷ Three months later Burroughs would address the issue in her first campaign speech, delivered before thousands of women gathered for the annual meeting of the Woman's Convention

Dispatch, 24 November 1927.

15 “Pickens Drafts Memorial to Congress for Negro Organizations,” *Black Dispatch*, 15 December 1927.

16 Ibid.

17 See Kelly Miller, “A Moral and Political Expediency,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 21 June 1928; James L. Williams, “Kansas City Keeps Eyes on Melon,” *Washington Post*, 11 June 1928; and “Enforcement Clause is Attacked by Both Sides’ Leaders,” *Washington Post*, 12 June 1928.

in early September. Highlighting the centrality of the amendments, she argued,

The nation is in the midst of a political campaign. The moral issues involved are comparable only with those issues over which the Civil War was fought. . . . The test in this campaign is a test of the strength of the amendments to the Constitution. If the eighteenth amendment is not strong enough to stand—if we vote men into office who sanction its modification or annulment—we might as well sign the death certificate of the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth amendments. If prejudice ever has a chance to tear up or tamper with one of the amendments to the Constitution, that same prejudice will take advantage of the glorious opportunity and modify the War Amendments. It cost the nation billions of dollars and thousands of lives to get those three amendments into the Constitution. They are blood amendments, baptized in the carnage of Gettysburg and sealed with the blood of Abraham Lincoln in Ford's Theatre. They are our most sacred heritage and we should wade through blood to safeguard them.¹⁸

Burroughs' passionate and vivid depiction of the rights as “blood amendments, baptized in the carnage of Gettysburg” underscored the constitutional crisis facing the African-American community in the late 1920s. Burroughs sounded this alarm continually as she campaigned throughout the fall.

Burroughs' 1928 Campaign for Constitutional Rights

A natural choice for the RNC speaker's bureau, Burroughs was among those chosen by party leaders “for their eloquence and logic” to “present the issues of the day, discuss the principles of the party and the merits of the candidates.”¹⁹ Hoover hand-picked the leaders of the RNC's “Colored Voters Division,” and in turn the speaker's bureau sought the best oratorical talent among black Republicans to represent the party during the 1928 presidential campaign. Billing Hoover as “a man of broad sympathies who comprehends their problems, and who has already demonstrated his willingness to

18 Report of the Corresponding Secretary, Proceedings of the Woman's Convention, National Baptist Convention, 10 September 1928, 327.

19 “G. O. P. Line-Up Shows Many Race Leaders,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 11 August 1928.

apply his scientific mind to those problems for a just and fair solution,” the Republican party sought “[d]evoted, active, and aggressive” black Republican leaders to band together “for the purpose of getting out the largest possible vote for Hoover and Curtis.”²⁰

One of the most requested speakers of the fall campaign, Burroughs was strategically sent to prime battleground territory, addressing large bi-racial audiences in Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Kentucky, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Maryland.²¹ Daisy Lampkin, the director of the Women’s Bureau for the Colored Voter’s Division of the RNC, wrote to Burroughs in early October, “Telegrams are pouring in for you.”²² Lampkin received so many requests for Burroughs that she had to turn down more invitations than she accepted.²³ Burroughs’ schedule kept her on the road most of the month before the election—on 7 October, she boarded a train to New England; that afternoon she delivered a speech in New Canaan, Connecticut, addressed an audience in Stamford, Connecticut, and then traveled to New York City where she spoke at two political rallies. Overnight she traveled to Kentucky where a record-breaking crowd of fifteen-hundred gathered at the courthouse in Paducah to hear her speak. The audience, she reported, “showed great enthusiasm and evidence of intelligent understanding” of campaign issues. Two days later in Henderson, Kentucky, Burroughs found the Republican representatives well-organized and enthusiastic as she rallied the one-thousand men and women filling the church and overflowing into the church yard. The

20 “Step-by-Step Plans for Organizing Hoover-Curtis Clubs,” Washington, D.C.: Colored Voters Division, Republican National Committee, 1928. NHB Papers.

21 “Big Meeting Scheduled Soon Featuring Nannie Burroughs as Principal Speaker,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 6 October 1928.

22 Daisy E. Lampkin to Burroughs, 9 October 1928, NHB Papers.

23 Daisy E. Lampkin to Mrs. Paul FitzSimons, 8 October 1928, NHB Papers.

following day as she visited community centers and schools, Burroughs reported that she encountered “universal appreciation” for the speech she had delivered the previous night.²⁴

Traveling to Chicago, she addressed thousands of men and women, black and white, who packed Chicago's Eighth Regiment Armory to hear her speak. William Pickens and Senator Robert E. Watson of Indiana had been invited to speak as well, but Burroughs was the one who delivered, “the most telling speech of the afternoon.”²⁵ Local politicians judged the gathering to be the “greatest political meeting ever held by Negroes in this history of Chicago.”²⁶ The meeting, reporter Cary B. Lewis surmised, “had a pro-Hoover effect on the entire southside.”²⁷ Burroughs, too, seemed pleased with the results; she wrote to Pickens days after the event, “I have never witnessed greater enthusiasm and keener appreciation of the discussion of the vital issues of the Campaign. The great crowd was swayed until they were ready to dedicate themselves to the great ideal of fighting for righteousness.”²⁸ News of Burroughs' Chicago speech spread throughout the country. The *Black Dispatch* reported, “Miss Burroughs uttered a clarion warning against electing to the chief executive office of the nation any man who advocated tampering with the United States Constitution. She declared that the present period was somewhat analogous to the period just prior to the Civil War.”²⁹ Following her success in

24 Nannie H. Burroughs, “Summary of Report,” NHB Papers.

25 Cary B. Lewis, “Burroughs Delivers Address,” *New York Age*, 18 October 1928.

26 Nannie H. Burroughs, “Summary of Report,” NHB Papers.

27 Cary B. Lewis.

28 The next day the *Chicago Tribune* reported that Burroughs and Pickens, the “two Negro spell-binders” kept Senator Watson from speaking. See Burroughs to William Pickens, 20 October 1928, NHB Papers.

29 “Negro Leaders Bare Democratic Treachery Before Big Audience: Pickens and Burroughs Shell

Chicago, Burroughs returned to Kentucky to continue working the state, hoping to counter the efforts of Democratic campaigners who had canvassed the area earlier in October. Two thousand people from Lexington and the surrounding areas of Paris, Frankfort, Danville and Georgetown crammed into the hall to hear her speak; Burroughs described the scene, “The great hall was packed; standing room was at a premium and the people overflowed down the steps and into the street.”³⁰ The next day in Covington, Burroughs found bi-racial representation as she spoke to over a thousand people, concluding, “I have never seen a finer evidence of good-will and right attitude between the races.” Throughout Kentucky, Burroughs met hundreds of “capable women” campaigning for Hoover “because they say that 'Smith in the White House means the South in the saddle.'” On 18 October she returned to Brooklyn and delivered “The Moral Issue of the Campaign,” before three thousand black Baptists.³¹ The taxing pace of the tour left Burroughs without a voice as October ended, yet requests for her continued to pour into RNC headquarters.³² Unable to speak, she released a second printed statement on 26 October reiterating the constitutional themes she had featured in campaign speeches, “You say the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments are not in force. They are not. But they are in the Constitution. They set a national goal. The Ten Commandments are not lived up to, but they will not be revoked.”³³

Tammany Hall Fortress with Verbal Barrage,” *Black Dispatch*, 18 October 1928, 1. As one of the most popular campaign speakers for the Republican party, Republican leaders in Chicago called Burroughs back to town just days before the election.

30 Burroughs, *Summary*, 2.

31 Ibid.

32 Charles E. Mitchell to Burroughs, 26 October 1928, NHB Papers.

33 “Clubwoman Asks Voters to Aid G.O.P.; Nannie Burroughs Warns of Change,” *Chicago Defender*, 27 October 1928.

Party Affiliation Among African-Americans

In spite of the party's failure to secure and defend their constitutional rights, most black voters supported Republican candidates during the 1928 election. Long associated with Abraham Lincoln and the party of freedom, many African-Americans remained committed to the Republican party through the first two decades of the twentieth century; this historical loyalty began to weaken during the 1928 election, and would dissolve rapidly throughout the 1930s. During the 1920s black voters questioned the party's commitment to racial progress given the unchanged discriminatory policies and practices at all levels of government. For instance, although the 1920 Republican platform included federal anti-lynching legislation, both the Harding and Coolidge administrations, along with the Republican-controlled Congress failed to pass legislation to end the practice. Most departments of the federal government remained segregated, despite continual protest by African-Americans. Frustrated by these failed promises, African-American support for the G.O.P. began to weaken significantly during the 1928 election as black leaders publicly renounced party ties and twelve major newspapers endorsed Al Smith for president. Those who remained with the party in 1928 hearkened back to the past to justify enduring loyalty, as in the following editorial:

I cannot for the life of me, desert the G. O. P. for the party of Blease, Heflin, Robinson and others of this ilk. Of course, I can understand how the race will feel sore against the G. O. P. for its treatment of Ben Davis of Georgia, Cohen of Louisiana, MacDonald of Texas and Howard of Mississippi, but I do not think they ought to forget all of the past good acts of the Republican party, simply because lately the party has not lived up to its old tradition, and I cannot see how the race has anything to gain by making a change.³⁴

³⁴ J. Douglas Wetmore, "Wetmore Agrees With Miller as to Negro Votes," *New York Age*, 2 August 1928.

Others assessed the party more soberly, acknowledging the historical ties to, along with the shortcomings of, the party. Professor Charles H. Moore expressed this ambivalence in an editorial:

To an intelligent, thoughtful and unselfish colored man or woman, who is blessed with the opportunity to exercise his or her political franchise, without let or hindrance, to make this choice should not be difficult. . . . It is sadly true that the latter has swung aloof from its ancient mooring since the days of Lincoln, Grant and Sumner, but with all its faults the National Republican ship is the only one in which the Negro can safely afford to take political refuge. . . .³⁵

The Republican candidate, Herbert Hoover, was a questionable ally of the black community. On one hand, he had shown interest in, and even sensitivity to, racial issues. While Secretary of Commerce, Hoover desegregated the department at the request of African-American leaders, although many claimed that he had done so reluctantly and superficially. On the other hand, Hoover had been slow to respond to the needs of black flood victims during the devastating 1927 Mississippi flood.³⁶

Smith, portrayed in some quarters as a progressive supporter of African-Americans, gained the support of several African-American leaders, including at least a dozen editors of the black press. An advertisement displayed in the *Baltimore Afro-American* one week prior to the election was typical of the message used to garner support for the Democratic candidate. Suggesting that Herbert Hoover would "continue the policies of Coolidge which have heaped these indignities upon the colored voters who

35 Charles H. Moore, "Negroes Who Bolt Republican Party And Affiliate With Democrats Are Forgetting Record of Past Years," *New York Age*, 2 August 1928.

36 Hoover's position on race remains a contested issue among scholars. See Allan J. Lichtman, *Prejudice and the Old Politics: The Presidential Election of 1928* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979); August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, "The Rise of Segregation in the Federal Bureaucracy, 1900-1930," *Phylon* (1967):183.

helped enthrone them in power,” the ad proclaimed 1928 to be the year of the "Black Revolt against political slavery," calling upon the black community to break with the Republican party which had "imposed upon the Negro every thinkable proscription ranging from every kind of segregation in the Federal departments to partnership with the unspeakable Ku Klux Klan" ³⁷ Neval Thomas, president of the Washington NAACP, publicly renounced his affiliation with the Republican party, supporting Al Smith's candidacy instead. ³⁸

Although somewhat skeptical of the Republican party, many African-Americans were reluctant to endorse the Democratic party which had long-standing ties to the white South. White southerners, in turn, were hesitant to vote for Smith due to his Catholicism, his alleged opposition to Prohibition, and in part, because of the supporters he attracted. One southerner expressed this repulsion, "Smith appeals to aliens, Northern Negroes, Catholics, Jews, and . . . to the reactionary vested interests of the east." ³⁹ The RNC exploited these fears among southerners, hoping to pick up votes and break the Democratic hold on the region. These factors combined made Smith's victory in the region uncertain. Some members of the Democratic party raised the issue of race, pointing to the Democratic party as the white man's party, and naming the Republican party as the "Negro party." Although this tactic caused an outcry of protest by the Interracial Commission and African-Americans throughout the country, it became an

37 Ad placed by the authority of "The Smith for President Colored League," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 3 November 1928.

38 "Neval Thomas Deserts 'Grand Ole Party,'" *Pittsburgh Courier*, 18 August 1928.

39 George Fort Milton to William Gibbs McAdoo, 31 July 1928, reported in George Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press), 249.

effective strategy for retaining the white southern vote for the Democratic party. In the end, these racist maneuvers failed to deliver victory to the Democrats, and these sorts of tactics, employed by both parties, infuriated African-American voters. In her last report to the RNC, Burroughs complained that most people, “are going to vote *against* things and candidates, and not *for* anything. It is because this is a campaign in which there is so much mischievous propaganda that the voters have assumed a ‘vote in self-defense attitude.’ ‘Vote against’ is the unwritten slogan.”⁴⁰ In November, Hoover won with record-breaking electoral and popular support, carrying 58.2 per cent of the popular vote to Al Smith's 40 per cent.⁴¹

Post-election Analysis

Post-election analysis filled the pages of the black press, the writers speculating about the changed political landscape in the South, Hoover's political debts, and the power of the African-American vote.

The shifting party affiliation among white southerners was indeed newsworthy. Hoover made significant gains in the South, having wrested from Democratic control four southern states—North Carolina, Virginia, Texas and Florida—while attracting votes in others. Three weeks following the election, the *Philadelphia Tribune* opined, “The fact that the Solid South broke away from its Democratic moorings is still news. The event was so unusual that almost every periodical has said something about it editorially. . . . Whether the South remains broken depends chiefly on whether Mr.

40 Nannie H. Burroughs, “Summary of Report,” October 1928, NHB Papers.

41 “Hoover's Victory,” *Washington Post*, 8 November 1928.

Hoover will listen to the dictation of the South.”⁴² Some feared his indebtedness to the region, and wondered how he would re-pay his southern supporters, “Post-mortems of the Republican gains in the South reveal a flock of anxieties among those who had to do with them. Patronage is expected. Possible trouble. . . .”⁴³ Others wondered whether Hoover would use his victory to re-organize the entire party.⁴⁴ The *Baltimore Afro-American*, which had endorsed Smith during the campaign, raised the suspicion in an editorial, “Did Hoover come out clean, or is he tainted with the contact and influence of Lily Whiteism as has been alleged by his opponents? Did he give ear to the subtle influence of the Klan?”⁴⁵ Hoover’s reaction to the newly allied white southern voters caused some to doubt that he would deliver anything to the race, as expressed sharply by one writer,

The Negro, after his insane devotion to Hoover is in a more unhappy situation now than he ever was in all his political life. Hoover owes him nothing. Hoover, like Coolidge, will give him nothing. His individual support of the G.O.P. tells the Republi-klan party that however much you may lynch, burn, brand or kick the Negro, he will stand hitched.⁴⁶

Both parties had used racially divisive tactics to attract voters during the campaign; these strategies left African-Americans cynical about Hoover’s plans for the race as demonstrated in the following editorial,

He was assisted materially in the recent campaign, because Tammany, while decrying the Republicans’ association with the negro, was making every effort to get the Negro vote itself and the Southern electorate learned of it. . . . But there will have to be definite policies outlined by the Republicans on the race issue now if the South is to listen to their overtures, and these policies might endanger

42 “Again the Solid South,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 22 November 1928.

43 Carlisle Barger, “Hoover Now Plans to Satisfy South,” *Washington Post*, 11 November 1928.

44 Carlisle Barger, “Hoover Plans Rousing Fear of Old Guard,” *Washington Post*, 9 November 1928.

45 “Did Hoover Come Out Clean?” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 17 November 1928.

46 “No Hope From Hoover,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 17 November 1928.

colored votes everywhere.⁴⁷

Syndicated columnist Kelly Miller doubted that the power of the African-American vote contributed much to the outcome of the election, concluding, “The President-elect is, therefore, free from political obligation to the Negro votes as an entity.”⁴⁸ He continued, “What does the race expect during the next four years? It is perfectly apparent that little or nothing can be looked for from the affirmative attitudes in the incoming administration. . . Its commitment to the lily white propaganda spel[l]s the doom of the Negro's political prospect.”⁴⁹ The underlying theme in much of the commentary pointed to anxiety about the race's political standing. In response, Burroughs would forcefully assert the political power of the race as she presented her own interpretation of the 1928 election.

Nannie Burroughs' “What the Negro Wants Politically”

Although she would address the burning question regarding the political status of African-American voters, Burroughs' analysis of the 1928 election differed significantly from most of the editorial and opinion pieces printed in the black press following the 6 November election. Her editorial, “What the Negro Wants Politically,” published widely through the African-American press, reached a large national audience, many of whom looked to Burroughs for analysis of political and social issues. The text reflects her characteristic leadership strategies advocating social and political reform though incisive

47 Carlisle Barger, “Democrats Resent Republican Praise After Their Defeat,” *Washington Post*, 2 December 1928.

48 Kelly Miller, “As the Negro Comes from the Polls,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 15 November 1928.

49 “Inside and Outside the Political Cup,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 15 November 1928.

analysis and detailed agenda-setting.⁵⁰ As we shall see in the following analysis of her essay, Burroughs portrays the African-American voter as a formidable political force as she makes demands of the RNC and advances a clearly defined political agenda for the African-American community. She employs humor and clear, energetic prose to command the attention of readers and call them to action.

While she addresses themes featured in campaign analysis—the power of the African-American vote, Republican debt to the race, and the shifting political landscape of the South—she deftly exploits these issues to call forth from African-American voters a unified political force. With her language, she will harness the energy generated during the campaign, and argue for continued political activity among African-Americans. Five sections organize the text:

1. Post-election analysis reoriented (1-11)
2. Demands made to the RNC (12-14)
3. Warning issued to the RNC (15-16)
4. Political agenda for African-Americans announced (16-20)
5. Political power assumed (21-26)

Responding to the ongoing campaign analysis, Burroughs opens her essay by confronting the main themes found in the press. Unlike much of the analysis featured in the black press, Burroughs spends little time dissecting the racial components of the campaign. Instead, she gains the attention of the audience with a series of humorous

⁵⁰ Published over a ten-day period, the article first appeared under Burroughs by-line as “What the Negro Wants Politically,” *Oklahoma Black Dispatch*, 22 November 1928. It later ran, also under Burroughs’ name, as “Negroes Now Demand Political Recognition By Republicans: Government Should Prosecute Railroads for Charging Negroes ‘First Class’ Fares for Cattle Accommodations,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 29 November 1928; “‘Listen, Mr. President!’: Miss Nannie Burroughs Tells of the Negro’s Demands,” *Washington Tribune*, 30 November 1928; and finally the shortest version of the editorial ran with no by-line in the *Pittsburgh Courier*. “Nannie Burroughs Outlines Race’s Political Wants,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 1 December 1928.

exclamations heralding the results of the election,

You heard about the election. The Democratic party is pretty well banged up. The Republican party is all set up. It was a Landslide! It was a political miracle! It is a waste of time trying to explain how it happened. It got started and nobody could stop it.(1)

Now that a grand and glorious victory has been achieved in the name of Righteousness, let no group or race try to hog the victory. "We cannot say that this great victory is attributable to any one source. Every vote helped. Take your share of the glory."(2)

Of course, the "Wiseacres" will say, "I told you so," and then proceed to tell how it all happened. The job-seekers will say, "I did it. With my bow and arrow, I killed 'Cock Smith.'"(3)

Burroughs often began her essays colloquially, gathering fragments of opinion and commentary from the community, and combining them to frame her interpretation of events. These introductions, like the one here, frequently contained humorous exclamations and declarations, embedded in abrupt rhythms to secure the attention of her readers and draw them into a more substantial argument. Using short, quick declarative sentences, punctuated by exclamations, Burroughs entices the reader with a series of humorous comments on the election. Her repetition of "It" calls attention to the ubiquitousness of campaign, while her mocking tone diminishes the importance of election commentary that had recently filled the newspapers. Various rhetorical features facilitated Burroughs' campaign analysis—wit, rapidity, distinctness, and force combine to attract readers and move them quickly through the muddle of post-election analysis. Referring to the barrage of campaign analysis, Burroughs introduces her own list of reasons for Republican victory:

So over against what they put down as the “How and the Who” please do not allow them to overlook the real factors that gave to the Republican Party an unprecedented victory.(4)

- 1st . . . The strength of the platform
- 2nd . . . The superior fitness and sanity of the candidates
- 3rd . . . The efficiency of the Hoover organization
- 4th . . . The perfection of the radio
- 5th . . . The power of the press
- 6th . . . The service of the “Spell-Binders”
- 7th . . . The horse sense of the electorate
- 8th . . . The Democratic Party that unwittingly ran a showman instead of a statesman.
- 9th . . . And above all, millions of women who talked Herbert Hoover up and talked Al Smith out.(5)

Quickly cutting to the core of the election outcome, Burroughs dismisses “the who and the why,” that had garnered so much attention in the press, and presents briefly the “real factors” for the “unprecedented victory.” Offering her interpretation of the outcome in list-form facilitates rapid movement through reasons for the Republican victory—it focuses the mind and makes distinct a list of factors she wants the audience to consider. Burroughs employs lists throughout the essay to corral the mind, to group like things, and to focus and economize the attention of the reader. The list subtly turns the audience away from the tangle of the media's post-election analysis, presents a set of reasons as though they were facts, circumventing analysis, and then quickly proceeds. Curiously, none of the factors she attributes to the Hoover victory directly involve race, the order in which she presents the “factors,” highlights the Republican party—she praises the party platform, the proficiency of both the candidate and the Hoover organization, and cites the mistakes of the Democratic party—suggesting that she meant her essay to be read by the

RNC, as well as the African-American community.⁵¹ By focusing on the party she draws the attention of party officials, gains their trust, and perhaps defends her own continued allegiance to the party. While she does not mention race among the decisive factors, she trumpets the collective political power of women, only eight years from enfranchisement, applauding the "millions of women who talked Herbert Hoover up and talked Al Smith out,"⁽⁵⁾ reminding both audiences of the emerging political power of women. The next paragraph continues her analysis, introducing the baser side of the campaign,

Despite the fact that the campaign was begun on an elevated platform from which the American people were to discuss their ideals, hopes, and dreams in terms and promises of prosperity, projects, protection and peace, it ended in a fight on the sidewalks of New York, over rum, race and religion.⁽⁶⁾

Burroughs vividly conveys her overall disgust with the political strategies employed by both parties. Invoking a metaphor of descent, she moves the reader from a high exalted place, "An elevated platform," to a more debased location, "the sidewalks of New York,"⁵² which is likely a reference to the title of Al Smith's campaign song. Her contrast sharpens as the hard sounds of the alliterative "promises of prosperity, projects, protection and peace," hammer into the mind the significance of these political ideas, while the softer sounding consonants featured in the series "rum, race, and religion," diminish what to Burroughs' mind were unimportant distractions. This metaphor of descent concludes a few paragraphs later when Burroughs' depicts Tammany Hall being

51 Hoover did keep tabs on the black press, as indicated by the "Black Press" file in his papers. The RNC most likely did as well.

52 What I've termed a metaphor of descent may be similar to Osborn's "Forward and Backward" metaphor, yet it differs in that the movement is clearly one of degeneration. It moves the reader from a high exalted place, "An elevated platform," to a humbler location, "the sidewalks of New York." See Michael Osborn, *Orientations to Rhetorical Style*, (Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1976) 16.

"kicked from the sidewalk into the sewer," further condemning the political chicanery employed by the Democratic party. The descending imagery elucidates Burroughs' position toward the spectacle the election had become. Burroughs' brief overview of the campaign in the opening of her essay fixes the audience's attention on the Republican party, highlights the power of the newly franchised women, and conveys her disapproval of the way race was exploited during the campaign; she will then shift the reader's attention to more important political matters as she moves to the heart of the essay—African-Americans' political standing in the nation. Her campaign analysis concludes with a set of questions. More serious in tone, these questions frame a list of demands for the Republican party. Addressing race for the first time in the essay, Burroughs acknowledges that the injection of the race issue into the campaign raises two questions, the first was a question that had been considered many times in the post-election analysis,

The injection of the race issue into the campaign raised two questions:(7)

First —Did many Negroes bolt the Republican Party? No. It is true that a larger number of colored people voted the Democratic ticket this year than at any time since they have had the franchise. There were two reasons: (8)

(a) The race is actually chafing under national injustice and the Republican Party is justly charged with some "sins of omission" and dereliction of a patriotic duty.(9)

(b) Tammany Hall helped finance the Democratic Party, and Tammany Hall bids for Negro votes because it needs them and it knew that in order to help the Democratic Party win, they would have to have a large defection of Negro votes. They did not get the large defection and Tammany Hall was kicked from the side walk into the sewer and the Democratic Party, which is the "solid South," was smashed to

pieces and “all the king’s horses and all the king’s men will never put the “solid South” together again.”(10)

The Republican Party cannot sweep this country without the Negro's vote. Oh, yes, it is said they can, but try it — “It can't be did.” (11)

With an authoritative tone, she uses the question and answer form to guide the reader again. To the question, “Did many Negroes bolt the Republican party?,” she provides a quick and emphatic “No.” She offers no supporting evidence—no reasons, no analysis, no numerical support—for her assessment, creating an impression of continued loyalty to the Republican party. Once she establishes the race's fidelity, she challenges the party, noting that “more black voters voted Democratic than any other time since getting the franchise.” She frames her charges against the Republican party with, “national injustice,” “charged,” “sins of omission,” and “dereliction of a patriotic duty.” Her indictment of the Democrats, particularly Tammany Hall, is more subtle, revealing Tammany Hall’s financial support for the party, and portraying the failure of the Tammany machine with, “Tammany Hall was kicked from the sidewalk into the sewer.” Burroughs trumpets the end of the Democratic south by summoning phrases from Mother Goose’s “Humpty Dumpty.” Since Reconstruction, the Democratic party had relied on Southern whites' racist sentiments to secure party domination of the region. Highlighting the coexisting hubris and fragility of the Democratic hold on the region, Burroughs mocked them, “the Democratic party which is the “solid south” was smashed to pieces and ‘all the king’s horses and all the king’s men will never put the ‘solid South’ together

again.”⁵³ The transition point from the opening analysis to the bulk of the text appears in the declaration encapsulating the controversy and providing a challenge to the Republican National Committee, and to any who would doubt the power of the African-American vote: “The Republican party cannot sweep this country without the Negro vote. Oh, yes, it is said they can, but try it—‘It can’t be did.’” Her gently humorous colloquialism, “It can’t be did.” creates solidarity with her audience and it mocks those who doubt the collective political power of the race as she draws attention to one of the most contested claims of the year, the power of the African-American vote. As she completes her campaign analysis, Burroughs turns to the more salient topic of her discussion—framed in a question—“What does the Negro want politically?”(12) Her emphatic question silences all speculation regarding the race's political power—Burroughs boldly assumes and asserts African-American political power as she moves to the core of her argument. She succinctly characterizes a set of grievances that had been roiling the African-American community for years as she sets up this section of the text,

Secondly—What does the Negro want politically? He wants his rights as an American citizen and not simply jobs for a few politicians. That's what he wants.(12)

Thirdly — He wants general relief from demoralizing evils, rather than personal rewards for party fealty.(13)

Burroughs abruptly shifts her tone and focus as she moves into the remaining two-thirds of the text focusing on citizenship rights. Driven by clarity and force, the wit and imagery are minimal in this section. Several rhetorical devices promote the idea of

⁵³ Satire, one of Kellogg's subdivisions of wit, “lashes the follies and vices” of both men and institutions. See Kellogg, 162.

political potency among African-Americans—the use of agendas, concisely constructed lists, imperative and declarative sentences punctuated by framing questions—these strategies conveyed confidence, assurance of success, and hope for change. Providing a direct answer to the organizing question, “What does the Negro want politically?” Burroughs states emphatically, “He wants his rights as an American citizen and not simply jobs for a few politicians. That’s what he wants.” (12) Abandoning the more jocular language used in the opening, she issues a set of demands aimed at the Republican Party calling for change within the organization and the nation. At the beginning of the essay Burroughs had used the more intimate second person, “You heard. . .” to address the audience, but as she begins the second part of her essay the more formal, distant third person underscores her seriousness as she issues a set of demands for the Republican party.

Critical of the token jobs awarded to a few in the African-American community for their support of the Republican party, Burroughs argues that the race needs more than "personal rewards for party fealty," and "jobs for a few politicians." (13) Later Burroughs would argue that these "sop appointments" will never be accepted as substitutes for simple justice and equal opportunity. Burroughs wanted for the race, efficient, intelligent leaders who would serve the people, rather than themselves. This theme she repeats throughout her life, regarding politics, she said in 1923, “Negro leaders instead of using the ballot to get themselves jobs should use it to get better streets, lights, housing conditions and protection for Negro sections like Wylie Avenue in Pittsburgh, Decatur

Street in Atlanta, Lombard Street in Philadelphia, Beale Street in Memphis, State Street in Chicago, and sections in other large cities [similarly] segregated and neglected.”⁵⁴

She will refer to patronage again in the essay, but for now Burroughs continues by issuing bold demands to the Republican party,

He will therefore call upon the Republican Party to:

1. Enforce the Constitution and all of its amendments.
2. Compel the Interstate Commission to make the railroads operating in “Jim Crow” states provide equal accommodations for the races on the trains and in the waiting rooms. The railroads are guilty of highway robbery. They charge Negroes first-class fares and give them cattle accommodations.
3. Break up segregation in the Departments at Washington.
4. Appoint a National, Non-partisan, Bi-racial Welfare Commission whose duty it will be to make unbiased investigations and practical suggestions that will give relief from:
 - (a) Disfranchisement.
 - (b) Unequal accommodations in travel.
 - (c) Segregation in Federal Departments.
 - (d) Race discrimination in Civil Service appointments.
 - (e) Discrimination in relief work in times of floods and disasters.
 - (f) Unequal opportunity in times of peace, to learn the arts of war in army, navy and aerial service.
5. Appoint two colored women, specialists, to work in the Children's Bureau and the Women's Bureau, the former for child welfare and the latter for industrial and economic welfare among women. Both positions would require highly trained women and their work among colored women and children would parallel the work that is being done by the heads of these two bureaus, primarily for white children and women and incidentally for colored children and women. Conditions and needs among the children and women of the Negro race justify these appointments.(14)

Her declarative statement, “He will therefore call upon the Republican party to: ” is followed by an enumerated list of five demands that moves from the more general,

⁵⁴ “Twenty-Third Annual Report,” 25.

“Enforce the Constitution and all of its amendments,” to a longer and more detailed call for an appointment of a “bi-racial commission.” These demands address long-standing grievances in the African-American community. The concise nature of the list—visually and linguistically—along with the strong verbs framing the list—“enforce,” “compel,” “break up,” and “appoint”—commands attention and encourages action. The section conveys to both audiences—the party, as well as the race—that black voters should be considered a serious, confident, and powerful political force. The next section of the text develops this theme.

African-American Political Power in Practice

To strengthen the perception of African-American political agency, Burroughs portrays a politically savvy, organized, and united group,

At the proper time and in the proper way the men and women who are seeking relief for the masses from the injustices herein listed, will prepare their case, secure the backing of every Negro organization, political, and non-political, and lay their petition before Congress and the Chief Executive and seek and work for redress. (16)

In preparation for more effective action, the Negroes throughout the country should keep all of their political clubs in tact, hold regular meetings, carry on a campaign of education and enlightenment and thereby build up a vigorous morale and be ready for the “fire-works” four years from now.(17)

The best advice to give our people, politically, is organize and keep organized, study men and measures, put down every “sin of omission, or commission,” get every congressman's number — know what he is saying and how he is voting, and “meet him at Philippi.” At the same time do not forget to repudiate all of the Negro political leaders who drag around begging for jobs for themselves and never contending for justice and opportunities for the race. They are more responsible for our political undoing than the whites. Do not let them out.(18)

She begins this section by depicting African-American leaders as possessing good judgment and a careful plan, “At the proper time and in the proper way,” to address injustice. The action-oriented verbs heaped up in these paragraphs—“are seeking,” “will prepare,” “secure,” “seek and work,” “keep,” “hold,” “build up,” “carry on,” “be ready,” “study,” “organize,” and “know”—establish the black voter as an organized, formidable political force. For African-American readers, Burroughs presents a plan for intelligently exercising their collective political power. Her depiction of a timely, methodical strategy signals to anyone in the Republican party who might be reading to take seriously the race and its demands. Several times during the essays warns the party and the race not to accept any worthless patronage appointments. The race had been burned by the likes of Perry Howard of Mississippi, Ben Davis of Georgia and others who, winning places in the government, sought to enrich themselves rather than help the race.

African-American Power Proclaimed

In the final section of the essay (21-26) Burroughs expresses black political power through various rhetorical devices. Following the election, many African-Americans expressed anxiety about the Republican party's political debt to the white South. Burroughs reinterprets this newly-configured political landscape by pointing to the potential political power of African-Americans living in the region,

The breaking up of the “solid south,” regardless of whether we believe it now or not, and the building up of a two-party government in the South is a move in the right direction. As long as the south remains a government of white men, by white

men, and for white men instead of a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, the Negro in the South will never enjoy his rights as an American citizen nor receive anything like just consideration in the distribution of funds from the taxes which he pays for public education, protection and general welfare.(21)

With the ballot in his hand he has a weapon of defense, protection, and expression. Both parties will need his vote and he will learn to use it wisely.(22)

Subverting and then appropriating the language of Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address," her combination of the repetitive epistrophe and antithesis quickly turns the reader from despair to hope about Republican success in the South as she minimizes the political power of the white South by mocking the current situation, "a government of white men, by white men, and for white men," and pointing to its correction "a government of the people, by the people, and for the people." The climax of her argument arrives as she concludes this section by stating the key idea of her essay, "With the ballot in his hand he has a weapon of defense, protection, and expression. Both parties will need his vote and he will learn to use it wisely." She depicts the African-American voter powerfully—armed, prudent, and desirable to Democrats and Republicans alike. The final two paragraphs establish further the race's political power,

Since the Negro vote helped the Republican Party win the 1928 victory, the question has been asked again and again, what does it profit the Negro to give his vote to keep the Republican Party in power? Here is the answer. With all its faults it is the better party. In this campaign the Negro voted against the Democratic Party's ideals for his race, against tampering with the Constitution, against an increase of the emigration quota, against tinkering with the tariff, against a man who is not qualified to be President of the United States. The Negro simply voted for the strongest platform and the better qualified man.(25)

The Negro gave his vote to Herbert Hoover, because Mr. Hoover stood four-square on the strong platform of the Republican Party and pledged equal

opportunities to all, regardless of faith or race. The American Negro asks nothing more and will be satisfied with nothing less.(26)

She subtly crafts her final question—the opening clause, “Since the Negro vote helped the Republican Party win the 1928 victory,” highlights for the reader the race's political influence in the fall election; the second clause, “the question has been asked again and again,” reminds the reader of the ongoing analysis among black voters regarding party loyalty; and the final segment, “what does it profit the Negro to give his vote to keep the Republican Party in power?” underscores the tenuous nature of continued support. She had used humor earlier (11) to address whether the race had helped the party win. As she concludes the essay, she directly and confidently asserts the fact. She depicts the African-American political power further by demonstrating how it can be applied in support or opposition to either party. By noting how the race cast their collective vote negatively, “the Negro voted against Democratic Party's ideals. . . against tampering. . . against an increase. . . against tinkering. . . against a man” she reminds the RNC of the tenuous nature of continued loyalty from this powerful political constituency as she repeats “against” five times. The final sentence, an understated antithesis, forcefully proclaims African-American political power as she demands, “The American Negro asks nothing more and will be satisfied with nothing less.”

Moving the audience beyond the muddle of post-election analysis, Burroughs positions the race for future action and success. Her clear, energetic style of language moves the mind of the reader quickly, presenting her analysis of the 1928 campaign as

definitive, and the political power of African-Americans as certain. Using clear, concise language, enumerated lists, active verbs, she issues a set of demands for the Republican party, and a political agenda for African-American voters. The varied structure of the discourse helps to keep the audience interested and stimulated. Interrogation, exclamation, and declarative sentences contribute to an energetic style while constructing an authoritative ethos for Burroughs. The ideas and the style combine to construct African-American political agency. In the months following the election she would work to develop this growing political power.

Keeping the Fires Burning: Post-Election Work Among African-Americans

When the Associated Negro Press published its year-end assessment of political and social trends in 1926, the editor commented on the political status of the race, “The Negroes’ influence in politics today, nationally, is less potent than at any time since enfranchisement.”⁵⁵ Two years later the race, galvanized by the 1928 election, seemed more confident, more hopeful about the possibility of citizenship. Following the election, John Hawkins, chairman of the Colored Voters Division of the RNC wrote to Hubert Work that as a result of the 1928 campaign “the colored citizens are aroused as never before. There has been a new awakening and thousands of them have a new concept of the privileges, duties and responsibilities of citizenship.”⁵⁶ While one cannot attribute this activity solely to Burroughs’ article, much of her advice came to fruition during the weeks and months following the election. Political organizations continued their activity,

⁵⁵ “Annual Survey of the Associated Negro Press,” *Black Dispatch*, 30 December 1926, 8.

⁵⁶ John R. Hawkins to Hubert Work, 22 January 1929, Herbert Hoover Papers (HH Papers), Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA.

new organizations were formed, and letters were written to Hoover and other high-ranking administration and party officials asking that race appointments be made.

Soon after Hoover took office in March, letters and telegrams arrived daily requesting, and even insisting that Hoover appoint African-Americans to various positions—the division of Vital Statistics in the Bureau of the Census,⁵⁷ recorder of Deeds of the District of Columbia, and the Minister to Liberia.⁵⁸ One man urged the “appointment of two Arkansas colored men to positions in the Government service.”⁵⁹ James Weldon Johnson writing on behalf of the NAACP requested the “appointment of a Negro to the Commission on Law Enforcement.”⁶⁰ Burroughs sent a letter to Sallie Hert repeating the request she had made in her newspaper article, “When Mr. Hoover begins to consider Negro welfare we want him to do the things that will give relief and hearten the whole race, rather than reward a few politicians. The race is tired of the old system.”⁶¹ Burroughs called a meeting to coincide with Hoover’s Inauguration in March 1929. Addressing the letter to, “Associate in a Great Cause,” Burroughs urged the women of the NLRCW to attend the meeting, “Matters of vital importance affecting our political interests for the next four years will be discussed and a plan of action mapped out.”⁶² Many women planned to attend and just before the Inauguration, Burroughs wrote to Sallie Hert, the RNC Vice-chairman regarding the treatment of African-American

57 J. Finley Wilson to Herbert Hoover, 9 March 1929, HH Papers.

58 Rep. R. H. Thatcher, 18 March 1929, HH Papers.

59 Wallace Townsend to Herbert Hoover, 20 March 1929, HH Papers. Townsend was a National Committeeman for Arkansas.

60 James Weldon Johnson to Herbert Hoover, 29 March 1929, HH Papers.

61 Burroughs to Mrs. Alvin T. Hert, 16 February 1929, NHB Papers.

62 Circular letter from Nannie H. Burroughs, 9 February 1929, NHB Papers.

women who planned to attend the Inauguration; in her letter she emphasized the importance of maintaining the loyalty of the race to the party,

The influence and effect on the whole national attitude of Negro women justifies at least a thought of their comfort and pleasure while they are here since they will be shut out of the places into which whites can go and meet and socialize. Our petition is for a place to extend courtesies and assure our people that the Party thinks of them during inauguration week as well as during election time. Mrs. Hert, help us hold these people while we have them. Make them all feel that it is worthwhile to support the G. O. P.

Now to the future. We must maintain headquarters, build up a strong, loyal organization and conduct a campaign of general education. It is cheaper and we want you to get the National Committee to do it. It can be done at little cost compared with the cost of "hooping up" after they are allowed to sleep and disintegrate for four years.⁶³

Her letter reveals her desire to keep the fires burning among the African-American voters who had helped Hoover win the fall election. Burroughs' zeal soon evaporated as she and other African-American supporters who had been invited to the Inaugural Ball were abruptly dis-invited with no explanation given. Burroughs wrote to Mrs. John Allen Dougherty, the chair of the Inaugural Charity Ball to express her shock and disgust,

This is a very embarrassing and delicate situation to be worked out. I worked like a slave in the last campaign; I went everywhere and plead the cause of our party. There was no question of color. When I received my tickets I said, 'well, my prophesy of fairness has come true.' I invited a friend to go with me and I had planned to sit in the gallery and look on the brilliant affair. . . . I can take my medicine like a woman, but it is not easy for me to get the others reconciled to embarrassments for which they are not responsible. One has said already, "they use us in the crisis and then humiliate us at will." I do not want this to leave them feeling resentful. We are getting ready for 1932— you know.⁶⁴

The race's exclusion from Inaugural events, along with Hoover's lack of decisive

63 Burroughs to Mrs. Alvin T. Hert, 16 February 1929, NHB Papers.

64 Burroughs to Mrs. John Allen Dougherty, 2 March 1928, NHB Papers.

action on behalf of African-Americans frustrated many of those who, like Burroughs, had supported him during the campaign. Despite repeated requests that Hoover appoint African-Americans to his administration, he did little to demonstrate his gratitude to the race. Burroughs wrote to Sallie Hert again in August expressing her disappointment with Hoover's inaction,

My only desire through the campaign was that President Hoover would, in his general welfare programs, do something that would hearten the Negro in spirit and help him in his distressingly discouraging economic situation. The President is appointing commissions composed entirely of white Americans. I want an inter-racial commission appointed to study economic and health conditions among Negroes. . . . [O]ur poor people are being thrown out or dropped to the bottom in all industries. The employment situation among Negroes is most serious. Unemployment among Negroes is nation wide. The masses of the race are resorting to number playing and bootlegging. The home life of the masses is being terribly demoralized. The Negro cannot live on loafing, gambling, and drinking. This country should be too fair and decent to permit it. I want you to bring this matter squarely before our President and urge him to appoint an Inter-racial Commission on Health and Economic Conditions Among Negroes. Call it anything, but in the name of twelve million colored Americans, I beg you to help me get the President to do something . . . that will hearten the race.⁶⁵

The emphatic tone of the letter echoed Burroughs' post-election call to the party. Hoover eventually appointed African-Americans to various posts in his administration, and he selected Burroughs to lead the Committee on Negro Housing in 1931. Under her leadership the committee carefully investigated and reported on the state of housing among African-Americans, making recommendations for future policy changes.

Burroughs continued her political work throughout the 1930s, with markedly less enthusiasm. While campaigning for Hoover four years later, Burroughs wrote, "Negroes are not going to accept any more salve and soft soap from political peddlers. Nor are

⁶⁵ Burroughs to Mrs. Alvin T. Hert, 19 August 1929, NHB Papers.

they going to be used as political buffers.⁶⁶ Hoover lost the 1932 election signaling a massive shift among African-Americans to FDR and the Democratic party. Although she was never as active in party politics as she was during the 1920s, evidence suggests that Burroughs remained politically engaged for the rest of her life. Months before she died in 1961, she delivered a scathing assessment of another constitutional crisis facing the race. Once again declaring that African-Americans' basic rights are contained in the Constitution, she called the civil rights planks offered by both Democratic and Republican platforms during the 1960 election, “fakes.” In her last presidential address before the 1960 Woman's Convention, one hears the same stridency and energy that marked her campaign discourse in 1928, “[W]e are not taking anybody's planks. If the President of the United States cannot enforce the Constitution, we don't want their planks. The Constitution is the floor on which this nation is built, and the Constitution is stronger than any plank that either Kennedy or Nixon can write. . . . We are sick and tired of this campaign 'hoey.’”⁶⁷

66 Nannie H. Burroughs, “Venal Leaders Discredit Race By Offering Spurious Advice,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 27 October 1932.

67 Alice A. Dunnigan, “Nannie Burroughs Says Both Parties' Planks Are 'Fakes,’” *Pittsburgh Courier* 17 September 1960.

Chapter Four: Transforming Struggle—Burroughs' 1934 Tuskegee Institute Commencement Speech

“We might as well make up our minds to go to it. You ask what can Negroes do when the whole world is in the same fix. The Negro can do just what others are doing—call on his courage, industry, ingenuity, initiative, dogged determination, put his brain to work, and put up a fight for his life—that’s all. The man who uses his head, hands, and heart can make his own bread, buy his own house, sit by his own fire, instead of standing outdoors in the cold waiting for somebody to feed him.”¹

-Nannie H. Burroughs

Introduction

The political gains secured during the late 1920s provided little in the way of immediate, practical relief to African-Americans as the nation plunged into an economic depression. As unemployment spiked, banks failed, and bread lines grew longer, Burroughs thought about what she might say to inspire the race during such difficult times. She conveyed this desire in a letter to John Henry Adams, “I sincerely wish that I could say something or do something that would actually awaken and enlist our people in a crusade for economic, social and spiritual deliverance. We must not give up the struggle. We must by some means, fire the imagination of the masses for a crusade in a common ideal. It can be done and it must be done.”²

The quest for freedom, Burroughs believed, would be satisfied through collective and individual struggle, and while she never advocated directly the use of physical force, she often evoked martial themes—using terms such as battles, enemies, crusades,

1 Nannie Burroughs, “Nannie Burroughs Warns People to Prepare For Next Winter’s Hardships,” *The St. Louis Argus*, 21 August 1931.

2 Burroughs to John Henry Adams, 5 February 1934, NHB Papers.

weapons, and sacrifice—to motivate action among African-Americans. During the depression, Burroughs delivered a speech before Baltimore's City-Wide Young People's Forum, "Minority groups have won their way by deciding what they want and living and dying for it. . . . The 142,000 Negroes in Baltimore can get anything they want before supper tomorrow night, if they will go out after it," she told them.³ The Baltimore residents had been boycotting white-owned businesses who refused to hire black workers. We hear this martial language in Burroughs' challenge to her audience:

The Negro must serve notice on the world that he is ready to die for justice. To struggle and battle and overcome and absolutely defeat every force designed against us is the only way to achieve. Men must have life, the opportunity to learn, to labor, to love. Without these fundamental virtues we cannot achieve. We must not give up the struggle until this is obtained.⁴

Sometimes her martial references were implicit, like the first excerpt above; others were stated more explicitly, as in the second example. She repeated these themes throughout her career, encouraging unbowed perseverance in the face of difficulty as illustrated in an editorial she wrote early in 1934, on the occasion of W. E. B. Du Bois' resignation from the NAACP, "When colored people give up and whine, the whites know that their trick is working. The man is licked. But, thank God, there are colored people who are taking the dastardly blows of enemies to human progress right on the chin, and coming up for another round."⁵

This call to struggle, to fight persistently and courageously, featured prominently in Burroughs' far-reaching vision for the race. She invited audiences to believe they were

³ Ibid.

⁴ Juanita Jackson, "Unload Uncle Toms,' Says Nannie Burroughs," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 23 December 1933.

⁵ Nannie H. Burroughs, "DuBois Honest at Least," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 28 April 1934.

part of a grand, unstoppable force for justice; she encouraged them through her language to view their suffering as redemptive, and more importantly, their action as imperative for racial progress. These ideas, complemented by her stylistic tendencies, provided vision and inspired action during a time when basic citizenship rights seemed out of reach for many African-Americans.

Burroughs employed this strategy in her 1934 Tuskegee Institute commencement address, “The Challenge of a New Day.” In this chapter I shall argue that Burroughs' visionary ideas combined with martial themes, conveyed in clear, energetic prose work to overcome the material reality of the depression, inspiring confidence and encouraging action among her various audience members. As we shall see, Burroughs responds to two main concerns facing the Tuskegee graduates, as well as her larger audience—the economic depression and the overarching need for vision among African-Americans.

Economic Distress among African-Americans

By October 1933, between twenty-five and forty percent of the African-American population in major urban areas was unemployed. Historians John Hope Franklin and Alfred Moss have characterized the period as follows, “. . . there was utter distress and pessimism among African-Americans generally. Added to the denials of freedom and democracy was the specter of starvation.”⁶ Although the federal government devised programs to generate employment for American workers, the policies of prejudice overtly excluded or subtly overlooked African-Americans for available jobs. Daily, the black press received reports about the pervasive discrimination faced in the administration of

6 Franklin and Moss, 384.

the Civil Works jobs; the editorial page of the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* noted that “[T]here is no opportunity for him under any phase of the National Recovery Act. And that is the raw edge of the New Deal.”⁷ A college education offered a slightly better chance for employment during the depression years. According to Albon Holsey, secretary of the National Negro Business League, African-American college students faced dim employment prospects upon graduation; although more than 19,000 African-Americans were enrolled in college in 1930, there were “practically no white-collar jobs available to our people except those created by themselves, and there is only one such job for every forty educated Negroes,” Holsey reported.⁸

African-Americans living in the South, in some ways, fared worse during the depression than those living in the North. Although Burroughs spent much of her time working in the urban areas of the north, she traveled frequently to the south, and during the 1930s she expressed concern about the toll the economic hardship was taking on African-Americans in the region. The conditions under which they lived were often no better than slavery Burroughs would observe,

These toilers are native Americans. They can trace their ancestral line back to the Mayflower and the little Dutch trading vessel. Their forebears laid the economic foundation of the South. They are the back-bone of Southern agriculture. Their sacrifices have saved it from complete collapse. In spite of their loyalty and sacrifices, they are the most neglected people in any forward looking country on the globe. They are ignorant, ragged, exploited, hard pressed and homeless. They work from sunrise to sunset. They live in plantation shacks unfit for human habitation and subsist on fat meat, corn bread and black molasses. They live far below the American standard, and there have never been any organized efforts to help them rise above miserable cabin life. America owes them an honest deal.

7 “The Raw Edge of the New Deal,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, 4 January 1934.

8 “Bread and Butter Problem Most Important to Negro,” *Tuskegee Messenger*, 8 February 1930.

They have never had it.⁹

In the South, along with the threat of hunger and unemployment, a particularly virulent white supremacy raged as white Americans demoralized by the depression turned their frustration on the African-American community. Weeks before Burroughs arrived on Tuskegee's campus, the *Baltimore Afro-American* described a document circulating throughout the deep South. Written by Alabama lawyer, Woodford Mabry, the 54-page pamphlet, "Reply to Southern Slanderers," among other things, demanded the repeal of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, defended the practice of lynching, and called for the International Labor Defense and any other organization that promoted social and political equality for African-Americans to leave the state of Alabama.¹⁰ The pamphlet also attacked higher education for the race,

The taxing of poor white people to furnish higher education for Negro wenches and sassy bucks is an Outrage upon the Whites and an injury to the Negroes. There is absolutely no place in this land for the arrogant, aggressive school-spoilt Afro-American who wants to live without manual labor. . . . The sooner he abandons his attempt to share political power and privileges with the whites, the better for him. . . . The Negro has always been what he is and always will be no matter how many books you rub into his head."¹¹

Worried about the destructive effect of such perspectives on the collective will of the African-American community, Burroughs wrote to her friend Una Roberts Lawrence, "Do you realize, Mrs. Lawrence, that Negroes have had it hammered into them that they

9 Nannie Burroughs, "Farmers Will Do More With a New Deal Than Any Other Americans," *The Louisiana Weekly*, 31 October 1936.

10 Ralph Matthews, "Afro Unearths Secret Ku Klux Document in Alabama Encouraging Lynchings," 17 February 1934, *Baltimore Afro-American*. The ILD, along with the NAACP, had been in the state during the Scottsboro Boys trial.

11 Matthews, 5.

are things apart from other peoples so long until they have been forced to live in their own little shells and to think in terms of their own problems and their own needs? We will have to lead them along.”¹² White supremacy and economic hardship were just part of the problem facing African-Americans, Burroughs argued. Perceiving a greater, deeper threat to the race during this time, she spoke of a crisis of the soul, one that superseded the demoralization experienced under slavery,

The Negro race is in a worse fix than it has ever been not even barring the time they served in the ungodly institution of slavery. Now millions of Negroes are sitting down waiting for somebody to deliver them, waiting for their second emancipator—and millions of others are happy and satisfied to live below the common level of decency.

Yes, we are *worse off*, because we are worse off inside—in our *hearts* and *minds* and *spirits*. Accepted or initiated moral slavery is a thousand times worse than enforced, physical slavery. Negro slaves *longed* to be *free*. Freedom was the burden of their prayers and songs—of their midnight musings and daily thinking—Freedom was their one dream and ever increasing hope. God always rewards such soul hunger. But here we are a race group, years after freedom with no consuming passion for those fundamentals of life that make for a larger and more perfect freedom.¹³

Cultivating this soul hunger for freedom would be one of Burroughs' rhetorical tasks as she ventured south during the spring of 1934. Providing vision and preaching hope during the depression years might have been one of the most important aspects of Burroughs' rhetorical leadership. She often cited long range vision as a necessary quality “to build a race and to build a civilization.” She spoke often of the need for leaders “with long-range vision who can see fifty or a hundred years hence and plan to

¹² Burroughs to Mrs. Una Roberts Lawrence, 2 July 1934, Una Roberts Lawrence Papers, Southern Baptist Historical Association and Archives, Nashville, TN.

¹³ *Journal of the Thirty-Third Annual Session of the Woman's Convention Auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention*, 18.

that end. Short-sighted people cannot do it.”¹⁴ Frequently Burroughs' annual speeches to the Woman's Convention, like the Tuskegee commencement speech, represent her attempt to convey a sweeping and compelling vision for the race during the inter-war period.

Burroughs at Tuskegee Institute

Burroughs spoke often at commencement ceremonies, but when the prestigious Tuskegee Institute selected her as their featured commencement speaker, she was the first woman invited to address a graduating class at the school. Tuskegee was, in the minds of many, a remarkable achievement. Founded in 1889 by Booker T. Washington, Tuskegee Institute encountered and overcame some of the South's most brutal discrimination and prejudice. Although Washington's critics dismissed his insistence that industrial education offered the most efficient avenue to freedom, most Americans, black and white, recognized and appreciated what he had accomplished at Tuskegee in a relatively short period of time. The institute itself was symbolic of the values Burroughs promoted throughout her career—hard work, self-initiative, ingenuity and self-respect. Burroughs visited Alabama frequently during her career and was well-known and admired throughout the state. Her presence as the featured speaker attracted record crowds to the graduation ceremony. An air of celebration engulfed the campus and the surrounding community as thousands of men and women, black and white, came to campus to hear her speak. Reporter Ollie Stewart described their arrival,

¹⁴ *Journal of the Twenty-Third Annual Session of the Woman's Convention Auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention*, 30.

Some 4,500 persons were packed in Logan Hall when the exercises began. Approx. 1,500 more were as near the door as possible and strolling up and down the walks. They came in carts, wagons, automobiles, in trucks and hundreds walked. They stood up in the balcony, they crowded the corridors and stairways so that it was almost impossible to get through. Parking space was at a premium—almost any kind of space was at a premium. Friends of the school white and black were present in such numbers that the campus. . . was taxed to accommodate the visitors.¹⁵

Naturally, the expected tone of a commencement address is positive, hopeful, and forward-looking; however, the brutal circumstances facing the Tuskegee Class of 1934 dampened their hope for the future, making success seem elusive. The title of Burroughs' speech, "The Challenge of the New Day," signals her goals for the speech, calling the audience to look beyond bleak present circumstances, to anticipate success, to participate in building a new social order. The text can be roughly divided into five sections:

1. The introduction positions the graduates as part of a battle.(1-4)
2. An agenda lays out the elements of the quest for the new day.(5-9)
3. An alternative interpretation of reality transforms present suffering.(10-14)
4. A description of the march toward justice builds momentum and excitement.(15-19)
5. The conclusion offers a triumphant transformation of difficulty.(20)

Tuskegee as Battlefield

Burroughs opens her speech by placing the audience, graduates as well as faculty, family, and community members, on hallowed ground,

We are on the most sacred spot in America and in the world. We are on the grounds dedicated to the future hopes and dreams, aspirations and prophesies of the founders of our democracy. You and I today are surrounded by the most marvelous achievement that has taken place in American history during the past seventy years. The class that returns here today after ten years on the firing line

¹⁵ Ollie Stewart. "Miss Nannie Burroughs Delivers Tuskegee Commencement Address." Associated Negro Press, June 1934. See also "Miss Burroughs Heard by Grads at Tuskegee," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, 2 June 1934.

witnesses a new Tuskegee, its magnificent buildings, its marvelously improved campus, its splendid and modern equipment, its great faculty and the Commander-in-chief in the person of the President of Tuskegee Institute.(1)

Signifying a place where battles against segregation, poverty, and bondage had been fought and won, Tuskegee Institute offered concrete, physical proof of African-American struggle and success. Burroughs depicts Tuskegee as a manifestation of the, “future hopes and dreams, aspirations and prophesies of the founders of our democracy,” along with the more immediate manifestation of emancipation, “surrounding by the most marvelous achievement that has taken place in American history during the past seventy years,” grounding her audience in the physical space where they gathered. She will directly quote Abraham Lincoln's “Gettysburg Address” later in the text, but as she begins her address her language foreshadows Lincoln. Burroughs places herself and the audience on sacred ground, her word choice, “sacred spot,” “grounds dedicated,” recall Lincoln's hallowing of the Gettysburg battlefield. Lincoln opened his Gettysburg Address by hearkening back to the American Revolution; he linked the Revolution to the ongoing development of freedom in the context of Civil War, reminding his audience of “our forefathers,” who were “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” Burroughs' subtle invocation of Lincoln immediately elevates the occasion, as does her vocabulary. Amplifying the physical setting of Tuskegee with latinate adjectives—“marvelously,” “magnificent,” “splendid,”—she reflects the formality of the setting and occasion, as she highlights Tuskegee's symbolic importance. Her references to the graduates who had returned to the school to mark their tenth anniversary, “after ten years

on the firing line,” and President Robert Moton, Tuskegee's “Commander-in-chief,” contribute to the sense of the institute as a battleground. As the introduction continues Lincoln becomes more prominent:

Today I shall speak to you as members of the graduating class and as men and women who are going to contribute their part to the building of a great, new, vital social order on our continent—you who are going to dedicate yourselves again to those spiritual and moral ideals which moved the founders of our country to build on this continent a government of the people, by the people and for the people, and as Abraham Lincoln said in his famous Gettysburg Speech, he entertained the hope that “a government so conceived and so dedicated shall not perish from the earth.” If the saints are permitted to look from the battlements of heaven today they rejoice to witness this magnificent scene in the heart of the deep South wherein you are making the spiritual and social and economic contributions to our great republic. They must be happy today to see here in the midst of our new dreams, new hopes and aspirations this magnificent audience of white and black people who believe that we shall in deed and in truth build on this continent a Christian civilization not for blacks, not for whites but for all who shall come to our land and contribute spiritual, moral, social and economic advancement to the world.(2)

She begins to create the momentum needed to move the audience as the speech continues by shifting her temporal references quickly from the past, to the present, and then to future work. She addresses the graduates directly, “I shall speak to you as members of the graduating class . . . you who are going to dedicate yourselves,” placing them in the present before she propels them into the future with a lengthy sentence that connects her audience to the past, (“the founders of our country,” and “Lincoln,”) with “their part to the building of a great, new, vital, social order on our continent” The rapid series of adjectives, less formal than those used previously and offered without connectives, convey movement, excitement about the work Burroughs proposes. From Lincoln, she

borrowing the rhythmic and familiar phrases, “A government of the people, by the people and for the people,” and, “a government so conceived and so dedicated shall not perish from the earth,” to magnify the importance of the work she proposes. The ideas behind Lincoln's historic phrases (that the men who fought at Gettysburg advance liberty by their sacrifice) gives meaning to the hardship Burroughs' audiences had endured. The rhythm and repetition carries the audience along as the sentence concludes with Lincoln's quote, reminding the audience of the enduring freedom America symbolizes, and their inclusion, ideally, in such a government.

She continues this blending of the past, present, and future, summoning “saints. . . from the battlements of heaven,” as witnesses of the present, “this magnificent audience of white and black people,” who believe that in the future, “we shall in deed and in truth build on this continent a Christian civilization not for blacks, not for whites but for all who shall come to our land and contribute spiritual, moral, social and economic advancement to the world.”(2) As before, the repetition and asyndeton generate speed, keeping the audience attentive and amplifying Burroughs' idea of the new civilization.

Burroughs embellishes her introduction and seals the tone of the speech by reciting a brief excerpt from Alfred Tennyson's *Locksley Hall*,

First of all what is the new day? The new day is the day Tennyson visioned in Locksley Hall:

“When I dipt into the future far as human eye could see;
Saw the vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be.

Till the war-drum throb'd no longer, and the battleflags were furl'd
In the Parliament of man, the Federation of the world.

There the common sense of most shall hold a fretful realm in awe,
And the kindly earth shall slumber, lapt in universal law.”¹⁶ (3)

An apt choice to illustrate the “new day,” the poem melds the past, present, and future in ways similar to Burroughs' blending of time in her introduction. The hero of the poem, a soldier who, while marching with comrades passes his boyhood home, pauses to reminisce about the past. Summoned back to the present by a bugle call, he confronts his present, dismal circumstances, and envisions a brighter future where the “war-drum throb'd no longer, and the battleflags were furl'd.”

The final segment serves as a transition from the introduction of the speech to her characterization of the “new day,”

As you go forth from here today I would have you realize that the things that have been prophesied, all the things that have been promised, all the things that are to be reaped in abundance in this world shall be enjoyed by you. Not by gift, but by struggle, by sacrifice, by indomitable will, by courage, by hope and by every human and spiritual effort that is possible for you to put forth in whatever fields you shall labor and find yourself. And as you go forth from here you will work for six things. You will dedicate yourselves to a new social order and to the building of it in the hearts of men. You will work first of all for life—abundant life—life promised by Him who came over two thousand years ago and said that he came that we might have life and that we might have it more abundantly.¹⁷ (4)

Once more, Burroughs links the graduates to the past, casting them as recipients of past

16 Alfred Tennyson, *Locksley Hall*, 119-20, 127-130. She quotes only six lines from the 194-line poem. Burroughs often included poetry in her speeches and essays, sometimes her own and other times taken from poets or songs. This was an apt choice for her audience as well. A poll taken by the English Department to ascertain the reading habits of Tuskegee students found that Tennyson ranked third among the students as a favorite author. “Likes and Dislikes of College Students,” *Tuskegee Messenger*, February 1934, 6.

17 A reference to Jesus' statement in the Gospel of John, “I am come that they might have life.” John 10:10.

prophecies and promises. Although the construction of the introductory sentence is passive, “shall be enjoyed by you,” she quickly shifts the voice in the next sentence, “Not by gift, but by struggle, by sacrifice, by indomitable will, by courage, by hope and by every human and spiritual effort. . . .” Her characterization positions the graduates participating actively to bring about the “new day.” Burroughs sets up this agenda by featuring audience members as participants in the “new social order.” Burroughs concisely conveys her vision for the race—that by struggle, sacrifice, and courageous effort, they, individually and collectively, will bring about change, however costly it may be. The focus of the section, and of the text, generally, rests here in her transition between her introduction and the body of the speech. Burroughs' introduction functions as a call to battle—she quickens her audience, transporting them out of the mundane, beyond the anxiety about the future and uncertainty about their place in America, and situates them for future victory. Using martial language, repetition, and speed accomplishes several things for her immediate and extended audience: first, she elevates Tuskegee Institute as evidence of present, material success; second, she joins the graduates to the past—Revolutionary heroes, Lincoln, saints from their battlements in heaven, Tennyson's soldier—as a way of beckoning them to become part of the march of freedom; and finally, she presents the future, the “new day,” as a quest to motivate the graduates, along with her multiple audiences. The next segment(5-9) constitutes about one-fifth of the speech and serves as a blueprint for the “new day.”

The Quest for the New Day

The enumerated organization of this section (5-9) of the speech suggests an agenda to be adopted, and as she did in her essay on political power, Burroughs uses a list to guide the audience through the items that require action. Framed alliteratively, the ordered items function to keep the attention of the audience while she spoke, and to assist recall after the speech ended. Phrased as a series of nouns embodying conceptual ideas—life, liberty, love, learning, labor, and leisure—they recall the “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” engraved in the Declaration of Independence, linking the audience once again to the American Revolution. We find references to these items, or some variation of them, in several of Burroughs' texts during the inter-war period, as in the excerpt from her “Uncle Tom,” cited earlier in this chapter, “Men must have life, the opportunity to learn, to labor, to love. Without these fundamental virtues we cannot achieve. We must not give up the struggle until this is obtained.”¹⁸ Although Burroughs' list omits “the pursuit of happiness,” her list may be more expansive and personal than Jefferson's trio, offering “love, learning, labor and leisure” as part of a formula for “the pursuit of happiness.” More important than the alliterative device, Burroughs introduces each term indirectly, placing the graduates in the role of actor, “You will work for liberty. . .”(5); “You shall work for love, . . . “ (6); “You shall go forth and accept the new challenge not only for love but for learning.”(7); “Then you must work for another 'L'—Labor.” (8) “We must work for leisure.” (9) This orientation toward action, as presented in the

18 Juanita Jackson, “Unload Uncle Toms,' Says Nannie Burroughs,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 23 December 1933. See also “Christianity at the Judgment Bar,” *Black Dispatch*, 4 July 1929; and “Declaration of 1776 is Cause of Harlem Riot,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 13 April 1935.

Tuskegee speech, suggests Burroughs' goal for the race, actively participating in the development of American democracy. The synonymous verbs, “work,” “labor,” “build,” “dedicate,” identify the unending activity required of each individual to bring about the “new day.” These verbs signifying endeavor are complemented by the repetition of phrases suggesting movement—“brought forth,” “go forth,”— which she uses at least eight times in this segment.

Burroughs' structure of this section of the speech facilitates attention and memory, her language choices encourage action, and the features of this “new day” echo and expand the concepts contained in the Declaration of Independence. Her first item in the list describes the spiritual dimensions of the cultural changes she imagines,

You will dedicate yourselves to a new social order and to the building of it in the hearts of men. You will work first of all for life—abundant life—life promised by Him who came over two thousand years ago and said that he came that we might have life and that we might have it more abundantly. (4)

The nature of this new day, the vision she offers the audience, transcends anything contemporary, or even American. Universal, participatory, and spiritually grounded, she refers to Jesus' promise in the Gospel of John, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”¹⁹ Burroughs' view of justice fused the political and spiritual, promoting the Christian belief system—with its emphasis on freedom, justice, and redemption—as a resource for cultural change; this spiritual orientation recurs throughout the speech.

Liberty, a common theme in Burroughs' discourse and a term with special

¹⁹ John 10:10, King James Version.

resonance for her African-American audience, is perhaps the most abstract and elusive term in her list. Appearing as the second item, Burroughs treats it vividly,

You will work for liberty—absolute and complete freedom for all men of every nation under all suns and skies and flags. You will dedicate yourselves as did the man who fired the hearts and imaginations of the American people in the great struggle of the Revolution. You will stand forth as men and women in a new day facing a new challenge and speaking as did that famous, humble American who interpreted the hope and dreams of centuries that are to come. Out of humble Williamsburg, Virginia, realizing the purposes for which this republic was founded, Patrick Henry stood forth as you shall stand forth and declared for our new day and for those new challenges that 'it matters not the cost to other men but as for me, give me liberty or give me death.' That challenge to America, that rededication to the Declaration of Independence rings and reverberates in the hearts of all men in America, in the North and in the South. (5)

Burroughs first amplifies its meaning by the length, rhythm and vivacity of her description, “absolute and complete freedom for all men of every nation under all sun and skies and flags.”(5) This construction departs from her usual concise, rapid descriptions, but while simply stating “freedom for all” would have conveyed the same idea, Burroughs, by depicting liberty in this way, highlights the universal nature of liberty, moving the term out of the restrictive American setting into a more universal context. The expansive construction of the sentence attracts attention: extending the nature of freedom by the adjectives “absolute and complete,” and applying it to “all men of every nation . . .” broadens the concept of liberty, inviting the audience to dwell on its meaning. She enlarges the term further with her reference to Patrick Henry, he “stood forth,” as her audience “shall stand forth.”

The Pursuit of Happiness

The next four paragraphs feature Burroughs' expanded notion of Jefferson's "pursuit of happiness" as she discusses love, learning, labor, and leisure, measures of freedom Jefferson might have taken for granted, but Burroughs' audience still struggled to enjoy. Her treatment of love, although shorter, mirrors her depiction of liberty,

You shall work for another ideal. You shall work for love, the love of humanity, the love of the humblest—the least man and the lost man whether he lives in America or in India or in China or in Burma or in the isles of the sea. We shall work and dedicate ourselves to the end that all men everywhere shall enjoy the love of God and develop the best that is in them. And we shall not by act nor deed nor word nor association put a single stumbling block in the way of any humble struggling human being in all the world. We shall work for love.(6)

Locating the recipients of the "love" she describes globally, rather than nationally, "the least man and the lost man whether he lives in America or in India or in China or in Burma or in the isles of the sea," transports the audience once more beyond the oppressive confines of a racist, segregated American context. Again her expansive construction enlarges the scope of this concept, encouraging the audience to think differently about "the love of humanity," since manifestations of such love may have been scarce in the immediate context of the South. She repudiates the racist attitudes and actions of white America as she challenges her audience not to "by act nor deed nor word nor association put a single stumbling block in the way of any humble struggling human being in all the world." The sentence tumbles along with no punctuation suggesting, again, the pervasiveness of "stumbling blocks," and her use of polysyndeton, "act nor deed nor word nor association," lengthens and thereby emphasizes the all-consuming nature of their effort in promoting brotherhood. Two blunt statements encompass the

segment on love— “You shall work for another ideal,” and “We shall work for love.”

The varied length of the sentences contributes to an energetic style, keeping the audience attentive and engaged.

At first glance, Burroughs' final item, “leisure” seems out of place since it does not relate to activity. This feature, however, grounds the rest of the agenda. “[T]hat great period of meditation, of renewing our spiritual selves” balances the other five goals that connote action, providing a place to think and from where “we may go forth into the struggle of life,” Full freedom demands the opportunity to govern one's time of rest, particularly for the former slave whose time away from work was minimal and most often controlled by others. Burroughs describes its purpose, “for the advancement of human society, to the development of cultural things that make life worthwhile. . . . It will be that great period of meditation, of renewing our spiritual selves from which we may go forth into the struggle of life, into the great avenues of employment and take our place beside our brother.” (9) In order to convince them to accept such a vision, and to act in accordance with it, Burroughs must move her audience beyond their present grim circumstances, where they more often than not left out of anything momentous. She must move them beyond despair and inculcate hope.

Transformation of Reality

Such an optimistic charge to the class of 1934 might have seemed rather unrealistic given the harsh reality the graduates faced as they left Tuskegee. If Burroughs had continued along this path much longer without addressing the economic, social, and

political situation, she might have seemed delusional. In the third and middle part of the speech (10-14) Burroughs departs from the mission of the new day to confront directly the economic depression,

So we rededicate ourselves to the new day in spite of the darkness that surrounds us, in spite of the depression, which after all is not a depression only but a sort of spiritual, moral and social discipline through which we are passing. When we come out of it as individuals, as groups or as nations, if we have taken our medicine like men and women, we are going develop for the next generation whether it be twenty-five or fifty or a hundred years hence a type of man and woman stronger and more durable mentally, socially and spiritually. This discipline through which we are passing is going to be the best tonic that we have ever had, serving to tone up our inner equipment.(10)

Burroughs accomplishes two things in this passage: First, she transforms the economic, political, and social difficulties into a reason for perseverance. The realities of the depression present an even more daunting exigence for the graduates and many in the larger audience than the daily racism they experienced. She carefully ensconces her discussion of material reality—the “darkness,” “depression,” “war clouds,” “night” in proclamations of ultimate victory, “So we rededicate ourselves to the new day,” (10), “We are going to accept the challenge to build a new social order. . . . We have dedicated ourselves. . . .” (11) “It is to be a civilization such as we have never known.” (12) “The civilization now in the making, spiritual, moral, social and mental is yours.” (15)

Burroughs acknowledges directly the fear, the uncertainty, and the lack of opportunity, all arising from material reality; yet she argues in this passage that the new social order—“spiritual, moral, social and mental” in nature—will trump the material. Woven through this discussion of material difficulty, Burroughs employs language—“discipline,”

“medicine,” “tonic” “tone up”—connoting training, restoration and strength. Her treatment of the economic depression invites the audience to persevere, and to anticipate triumph over adversity. The second feature of this passage addresses the most practical concern facing her immediate audience, employment,

So this afternoon you young men and women who are soon going away sit here in doubt, and wonder whether you will get a job, whether there is a ready-made job for you in the world. I have come all the way down to Tuskegee to tell you NO! All the jobs we have had are taken. There are no ready-made jobs anywhere; but there are one hundred and twenty million jobs that can be made; and that is your job. If you can't take that challenge, if you can't go out and blaze new trails and find new avenues of employment make new roads, find new highways and discover new ways to do old things—if you can't do that, well, “look to the Lord and be dismissed.”(13)

Burroughs challenges the audience toward innovation and inventiveness. Her repetition of the word “new”—“new trails,” “new avenues,” “new roads,” “new highways”—shifts the graduates' minds away from present circumstance, where “All the jobs we have had are taken,” to the future; she further accomplishes this shift toward the future by employing transportation metaphors—“blaze new trails,” “make new roads,” “find new highways,”—which suggest movement, endeavor, activity leading somewhere, a theme she develops in the remainder of the speech. Employing the colloquial, “look to the Lord and be dismissed,” Burroughs gently and humorously taunts the audience as she concludes this particular treatment of personal innovation. Burroughs' style shifts as she develops this idea of momentum in the next segment of the speech.

Marching Toward that Social Ideal

Burroughs invokes ownership, participation, and responsibility as she moves away from the depression to discuss the new civilization,

The civilization now in the making, spiritual, moral, social and mental is yours. It is yours to make, yours to possess and yours to glorify. Men before you made the civilization of which they were a part or they gave to the world new ideas and started it off on a new trail. We have come over it for some two thousand years working on the ideals and dreams of one man here and another there, in one generation after another. We started it with that man who came to redeem this world with an individual ideal of human brotherhood, social justice and the idea of peace on earth good will toward men. For two thousand years the world has been marching toward that social ideal. We have not arrived and we are thousands of years distant from it, but we are facing in the right direction, marching towards justice, equality, brotherhood. (15)

She begins this section by emphasizing ownership in the new society, “yours to make, yours to possess and yours to glorify.” At this part of the speech Burroughs shifts from a general discussion of the “new day” to a more personal application of it with the repetition of “yours.” Her references in the remainder of the speech tend to be more personal, highlighting individual responsibility for cultural change. The ideas and style converge here, creating a sense of ownership and of movement. Her goal is to convince her audience that they are part of an unstoppable, historical quest for justice, equality and brotherhood. She had discussed the importance of providing vision a decade earlier, and her words then shed light on her strategy here, “[V]ision implies times as well as place. It is easy enough to get people to work for quick results, but it is not easy to get those who can see over the hill of the years and catch a vision of the value of unspectacular, long range work. But such work is far more important.”²⁰ Her word choice in this segment conveys movement: “have come over it,” “started it off on a new trail,” “the world has been marching,” “facing in the right direction,” “marching toward justice,

20 “Twenty-Third Annual Report,” 30.

equality and brotherhood.” Burroughs develops further this momentum, this idea of purposeful advance, in the next paragraph,

During these thousands of years men have waged bloody warfare for life, liberty, love, learning, labor and leisure and it is in part going to be realized by this generation; then they will pass on the torch to another generation. But we are going to witness a new heaven and a new earth right here worked out in the hearts of men. It is coming in proportion as we dedicate our faith, our courage, our hopes and our indomitable will. Young people, there is no force on earth, no handicap, no barrier on earth that can stay any race or individual who organizes its courage, its faith, its hopes, its industry and its indomitable will. You can't defeat it. You may delay it, or place a barrier around; you may block up the stream, but it will swing around the dam and join the current and continue on its way to the great ocean beyond. (16)

The ideas in this section emphasize struggle, perseverance, progress, and movement; her stylistic choices enhance these themes. The temporal and spatial references generate a feeling of urgency; the natural imagery—the unidentified river tumbling into the ocean—makes visible the sense of momentum. She conveys speed in the broken up clauses she constructs to describe the river's course—“You can't defeat it. You may delay it, or place a barrier around; you may block up the stream,” Each obstacle is followed by a pause, (a temporary cessation of the flow of the river); the concluding clause is driven along by polysyndeton, giving a sense of inevitability. The last part of the sentence mimics the flow of a river emptying into the ocean, she depicts this phenomenon without pause: “but it will swing around the dam and join the current and continue on its way to the great ocean beyond.” The rushing course of the river makes progress seem natural, rapid, inevitable.

Burroughs creates this great sense of momentum for her audience as the speech progresses, her temporal references will shift as she moves toward her conclusion, but her

temporal focus remains on the present as she sweeps the audience up into the current of change,

I want you today to remember that there are thousands of men who dream dreams for you; you are realizing some of them today. But you do not realize it fully because you are too near to it, too much a part of it, to sense what is taking place right here in the southland. Today in spite of the prejudice, barriers and handicaps we are thousands and thousands of years, which are but a yesterday in the divine plan, thousands of years beyond the dreams of our fathers over seventy years ago. It has been a marvelous development in such little time.(17)

It is a long way from an ox-cart to a good car hitting on all cylinders, but you have made it and you have made it in less than twenty-five years. And we are going to make more speed—I mean mental, moral, social and spiritual speed in the next twenty-five years than we have made in the past one hundred years. We are going to make it because we desire it. In the heart of every young man who sits in this audience today is the desire to be a man, to be somebody and to do something and to go somewhere. It is in the heart and it is burning as a spirit aflame. Out of that human desire we are going to create a civilization characterized by courage, faith, hope, cooperation and sympathy. We are going to get it because men desire it. It is true of every generation. (18)

The references to time get progressively smaller throughout the passage, narrowing in the minds of the audience the distance and making more tangible the progress Burroughs envisions. Burroughs collapses history, moving from the ages, “we are thousands and thousands of years beyond,” through yesteryear, “over seventy years ago,” to their own era, “made it in less than 25 years.” The telescoped time span invites the hearers to think about their immediate circumstances in the context of progress made over the course of centuries. Her imagery develops further the transportation theme used earlier making the recent progress even more compelling, “from an ox-cart to a good car hitting on all six cylinders.”

The March Toward Justice

The present is made sharply manifest as the movement slows and “today” is repeated three times in paragraph (17). She introduces the actual concept of speed, and her stylistic choices change in (18), with sentences becoming more compact and forceful, the imagery more vivid, and the overall structure more varied. Earlier in the speech, Burroughs had invoked references to Abraham Lincoln (2), Patrick Henry (5), and Jesus (4) (15); now she employs another historical illustration, this time from European history, as evidence for victorious transformation of society,

Martin Luther's reformation was a success because he dreamed a dream. Yes, that is true, but there was in the hearts of millions of people of his day the desire for certain spiritual freedom. They hungered and thirsted for it and when he tacked the thesis on the door and was responsible for the calling of the Diet of Worms, it was a declaration of what men had desired for generations hence they caught it up, fanned the flame and baptized it with the spirit of their great desire. So today, we are marching to a new reformation of social and spiritual betterment in spite of difficulties. (18)

These historical allusions become markers or touchstones of success, representing large, decisive, revolutionary moments in western history—Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War, Patrick Henry and the American Revolution, Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation. Luther who, by merely envisioning change, satisfied the hopes of the populace. Burroughs speaks of Martin Luther who had “a dream,” and provided the impetus for change, but her characterization of the German reformation highlights the role the people played in bringing about change. Her description of the German reformation features Luther only briefly; those responsible for the great cultural revolution were the millions who acted on their desire for change. The foundation for this new civilization, according to Burroughs, comes from within the individual. She

stokes within her audience a desire for this new civilization by describing variously and attractively how Germans had longed for freedom, “but there was in the hearts of millions of people of his day the desire for certain spiritual freedom,” “They hungered and thirsted for it,” “a declaration of what men had desired for generations,” and “they caught it up, fanned the flame and baptized it with the spirit of their great desire.” She concludes the section by turning them away from despair over material circumstances and setting them on a path toward victory, declaring that “we are marching to a new reformation . . . in spite of difficulties.” The section provides a grand, sweeping vision for her audience, she will next turn to more practical matters, highlighting individual initiative and ingenuity,

What are some of things to be done? First, we have got to have better automobiles. Those out there twenty-five years from now will be objects of curiosity in some museum. They will go out of style but some mind is going to conceive new ways to build automobiles and to improve them. Some mind is going to conceive new things in medicine, new ways of keeping men well, ways of building in men the physical and moral stamina that will enable them to carry on in their work. Some mind is going to conceive a finer and better way of lighting our homes and heating our houses. We now heat them from things in the cellar called furnaces or stoves but some mind is going to conceive a way of heating homes directly from the mine without hauling coal from all over the United States and then carrying it downstairs. They are going to get sense enough to pipe it to us so we can press a button and have heat. Somebody is going to conceive a finer and better way to stay up in the air. The world will not think of the color of the skin but will accept whatever contrivance or machine or conveyance that will get one safely where one wants to go—and on time.(19)

A question captures the audience's attention once more as she orients them toward practical matters. She has declared the new day, now she will offer concrete, direct suggestions. The phrase, “Some mind is going to conceive . . .” frames the technological

advances she imagines, some of which repeat the transportation theme—creating a portrait of activity, of movement, of advance, positing innovative, creative, intellectual tasks that will shape future civilization. She invites the audience to solve these issues as she closes her speech,

I want you to take the struggles, the hardships and the handicaps of this civilization and turn them into stepping-stones. That is what other races have done, black and white. Disregarding handicaps, they have decided within their own souls that they were men and could look this old world in the face, could beat down barriers and climb the rough side of the mountain. I heard an old woman praying one time. She asked, "Lord please don't take me up on the rough side of the mountain." I spoke to her afterwards and told her please not to include me in that number because that was not the side I wanted to go up on. I wanted to go up on the rough side because I knew there was some chance for me to get to the top, but if I went up the smooth side I might slip down. You young men and young women are going up the rough side of the mountain, going through handicaps and barriers; you will have to meet the struggles of this world but out of the depression you are going to come forth a new group of men and women, strong and with powerful characteristics and lasting influence. (20)

Physical imagery and movement dominate Burroughs' conclusion as she once again confronts reality, "the struggles, the hardship and the handicaps," her audience faces. Transforming them into "stepping-stones," she depicts them as inevitable challenges not unyielding obstacles, emphasizing again the progress she expects them to make in their journey toward the "new day." The use of the catch phrase, "rough side of the mountain," suggests an insurmountable, unyielding barrier; yet she transforms this obstacle into an opportunity to sharpen the determination, grit, and courage of the new graduates. Early in her career, when writing a column for the *National Baptist Union*, she had offered similar advice to recent graduates, "If you are going to succeed in life you have got to begin with the idea and the determination that you are going to unlock

doors, go through obstructing walls, climb mountains of difficulty, face adversity with an unflinching soul and see nothing before you but a deathless purpose to reach the goal.”²¹ Confronting and mastering these difficulties forge the strong men and women who will usher in Burroughs' “new day.” Employing language that speaks of purposeful advance, “up the rough side of the mountain, going through handicaps and barriers,” she closes the speech powerfully by heralding victory once more.

Reception of the Tuskegee Speech

Thousands heard Burroughs deliver her commencement address, yet her audience extended beyond the graduates, faculty, and local community who gathered to hear her speak. Her message reached thousands more through the African-American press. The *Tuskegee Messenger*, which circulated nationally, reprinted the entire speech text in its June 1934 issue, introducing the speech as a “battle cry,” “characterized by sane and practical optimism.”²² Noting its universal reach the day it was delivered, the *Messenger* described Burroughs' presence at Tuskegee,

Miss Burroughs with all the vigor of her dynamic personality stirred everyone of the more than three thousand persons present with her “Challenge of the New Day.” In words simple enough to be understood by the most unlettered, she set forth goals high enough to stimulate the most ambitious. Her message although designed particularly for members of the graduating classes was indeed a battle-cry that could not but arouse every member of her race to immediate action. For the white race too there was a message in this challenge of the new day for Miss Burroughs emphasized over and over that this new day with its opportunity for “liberty, learning, love, life, labor and leisure,” would not be for white or black but for any person, black or white who could and would make a contribution to

21 Miss N. H. Burroughs, “Woman’s Department,” *National Baptist Union*, 11 June 1904.

22 “From School Life to Life Work,” *Tuskegee Messenger*, June 1934. The speech text was published under “The Challenge of the New Day,” in the same issue.

the spiritual, social and economic advancement of the world.²³

The Associated Negro Press picked up excerpts of the speech, highlighting various parts such as the following,

To the audience as a whole Nannie Burroughs said, 'What you call the depression is the best tonic you've ever had.' To the graduates—particularly those among the group who were sitting in doubt and wonder as to whether they would be able to get a job, the speaker exclaimed in ringing words: 'No! There are no jobs waiting for you. There is no ready made job anywhere. But there are 120,000,000 jobs waiting to be made. That is your job.'²⁴

The *Pittsburgh Courier* also covered the ceremony, reporting, “In one of the most inspiring addresses of hope ever delivered from a Tuskegee Institute platform, Nannie H. Burroughs, president of the National Training School for Women and Girls . . . appealed to the 183 members of the graduating class of 1934 to accept the Challenge of the New Day and bestir their imaginations to produce bigger and better things for the ultimate happiness of the world.”²⁵

Knowing that Burroughs would be in the state for commencement, several Alabama organizations contacted her before she traveled south requesting that she do some speaking while in the state. She declined all invitations, instead agreeing to speak at a church in Camden, New Jersey immediately after leaving Tuskegee. However, once she arrived in Alabama she was moved by what she observed, and decided to extend her stay in the state. She wrote to Reverend Sylvanus Browne, apologizing for her absence in New Jersey and explaining her change of plans, “After I was on the scene and had a

23 “From School Life to Life Work.”

24 Stewart.

25 “Face New Day, Woman Speaker Declares,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 2 June 1934.

chance to look into the situation, I decided that our people of the deep South really needed me far more than you people who are so advantageously situated in the great North. The people actually begged me to stay and give them another inspirational address. Could you have seen them and heard their earnest petition, you would have willingly consented to release me.”²⁶ Burroughs reported favorably on her trip to Alabama when she delivered her annual address to the Woman's Convention that September, encouraged that progress was indeed taking place in the deep south,

You who have spiritual minds can discern His presence. Marvelous things will take place in America, if you who see, and hear, and feel, and understand will properly evaluate these beginnings. The Interracial Commission is working for justice—economic, political and civic. The Woman's Division is trying to find out what it can do to improve conditions for domestics workers (sic) and to give the Negro his full citizenship rights to vote and serve on juries. Yes, the movement is small, but it is not sporadic.²⁷

In her speech to the Tuskegee Institute graduates, Burroughs invites her audiences to change, fundamentally and dramatically, their view of themselves and their standing in America. Marshalling historical examples of great cultural revolutions, Burroughs offers a compelling vision of a “new day” as she fortifies the battle-weary, transforms the current struggle, and proclaims future victory. Several stylistic features assist these arguments—lists focus the mind and direct the attention to the underlying features of the new civilization; temporal and spatial references, along with structural and figural choices create a sense of momentum, and natural imagery depicts the power and force of this movement. The style commands attention, heightens emotion, stimulates action, and

²⁶ Burroughs to Rev. Sylvanus Browne, 13 June 1934, NHB Papers.

²⁷ *Journal of the Thirty-Fourth Annual Session of the Woman's Convention Auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention*, 10.

thereby encourages the belief that one is indeed involved in a great quest to transform America.

Burroughs' speech echoes and extends Lincoln's "new birth of freedom," as she presages some of the ideas that will drive the civil rights movement of the 1950s.

Chapter Five: A Long Train of Abuses—The Duty to Revolt

“The framers of the Declaration of Independence prophesied that uprisings would occur 'in the course of human events,' if people are denied those inalienable rights to which the 'laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them.' Re-read their prophecy—their justification for such natural, human resentment after patient sufferance. It is written in every American history. They declared that 'when a long train of abuses and usurpations pursuing, invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.'”

-Nannie Burroughs, 1935

Introduction

They stood silently, ropes encircling their necks, placards bearing the number of human beings lynched pinned to their chests. The Department of Justice had tried in vain to block the NAACP-backed protest, insisting that local police arrest the picketers. But the seventy young men and women were determined to send a message to Attorney General Homer S. Cummings and President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had ignored repeated requests that lynching be placed on the agenda of the National Crime Conference being held in Washington, D. C. in mid-December, 1934. Carefully planned, the picket was executed with “military precision,” according to one reporter covering the event. He observed that, “Nothing like it has been seen in Washington in many a year.”¹ Later that night over a thousand people gathered at a nearby church to hear Nannie

1 “Military Precision Marks NAACP Crime Convo [sic] Demonstration; Prof. Editor, Lawyer, Journalist Jugged,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, 22 December 1934. “Crime Conference Still Silent on Lynching,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, 1 December 1934.

Burroughs and local N.A.A.C. P. leaders speak. Burroughs hailed the protesters, and urged others to join them, “There are enough Negroes in Washington to make Pennsylvania Avenue tremble! . . . It is no evidence of Christianity to have people mock you and spit on you, and defeat the future of your children—it is the mark of cowards!” She thundered to the crowd:

Lynchings and burnings start as much in the Federal government as in Mississippi. Prejudice has made the Negro satisfied. All they want to know here in Washington, or down in Mississippi or Alabama or Tennessee, is 'Will they take it? And how much will they take?' If we do not demand our rights, who in the world will demand them for us? Get rid of cowards. There is no place for them—black or white—in this country.²

The *Washington Tribune* covered Burroughs' speech that night, concluding, “The next twelve months will be the most important in determining the status of the black man in America for some time to come, prophesied this militant leader.”³ Frustration would mount over the next few months as the federal government refused to pass anti-lynching legislation, and continued economic injustice and widespread discrimination exacerbated the misery of the depression. This frustration culminated in one of the nation's most alarming racial revolts, the Harlem Riot of March 1935. African-Americans were no strangers to rioting, but prior to the 1935 Harlem Riot, the black community was typically the recipient of violence rather than initiators of it. Unemployment rates, by some estimates, hit eighty percent among Harlem residents during 1935, and only fourteen percent of the unemployed regularly received any type of assistance from the

2 “Let Pennsylvania Ave. Tremble, Says Nannie Burroughs in Speech,” *Washington Tribune*, 29 December 1934.

3 Ibid.

government. Living conditions became nearly unbearable with up to five families occupying six-room dwellings.⁴ Economic oppression by Harlem's white merchants—high prices and their refusal to hire black workers—intensified the misery of the depression.⁵ Yet it was the thought of another injustice, the idea that a lynching had occurred in Harlem, that ignited the African-American community. "It was not the casualty list of the Harlem riots which made them stand out. It was their mass and vigor. . . . [T]he whole population seemed to rise in window-smashing protest at something vague and obscure which it scarcely understood," observed Ralph Renaud. "No earthquake could have caused more consternation than the sudden Harlem riots, which blazed almost into insurrection."⁶ The fact that the uproar was started and perpetuated by African-Americans alarmed New York City authorities who, fearing that the Communist Party of the U.S.A. (CPUSA) had inspired the uprising, immediately and doggedly set out to determine the exact cause of the riot.⁷

Exploiting the obsession with the cause of the Harlem Riot, Burroughs offered her own explanation for the Harlem Riot in "Declaration of 1776 is Cause of Harlem Riot."⁸ This text, part of Burroughs' editorial campaign against lynching, exposes

4 Renaud.

5 Winston McDowell, "Race and Ethnicity During the Harlem Jobs Campaign, 1932-1935," *Journal of Negro History*, Summer/Autumn 69, 1984: 134-46, 137.

6 Ralph E. Renaud, "Harlem Riots Caused By Misery, Not Reds," 23 March 1935. Renaud, managing editor of the *Washington Post*, was former managing editor of the *New York Evening Post*.

7 Philip A. Klinkner with Rogers M. Smith, *The Unsteady March: The Rise and Decline of Racial Equality in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 145.

8 Nannie H. Burroughs, "Declaration of 1776 is Cause of Harlem Riot," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 16 April 1935. As a national board member for the NAACP, Burroughs contributed to the writer's campaign against lynching. The piece is one of several she published through the black press addressing lynching during the 1930s. See also Nannie H. Burroughs, "America Lynch Mad, Declares Miss Burroughs," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 23 December 1933; "Nannie Burroughs Says Hound Dogs Are Kicked, but Not Bulldogs," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 17 February 1934; and parts of a speech

American hypocrisy, encourages active protest of injustice, and rehabilitates African-American identity. I shall argue in this chapter that by using the language and ideology of the American Revolution, Burroughs skillfully framed the Harlem Riot as a typically American response to long-standing oppression. The actions of the rioters, she would argue, were the predictable outcome of many years of patient suffering under an unjust government. By depicting the Harlem rioters as American patriots she strengthens their American identity, justifies the use of violence in the face of continued injustice, quells the charge of communism, and shifts the discussion of the underlying causes of the riot to the issue of lynching. Before we get to the text, an examination of the salient issues Burroughs addressed in her editorial—particularly the surge in lynching during the 1930s, and the renewed attack on African-American identity—will make her rhetorical strategies more evident.

Lynching Increases

During the first eight months of 1930 alone the recorded number of lynchings doubled, with twenty-two people reported lynched, up from a total of eleven during 1929.⁹ The sudden spike in the number of lynchings prompted the NAACP and the black press to increase their anti-lynching efforts, enlisting writers across the nation to draw attention to the barbaric practice, and urging Congress to do something about the

Burroughs delivered on lynching was published in "Let Pennsylvania Ave. Tremble, Says Nannie Burroughs in Speech," *Washington Tribune*, 29 December 1934.

9 Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Random House, 2002), 303.

problem.¹⁰ Weekly the papers featured news items and editorials on the subject,¹¹ and Burroughs would contribute a series of articles through the black press on the topic.¹² Burroughs spoke out often against lynching throughout the inter-war period, characterizing the grisly practice as fundamentally un-American, “Lynching is an indictment against Christian civilization,” she declared before the Woman's Convention. “No American can evade the responsibility for it, and this government cannot stand half savage and half civilized any longer than it could have stood half slave and half free.”¹³

Lynching and African-American Identity

Burroughs considered the violence against African-Americans a physical manifestation of America's deep-seated racism. She named two sources of lynching: The first being the Federal government's failure to enforce the Fifteenth Amendment, “Such failure leaves two-thirds of the Negro population voteless and, therefore, defenseless,” Burroughs argued. “It actually sets the stage for discrimination, wanton aggression,

10 “Writers to the Rescue,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 23 December 1933. See also “Lynching is ‘Murder’ Says Pres. Roosevelt in Address Before Federal Council of Churches,” *New York Age*, 16 December 1933. And “President Roosevelt on Lynching,” *New York Age*, 16 December 1933. See also “U. S. Senators Promise Support of Anti-Lynching Bill,” *New York Age*, 6 January 1934.

11 See, for example, a report of the killing of Richard Roscoe, the 28th victim of 1933 of Minter City, Mississippi who was lynched dragged through the streets and left at his door step with a sign reading, “Let this be a lesson to all darkies.” “Deacon Lynched; Dragged Through St. Behind Sheriff's Car,” *New York Age*, 7 October 1933. “Lynched for Threatening White Man With Knife,” *New York Age*, 14 October 1933. “Texas Lynch Mob Cuts Out Heart of Victim Before Burning Him,” *New York Age*, 16 December 1933. “Alabama to ‘Burn’ Nine in One Day,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 23 December 1933. “Tragedy Occurs in Shadow of Fisk University,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 23 December 1933. The *Pittsburgh Courier* ran across the bottom of the front page, set off in a box and bold-faced type: “Read ‘Why America Has Gone Lynch Mad’—By Nannie Burroughs.” See also “Pender County Officials Were Members of Lynch Party, White Newspaperman Says,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 23 December 1933.

12 Nannie H. Burroughs, “America Lynch Mad, Declares Miss Burroughs,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 23 December 1933; Nannie H. Burroughs, “Nannie Burroughs Says Hound Dogs Are Kicked, but Not Bulldogs,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 17 February 1934; “Let Pennsylvania Ave. Tremble, Say Nannie Burroughs in Speech,” *Washington Tribune* 29 December 1934; “Declaration of 1776 is Cause of Harlem Riot,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 13 April 1935.

13 “Twenty-third Annual Report,” 27.

injustice and crime.”¹⁴ The second source was prejudiced attitudes among white Americans. Although the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the U. S. Constitution provided a statutory basis for citizenship, African-Americans were kept from participating fully in national life by racist attitudes and damaging stereotypes. Securing a statutory foundation for equality was fundamental, Burroughs believed, but dislodging the destructive attitudes of racism would prove to be as difficult, if not more so, than changing the laws. These attitudes, she argued, seeped into all aspects of American culture infecting those who promoted, as well as those who were harmed, by such beliefs. As early as 1906, Burroughs identified this as one of the most pervasive and growing issues facing the black community, “Prejudice is on the increase and race hatred and sectional strife is everywhere felt.”¹⁵ She sounded these themes throughout the inter-war period, railing against such attitudes in a speech delivered at a meeting marking the NAACP's twentieth anniversary:

There is more power in the American brand of race prejudice than there is in the brand of Christianity which is propagated in this country. Men out of every land under the sun have come to dwell in the midst of this nation—a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the ideals of justice and happiness. Yet our country has fought harder to keep men in physical and moral slavery than any of the so-called Christian nations of modern times.¹⁶

Rooted deeply in the American psyche, this racial prejudice fueled all sorts of discriminatory and even violent practices, Burroughs believed. She argued that one of the contributing factors to lynching was the national tendency “to look down on the Negro.

14 Nannie H. Burroughs, “America Lynch Mad, Declares Miss Burroughs,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 23 December 1933.

15 “Miss N. H. Burroughs,” *Washington Bee*, 10 March 1906.

16 “Christianity at the Judgment Bar,” *Oklahoma Black Dispatch*, 4 July 1929.

Such an attitude invites and encourages injustice and persecution.”¹⁷

Burroughs was not the only one to place identity at the root of the lynching problem. Vere E. Johns echoed her sentiment when he argued in the *New York Age*, “What a lot of people do not understand is that these Southern swine have convinced themselves that the Negro is not a human being the same as white people—he is some kind of superior beast and only deserves good treatment when he is humble and docile like a puppy, but the moment he becomes aggressive, like a wild animal, he must be destroyed.”¹⁸ Accordingly, part of the solution to the lynching problem would be to rehabilitate African-American identity. Burroughs attacked this issue in a variety of ways. To the African-American community she crafted an identity of confident, intelligent, unified, and active citizens who could bring positive change to their communities. She loudly protested the way the race was depicted in films like “Birth of a Nation,” and the popular “Amos and Andy;” she encouraged the black community to take action against such damaging characterizations:

In order to gain and maintain the respect for the race that will give elevation to its ideals and value to its assets, we must stop the caricaturing and defaming of the race on the stage, in literature and in moving pictures. We must stop newspapers and magazines in their work of defamation, by protest to editors and by boycotting such papers and by publishing as many facts as possible on the same subject matter in such papers and magazines. . . . The Negro is held up to ridicule, he is pictured as a brute, impossible of highest civilization.”¹⁹

To white audiences Burroughs positioned the race as loyal, intelligent, capable citizens, worthy of respect and equal treatment. This strategy would be especially important

¹⁷ “America Lynch Mad, Declares Miss Burroughs,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 23 December 1933.

¹⁸ Vere E. Johns, “Through My Spectacles,” *New York Age*, 9 December 1933.

¹⁹ *Journal of the Thirty-fourth Annual Session of the National Baptist Convention* (Nashville, TN: National Baptist Publishing Board, 1915), 173.

during the inter-war period as the federal government, suspicious of Communist activity among black Americans, increasingly monitored the black press and the activities of certain African-American leaders.

Burroughs herself was under surveillance by the War Department for at least a few months during 1917. Suspected of being a "Black Radical," the department documented her travel and correspondence,²⁰ and likely continued their surveillance since she regularly wrote for the black press during this time. Considered an organ for disseminating radicalism and Communist doctrine, the black press was considered by the federal government to be a highly influential and potentially destructive force in the Black community.²¹ The Department of Justice asserted in 1919 that "the influence of the negro press in general" was not to "be reckoned with lightly."²² Soon after the riots during the Red Summer of 1919, the Department of Justice released a report entitled, "Radicalism and Sedition Among the Negroes as Reflected in Their Publications." Compiled by J. Edgar Hoover, the report stated,

At this time there can no longer be any question of a well-concerted movement among a certain class of negro leaders of thought and action to constitute themselves a determined and persistent source of a radical opposition to the Government, and to the established rule of law and order. . . . Among the more salient points to be noted in the present attitude of the negro leaders are, first, the ill-governed reaction toward race rioting. . . the identification of the negro with such radical organizations as the I.W.W. and an outspoken advocacy of the Bolsheviki or Soviet doctrines . . .²³

20 Records of the War Department, General and Special Staffs, Military Intelligence Division, "Black Radicals," from Record Group 165, National Archives, reported in Higginbotham, 225, n295.

21 See Enoch P. Waters, *American Diary: A Personal History of the Black Press* (Chicago: Path Press, 1987), 287-8.

22 "Radicalism and Sedition Among the Negroes, as Reflected in Their Publications," *New York Times*, 23 November 1919.

23 Ibid.

Burroughs, a member of the "certain class of negro leaders of thought and action," was likely aware of the government's interest in her work. She was also aware of Communist agitation in Harlem. Well-acquainted with Harlem's African-American community, Burroughs visited often—as an NAACP board member, on behalf of the National Urban League, and as a frequent speaker at Abyssinian Baptist Church, the largest African-American church in the world.²⁴

The federal and local government's interest in the CPUSA's activities in Harlem was not without foundation, the party had long sought inroads into Harlem's African-American community; their efforts were met mostly with resistance from both local and national NAACP leadership, as well as many Harlem churches. In general, many African-Americans remained skeptical of the party's interest in racial matters. More often they suspected the party of exploiting racial matters simply to swell their membership lists. The Scottsboro Boys' ordeal, however, provided the CPUSA a perfect opportunity to demonstrate a sincere interest in racial oppression in America.

The Scottsboro Trials and the Communist Party

On 25 March 1931, nine young African-American men, ranging in age from thirteen to twenty, were accused of assaulting and raping two white women with whom they were sharing a freight car on a train traveling from Chattanooga to Memphis.

²⁴ Burroughs corresponded often with William Pickens, secretary of the NAACP about the Scottsboro trial, lynching and other issues related to the NAACP. See Burroughs to Pickens, 24 November 1931; Burroughs to Pickens, 17 November 1932; Pickens to Burroughs, 5 December 1933; Burroughs to Pickens, 6 January 1932; Burroughs to Pickens, 16 September 1931, NHB Papers. Burroughs also enjoyed frequent contact with Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church and her close friend.

Removed from the train and arrested near Scottsboro, Alabama, the young men were quickly tried, found guilty, and sentenced to death (except for the thirteen year old). The details of the affair—nine boys, the dubious rape charge, inept legal representation, and the speed with which the trial was conducted—were quickly transmitted through the black press and stunned African-Americans around the country. While the NAACP was slow to respond to the boys' plight, the CPUSA sprang into action, arriving within weeks of sentencing to offer legal and financial assistance to the young men, who became known as the “Scottsboro Boys.” According to historian Mark Naison, “The campaign to free the Scottsboro Boys, more than any single event, marked the Communist Party's emergence as a force in Harlem's life.”²⁵ Assisted by the International Labor Defense (ILD), the legal arm of the CPUSA, the boys quickly appealed their sentences. Talk of the Scottsboro Boys trial dominated newspaper coverage and community conversation, and throughout the nation Communists joined African-Americans protesting lynching. Carrying banners that proclaimed, “Death to All Lynchers,” “Black and White Unite and Fight,” and “The Scottsboro Boys Shall Not Burn,” the ILD and CPUSA members held rallies in many northeastern cities.²⁶ The party staged protests in the streets of Harlem (although the majority of the marchers were white), raised funds for the defense of the Scottsboro defendants, and clashed bitterly with the NAACP over how best to manage their legal defense, which through a series of appeals, trials and convictions, lasted several years.

²⁵ Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 57.

²⁶ “Stage Protest Parade for Scottsboro Boys Here,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 23 December 1933.

Lynching Protest Accelerates

While the ongoing Scottsboro trials kept the CPUSA occupied, a particularly gruesome lynching during the fall of 1934 shocked the nation and galvanized the NAACP's anti-lynching campaign. On 26 October 1934, a mob in Mariana, Florida brutally tortured and killed Claude Neal, who had been accused of raping and murdering a white woman. An estimated four to eleven thousand people traveled from eleven southern states to watch the twelve-hour long torture and murder of Neal. Outraged, the NAACP conducted an investigation of the atrocity, prepared a report of their findings, and sent a copy to President Roosevelt and Attorney General Cummings demanding action,

It is imperative for Congress to pass the Costigan-Wagner anti-lynching bill immediately upon its convening in January. We sincerely hope that you will agree and that you will as vigorously as possible insist upon Congress that it pass the bill without delay.²⁷

Both Roosevelt and Cummings were unresponsive; but the NAACP was undeterred. The national office launched a fund raising drive, seeking \$10,000 to cover the postage needed to send the report to all faiths, denominations, and races, "in an effort to arouse the conscience of enlightened Americans to force passage of the Costigan-Wagner anti-lynching bill in the forthcoming Congress."²⁸ A copy of the report had already been sent to each member of the incoming Congress at his home address. A cover letter, signed by Walter White introduced the report,

27 "Clues to Lynchers' Identity Given Officials in Florida, Washington and Alabama," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, 1 December 1934. "F.D.R. Gets 5,000 Word Report on Neal Lynching" *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, 1 December 1934.

28 "Asks \$10,000 to Send Neal Lynching Report to 100,000 Ministers," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, 1 December 1934.

that this gruesome story may emphasize again to you the grave danger to the entire country which lynching constitutes. It is no longer a sectional or racial matter. No graver disintegrating force exists than such unrestrained lawlessness as lynching mobs represent. We respectfully urge your deep interest in an ardent support of Federal anti-lynching legislation to the end that the bill may be passed immediately upon the convening of the Seventy-fourth Congress.²⁹

An eight page pamphlet accompanied the report, featuring representative headlines from newspapers in various parts of the country announcing the lynching, and photographs of Neal's mutilated body hanging from a tree in front of the Marianna courthouse. The organization hoped to put a copy of the report into the hands of "every influential citizen" by the time congress convened January 3.³⁰

Senators Edward Costigan of Colorado and Robert F. Wagner of New York introduced a piece of anti-lynching legislation in January 1934. The first piece of legislation to be sponsored in the Senate since the doomed Dyer anti-lynching bill of the early 1920s, the carefully crafted Costigan-Wagner Bill was designed to address and overcome Southern opposition that had defeated the 1922 Dyer anti-lynching legislation. Many African-Americans hoped that it might have a chance, given the changed political landscape in all regions of the country; their hope would dissipate in the new year. Although President Roosevelt had been urged to lobby for the passage of the legislation, he said nothing about lynching or the pending Wagner-Costigan bill when he addressed Congress on 5 January 1935. His silence stunned the African-American community. In response to his silence, the front page of *New York Amsterdam News* ran a blank front page, with a caption, in small print, announcing, "Here's Mr. Roosevelt's message on

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

lynching.” Surrounded by a sea of blank space, the statement captured dramatically the exasperation of the black community over FDR's refusal to take a public stand against lynching.³¹

Several factors converged to bring Harlem to a boiling point during the spring of 1935—the lynching of Claude Neal, Attorney General Cummings refusal to acknowledge lynching as a crime, FDR's silence about the Wagner-Costigan Bill, and the agitation of the communists—intensifying the growing unrest among Harlem residents.

Harlem Explodes

On 19 March 1935, Harlem exploded. Although details of the events that precipitated the riot were disputed, most agreed the fighting began after sixteen year-old Lino Rivera was caught stealing a pocket knife in Harlem's S. H. Kress department store. The young suspect was apprehended, taken to the back of the store, and searched. A customer in the store, seeing the boy treated roughly, screamed hysterically and fighting began among the estimated 500 customers in the store. Rumors circulated rapidly: the boy had been beaten, possibly killed, a suspicion strengthened when witnesses saw a hearse arrive at the residence across the street from the store. Angered by the rumored lynching of a sixteen-year old boy, Harlem residents rioted for two days, targeting Harlem's white-owned businesses known to exploit African-American customers and discriminate against them in hiring. Contrary to rumor, Rivera arrived unharmed at the police station later that evening, but by that time fighting raged in Harlem's streets.³²

31 “Here's Mr. Roosevelt's Message on Lynching,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 12 January 1934.

32 Rivera received a post card soon after the riot ended stating, “Get out of the city or we will burn you alive.” He was placed under police protection. See “Dozen Indicted in Harlem Riot; Reds Accused,

Newspapers around the nation covered the riot, with front-page articles providing details of the mayhem—the *New York Times* reported that the incident in Kress had triggered, "a riot in which roving bands of Negro men and women smashed 200 plate-glass store windows, looted stores, assaulted white pedestrians and forcibly resisted 500 policemen patrolling streets in an area of more than a square mile."³³ The *Baltimore Afro-American* estimated that between 3,000 and 5,000 people participated in "twelve hours of brick hurling, hand to hand fights and guerrilla warfare while twenty-five radio cars, six emergency trucks and 700 extra uniformed and plain-clothes officers were rushed to the area with riot guns, tear gas and other 'war' machinery."³⁴ The fighting stopped after two days, yet the newspaper coverage—national as well as local—continued for weeks, focusing on the ensuing investigation into the causes of the riot.

Discovering the Causes

The riot revealed deep-seated fear among some white Harlem officials, you can hear the alarm in a telegram sent to New York's Governor Lehman by the Harlem Merchants Association:

In the face of the unbridled and open outbreak of violence, riot and plunder of Harlem business establishments, we. . . demand your personal and immediate intervention. The outbreak of this violence has been long fomenting, and we have repeatedly brought it to the attention of the local authorities, who have done nothing to cure the irresponsible racial and religious agitation carried on by well-known leaders of outlaws and hoodlums.

Last night beastly instincts of mob violence broke loose beyond control, and over 1,000 business establishments suffered the worst ruin known in the annals of our

Face Deporting," *Washington Post*, 22 March 1935.

33 "Police Shoot Into Rioters; Kill Negro in Harlem Mob," *New York Times*, 20 March 1935.

34 "Machine Guns Set Up in New York Streets," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 23 March 1935.

glorious State.”³⁵

Local government officials expended much effort to locate the cause of the riot; Mayor La Guardia quickly appointed a committee of representative citizens to investigate the causes of the disorder.³⁶ “Small groups of vicious individuals marauded throughout the section, from time to time committing acts of violence, attacking individuals in cowardly fashion. . . .”³⁷ The mayor placed the blame on a few “irresponsible individuals who spread false reports of race discrimination.”³⁸ New York City Commissioner Valentin attributed the violence to four sources: the theft of the knife, the hysterical reaction of the woman in the department store, the rumors of the lynching, and the activities of the Young Liberators. Communist influence was immediately and frequently named as the cause of the riot. The *Times* reported that “[t]wo white and two Negro pickets paraded back and forth in front of the store, bearing placards of the young Liberators League with the inscription: “Kress Brutality Beats Negro Child. . . .” This, according to District Attorney William C. Dodge, was “the spark that set off another flare-up.”³⁹ Dodge, claiming that he had been monitoring Communist activity in Harlem, cited evidence that

35 “Harlem's Stores Ask Soldier Guard,” *New York Times*, 21 March 1935.

36 Fogelson, Robert M. and Robert B. Hill, eds. *The Complete Report of Mayor LaGuardia's Commission on the Harlem Riot of March 19, 1935* (New York: Arno Press, 1969). Mayor LaGuardia's riot commission report was never officially released; it was published eventually in the *Amsterdam News* on 18 July 1936.

37 “Mayor Lays Riot to 'Vicious' Group,” *New York Times*, 21 March 1935.

38 The mayor ordered that proclamations be posted throughout Harlem the day after the riot. The proclamation read, in part, “The unfortunate occurrence of last night and early morning was instigated and artificially stimulated by a few irresponsible individuals. . . . Malice and viciousness of the instigators are betrayed by the false statements contained in handbills and placards. . . . I appeal to the law-abiding element of Harlem to carefully scrutinize any charge, rumor or gossip of racial discrimination made at this time.” See “Mayor Lays Riot to 'Vicious' Group,” *New York Times*, 21 March 1935.

39 “Police Shoot Harlem Rioters,” *New York Times*, 20 March 1935.

the Communists were “entirely responsible” for the mayhem. “The Reds have been boring into our institutions for a long time, but when they incite to riot it is time to stop them,” Dodge concluded.⁴⁰ Threatening deportation, Dodge continued, “They have been safe because we are sticklers for free speech, but when that free speech undermines our laws and causes riots. . . action must be taken.”⁴¹ Dodge held a press conference to announce that a grand jury would investigate the riots, “My purpose is to let the Communists know that they cannot come into this country and upset our laws.”⁴² Local officials were not alone in their obsession to determine the causes of the riot. African-American leaders cited various reasons for the violence. Roger Wilkins, NAACP leader and editor of the *Crisis*, blamed the outbreak on “the economic insecurity of the Harlem Negroes, who are barred from jobs by racial discrimination.”⁴³ High rent and hunger were among the other causes identified by the African-American press;⁴⁴ one writer even suggested that the lack of recreational facilities might be to blame for the Harlem Riot.⁴⁵

African-American Quest For Identity

In “Declaration of 1776 is Cause of the Harlem Riot,” Burroughs, as we shall see, re-interprets the Harlem Riot by shifting the orientation of the analysis and dismissing the false causes proposed by local authorities. The action of the rioters had been characterized by media and government officials as lawless, disordered, and Communist-

40 “Dozen Indicted in Harlem Riot; Reds Accused, Face Deporting,” *Washington Post*, 22 March 1935.

41 Ibid.

42 “Police End Harlem Riot; Mayor Starts Inquiry; Dodge Sees a Red Plot,” *New York Times*, 21 March 1935.

43 “12 Indicted in Riot; Troop Plea Denied,” *New York Times*, 21 March 1935.

44 “Claims High Rents Leading Cause of Unrest in Harlem,” *Black Dispatch*, 28 March 1935; “Empty Bellies Cause of Harlem Riot, Says J. A. Rogers,” *Black Dispatch*, 4 April 1935.

45 “Recreational Needs Blamed for Rioting,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 20 April 1935.

inspired. By re-interpreting the Harlem events as lawful, rational, and Declaration-inspired, she argues that they constituted a typically American response to gross injustice.

Four sections roughly organize this brief text:

1. The introduction re-frames the Harlem Riot (1-3)
2. The first argument separates the cause from the manifestation (4-9)
3. The second argument identifies the underlying ideology in the Declaration of Independence as a justification for revolt (10-19)
4. The conclusion summarizes and warns of another uprising (20-21)

The text begins abruptly and aims at two objectives—to re-interpret the Harlem Riot and to dismiss false claims regarding its causes,

Harlem did not have a “race” riot. It had a “human” revolt.(1)

Communitistic propaganda, Red agitation and unemployment are not the causes. Nor did a colored boy, a nickel pen-knife and a screaming woman cause the uprising. Hush the voice that tells you so.(2)

As in her 1928 political analysis, Burroughs introduces the editorial by re-framing the current situation. Her bold opening operates decisively; rather than equivocating or suggesting a point of view, she simply issues a declaration. This opening declaration along with the title of the article, “Declaration of 1776 is Cause of Harlem Riot,” immediately begins to shift events in Harlem toward the larger American struggle for independence. Burroughs asserts that the activity in Harlem was not just about the African-American race, but the “human” race; this was not merely a chaotic rumble, but a concerted effort to throw off the yoke of oppression. The *New York Times* had described the riot as “a rampage” by “roving,” “marauding,” “bands of trouble-makers” who

“smashed . . . looted. . . assaulted white pedestrians and forcibly resisted 500 policemen patrolling streets in an area of more than a square mile.”⁴⁶ The *Washington Post* used similar language to depict the events: “the wild outbreak,” “the wild disorders” “scattered bands of hoodlums continued to rage through the streets assaulting, looting and smashing windows.”⁴⁷ Burroughs' word choice counters such media depictions—by rejecting the word “riot,” and replacing it with “revolt” (and later using the term “uprising”), she begins to change the perception of the Harlem Riot from one of senseless destruction and violence to one marked by purposeful action. The use of the word “uprising” twice in the first three paragraphs complements “revolt” in the second sentence to undercut “riot,” suggesting a concerted effort, while strengthening the transcendent nature of the Harlem skirmish. These ideas are consistent with Burroughs' depiction of the African-American struggle as a continuation of the American Revolution.

Dismissing False Causes

Since the cause of the riot had become a local and national obsession, the re-framing of the events necessitated the identification of the cause of the riot. Before Burroughs could declare an alternative reason for the uprising, she first had to dislodge in the minds of readers the causes that had been identified by other sources and circulated through the press for weeks. Burroughs recites rapidly, and then repudiates, this list of causes, first the larger philosophical and economic charges: “Communist propaganda, Red agitation and unemployment are not the causes.” She then tackles the more mundane

46 “Police Shoot into Rioters; Kill Negro in Harlem Mob,” *New York Times*, 20 March 1935.

47 “Army of Police Patrols Harlem, Torn by Riots,” *Washington Post*, 21 March 1935.

elements: "Nor did a colored boy, a nickel pen-knife and a screaming woman cause this uprising." By grouping together the various explanations offered by government officials, Harlem residents, and African-American leaders, Burroughs can more easily dismiss them without lengthy refutation; the command, "Hush the voice that tells you so," assists this strategy of dismissing the false causes. She will extend this rejection by re-defining the proposed causes as "manifestations" in the following paragraphs:

There is a world of difference between local manifestations of an uprising and its creative influences. A statement of that fact seems superfluous, but I make it because people so easily mistake the manifestation for the cause.(3)

That was the mistake of the Pharisees whose case Jesus summed up in one sentence. He said to them: "You make void the law through your traditions." That is exactly what America has done in the case of the colored man.(4)

She divides the issue, separating cause from manifestation to clarify the thinking of the readers since, "people so easily mistake the manifestation for the cause," and offers as evidence a biblical illustration. The Gospels record Jesus' encounters with the Pharisees, who tried to trap Jesus at various times by judging his actions against the requirements of Jewish law.⁴⁸ In Matthew 23:23 Jesus condemned their scrupulous adherence to the external elements of the law while violating the spirit of the code, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former."⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Burroughs refers specifically to Matthew 15:6. For other examples of Jesus' encounters with the Pharisees see, for example, Matthew 15:1-9; John 8:1-9; and John 9:16.

⁴⁹ Matthew 23:23.

Burroughs' invocation of the Pharisees, who “make void the law through [their] traditions,” rebukes the New York City officials who condemned the unlawful actions of the rioters and the Communist agitators who may have inspired them, as they “mistakenly” overlooked America's egregious violations of the law. Burroughs completes her division in the next two paragraphs, naming the cause of the riot first and then the manifestation:

This nation openly endorses, tolerates and legalizes the very abuses against which she originally waged a bloody revolution.(5)

A colored boy, a nickel pen-knife and a screaming woman were no more the cause of the Harlem uprising in 1935, than was a shipload of tea in the Boston harbor, in 1773, the cause of the Revolutionary War. The tea party episode was only the manifestation. “A long train of abuses” created the cause.(6)

Samuel Adams feared that the colonists were being lulled into indifference to their rights. He was mistaken. The Boston tea party convinced him.(7)

The causes of the Harlem riot are not far to seek. They lie buried beneath mountains of injustices done the colored man in every state and in every relationship, through years of “patient sufferance” on his part. In dealing with colored people, American makes “void the law through custom” —that's the deep-seated cause of the Harlem riot.(8)

She identifies the cause of the riot through her bold charge against America, a nation which “openly endorses, tolerates, and legalizes the very abuses against which she originally waged a bloody revolution.” It would have made the point sufficiently to state, “this nation openly endorses the very abuses,” but to add, “tolerates and legalizes” amplifies the offense against the nation, pressing into the minds of the reader the extent of the offense, not of the rioters, but of a nation that tolerates racial discrimination and injustice. Burroughs attributes to both the Pharisees and America the kinds of abuses that

nullify secular and religious law, destroy political bonds, and leave them to assume natural rights.

Burroughs strategically uses the refrain from the Declaration of Independence, “the long train of abuses” to support her charge against the nation by developing, through the use of an historical analogy, an association between the Harlem Riot and the American Revolution. These two episodes, the Harlem uprising and the Boston tea party, were only “manifestations;” the “long train of abuses” was the cause behind these events, Burroughs argues. Her repetition and repudiation of the mundane causes of the riot, “A colored boy, a nickel pen-knife and a screaming woman were no more the cause,” further dissociate in the minds of the reader these false causes. The Boston tea party analogy situates the Harlem uprising within the larger American struggle for independence and freedom, forging an American identity for her African-American audience while intensifying the dissociation from the Harlem rioters and Communist influence. She also uses this analogy to justify revolt. As a precursor to the American Revolution, the Boston Tea Party served as an indication of the inevitable progression toward revolt. Just as the tea party had “convinced” Samuel Adams of the colonists’ determination to rise up against oppression, Burroughs suggests that the Harlem revolt might serve as a warning for those who fear growing African-American unrest. In the next two paragraphs Burroughs crafts more finely her separation of causes and manifestations:

The causes of the Harlem riot are not far to seek. They lie buried beneath mountains of injustices done the colored man in every state and in every relationship, through years of “patient sufferance” on his part. In dealing with colored people, America makes “void the law through custom” —that’s the deep-

seated cause of the Harlem riot.(8)

A few years ago there was a gigantic explosion of dynamite on the New Jersey side of New York Bay. It shattered thousands of windows in Manhattan and even broke dishes in Brooklyn, fifteen miles away. All the fire engines in the lower part of New York came out and raced helplessly up and down the streets looking for the cause of the damage. They found plenty of manifestation of the explosion, but did not discover the cause, for that was miles out of their reach. (9)

These two paragraphs work well together. The Declaration of Independence recognized "that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed." Burroughs demonstrates that "the colored man" had long and patiently endured many abuses. The causes of the Harlem revolt "lie buried beneath mountains of injustices done the colored man in every state and in every relationship through years of 'patient sufferance' on his part." The natural metaphor "mountains of injustices" powerfully depicts the enormous scale of the wrongs suffered; the repetitive "in every state," "in every relationship" convey the pervasiveness of oppression, as she starts to build a case for the "long train of abuses" African-Americans had endured. She will extend this charge later in the essay.

Offering the reader a more recent and vivid illustration to illuminate the difference between manifestation and cause, Burroughs refers to the massive and unforgettable 1916 Black Tom Explosion on Black Tom Island in Jersey City, when over two million pounds of ammunition exploded at a depot where barges and freight cars sat loaded with war material waiting to be transported to the Allied Powers. Not only did the terrifying early-morning explosions shatter windows throughout the New York City area; the blast was felt as far away as Maryland. The source of the first blast—a small fire on

the deck of a barge filled with TNT and illegally docked overnight at a depot pier—was not determined until the following day. The cause of the blast—the work of German saboteurs—was suspected by local and federal officials who immediately launched an official investigation into the causes of the disaster.⁵⁰ The similarities between the 1916 explosion and the Harlem Riot illustrate dramatically for Burroughs' audience her point that the cause of the riot can be difficult to discern initially, “buried beneath mountains of injustice.”

Assuming the role of a prophet wielding sacred text, Burroughs lays bare her charge against America,

The framers of the Declaration of Independence prophesied that uprisings would occur “in the course of human events,” if people are denied those inalienable rights to which the “laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them.” (10)

Re-read their prophecy—their justification for such natural, human resentment after patient sufferance. It is written in every American history. They declared that “when a long train of abuses and usurpations pursuing, invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.”(11)

Invoking the authority of the “Framers of the Declaration of Independence,” the “laws of nature,” and “nature's God,” Burroughs legitimizes the revolt, and positions it as an inevitable result of injustice. Burroughs directs her audience back to the framers of the Declaration: “re-read their prophecy--their justification for such natural human resentment after patient sufferance.” She strengthens the authority of the document by

⁵⁰ The work of German saboteurs, the blast destroyed 13 brick storage buildings, dozens of barges and freight cars, created enormous craters and left behind piles of burning wreckage 100 feet high. “First Explosion Terrific,” *New York Times*, 31 July 1916; “Ruins Disclose Disaster's Cause,” *New York Times*, 1 August 1916; “Explosives Laws Need Untangling,” *New York Times*, 1 August 1916.

underscoring its cultural permanence, "It is written in every American history." She continues by quoting the Declaration:, "They declared that "when a long train of abuses . . . it is their right, their duty to throw off such government." These two paragraphs function persuasively in the text, emphasizing the authority of the framers of the Declaration of Independence (they "prophesied, "their justification," "they declared"), the inevitability of revolt, and the duty of the oppressed. Like the American colonists in the eighteenth century, "[t]he colored man has reached the endurance limit--the point where the Declaration of Independence says, it is time to revolt. . . ." The Harlem revolt was carried out not at the instigation of the CPUSA, but rather, it was the inevitable consequence of the "long train of abuses," and "patient suffering," endured by African-Americans, as foretold by the Founding Fathers and demanded by the Declaration of Independence.

Of course, charges of Communist activity had riddled black Harlem for years, and became magnified after the Harlem Riot. In the next section of her essay, Burroughs directly addresses Communist influence, using the Declaration to diminish its force:

If that's Red, then the writers of the Declaration of Independence were very Red. They told Americans not to stand injustice after "patient sufferance."(12)

The colored man has reached the endurance limit—the point where the Declaration of Independence says, it is time to revolt when the "invasion on the rights of the people seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness and obstruct the administration of justice." Yes, a long train of abuses caused the Harlem uprising.(13)

A few days ago the daily papers excoriated Secretary Perkins for permitting deportable aliens to remain in the country. They called them Reds and enemies to American institutions and ideals. There are too many of them here, they say.(14)

The newspapers are right. Since America manufactures her own Reds through the lynching industry and other forms of base injustice, she has a huge surplus of Reds of her own on hand.(15)

Burroughs subverts the charges of Communist influence on two levels: fundamentally, by invoking the Declaration she weakens the relationship between the Harlem Riot and "red agitation;" but on a deeper level Burroughs' argument attenuates the alleged relationship between the African-American communities and radical organizations. She continues this subversion in the second half of the article as she inverts the term "red" by linking it with injustice and discrimination. "Since America manufactures her own Reds through the lynching industry and other forms of base injustice, she has a huge surplus of Reds of her own on hand." She recognizes that while "[i]t saves America's face to put the cause on alien propagandists, Communists and Reds," these have little to do with "that 'long train of abuses' that actually engender bitterness and resentment." In another article on lynching Burroughs employed a similar strategy of subverting —firing off a series of powerful verbs, “sanctioned, attended, or participated,” and “tarred, feathered, burned and roasted alive” to mock the “American” practice of lynching,

Americans have been lynching human beings for nearly fifty years. Thousands of fathers and mothers have either sanctioned, attended, or participated in lynching bees. They tarred, feathered, burned and roasted alive 3,711 men and women. They brought their little children and babies to witness the orgies. They danced, shouted and laughed gleefully at the death throes of their tortured victims.⁵¹

As she moves toward the final section of the article Burroughs' energetic style conveys vividly the long train of abuses. Burroughs describes the race's suffering

51 Nannie H. Burroughs, “America Lynch Mad, Declares Miss Burroughs,” *Baltimore Afro-American* 23 December 1933.

through a list of passive verbs. Her climax, structured in parallel form, powerfully depicts the patient suffering endured over a long period of time: "Day after day, year after year, decade after decade," the repetition of the words stretches out the sense of suffering and creates a feeling of movement as well. The climactic structure, starting with days and building to decades, not only portrays the long-suffering, but also depicts the movement toward the inevitable outcome of revolt after long endurance of oppression predicted by the Declaration of Independence.

Just as the "history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations," Burroughs recounts the history of the African in America; her list of "abuses," however, differs from those named in the Declaration; instead of focusing on the action of America, or the action of the white race, (as the 1776 Declaration records the actions of King George: "He has refused. . . He has forbidden. . . He has dissolved. . .) she uses the passive voice, portraying the Harlem residents, and by extension all African-Americans, as victims, "black people have been robbed. . . they have been goaded, hounded, driven around, herded, held down and roasted alive, by America's home-made Reds." The passive construction highlights the suffering endured, and the series of verbs, presented in rapid fashion, depicts vividly the "long train of abuses."

Burroughs subverts the charge of communism by asserting that the "home-grown reds" are the instigators, not of riots, but of injustice. Burroughs' choice of verbs creates an image of people devoid of agency; a characterization consistent throughout the text.

The passive construction coupled with the imagery creates in the minds of the reader the utter lack of regard for the oppressed. Not until paragraph (18) do we see action on the part of the African-American, and only when they have been reduced to "cornered rats" and "worms." Throughout the text, African-Americans are portrayed passively -- as those who have suffered long and patiently; yet also as a group who, like the 18th century American patriots, felt compelled to act after enduring a "long train of abuses." By depicting African-Americans as lacking agency, Burroughs weakens the charge made against the black community by the federal government as a "determined and persistent source of a radical opposition to the Government." This lack of agency coincides with the language of the Declaration by conveying the force of the Declaration, it is "the causes which impel them," to revolt, not radicalism or Communist influence.

The final section of the article cements the analogy between the American colonists and African-Americans, and refers again to lynching,

The majority of the colored people of Harlem came from mob-ruled sections, or are the victims of persecutions of various kinds. They came to Harlem seeking opportunity to enjoy life, liberty, labor and happiness. They are beginning to feel cramped and handicapped. Their hearts are hurt. They find themselves apparently pursued by the very evils from which they fled.(19)

America's age-old attitude on the race question is the cause of the Harlem riot. That "long train of abuses" is a magazine of powder. An unknown boy was simply the match—a frightened woman's screams lighted it and threw it into the magazine of powder, and Harlem blew up.(20)

Colored folks feel that Harlem is their last stand. (21)

As the colonists came to America to escape persecution, the "colored people of Harlem came from mob-ruled sections, or are the victims of persecutions of various

kinds." Like the colonists sought "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness," they "came to Harlem . . . to enjoy life, liberty, labor and happiness." And finally, as the American colonists of the 18th century, "[t]hey find themselves apparently pursued by the very evils from which they fled."

The explosion metaphor in the penultimate paragraph completes the progression toward the inevitability of revolt, "That 'long train of abuses' is a magazine of powder. An unknown boy was simply the match—a frightened woman's screams lighted it and threw it into the magazine of powder, and Harlem blew up." The clarity and force of the sentence vividly convey the order of her argument as well, starting with the offense, the long years of "patient suffering," and finally, the revolt. The metaphor calls up in the mind of the reader the enormous and destructive Black Tom explosion. Having reached the climax of the argument, the text closes as it began, with a bold declaration that aptly characterizes the impatience of the African-American community: "Colored folks feel that Harlem is their last stand."

Burroughs summons Samuel Adams, the Boston Tea Party, the framers of the Declaration of Independence and the history of the American Revolution to justify the struggle of African-Americans. Her structured argument lends order and purpose to the seemingly chaotic events that occurred in Harlem on 19 March 1935, and her wielding of the Declaration of Independence legitimates the actions of those who having endured oppression, revolt. For her immediate audience, the readers of the *Baltimore Afro-American*, Burroughs forges an American identity, and for the larger audience, the

Department of Justice and others in the federal government who were monitoring the Black Press, the text works to disassociate the cause of Communist agitation, not only for the Harlem Riot, but possibly for the race riots of 1919 as well, while justifying the activity in Harlem as an "American" response to injustice. She achieves this by relocating the cause of the revolt to the "long train of abuses" African-Americans suffered at the hands of an unjust nation. Hence the revolt is an inevitable and very American response to injustice.

"Declaration of 1776 is Cause of Harlem Riot" achieves rhetorical force through a combination of content and structure that reframes the Harlem events as ordered, purposeful and inevitable, thus constituting a typically American response to gross injustice. The orderly structure of her argument augments the sense of order and purpose she strives to give the Harlem uprising; the progression of the argument lends power to the inevitable nature of revolt; and the causal argument is consistent with features in the immediate context, as well as in the Declaration of Independence.

The Harlem Riot, and Burroughs' interpretation of it, embodied the frustration felt by many African-Americans, but perhaps more importantly, the text represents a new attitude toward action. Later that year, at the 1935 NAACP annual convention, the Associated Negro Press reported that the leaders of the NAACP, Burroughs among them, consecrated themselves to a new program,

Today's leaders, picking up the torch, recognize new responsibilities created by public hysteria, political instability and economic depression. . . . The need is for a racial consciousness which will get behind fighting groups which will carry the battle to those prejudices which deny the Negro his rightful place in American

life, and obtain for him a position of both political equality and economic security.”⁵²

The Harlem Riot resulted in some changes within the city structure as well, “forcing New York’s white power structure to recognize and accommodate black demands.” Mayor LaGuardia appointed an Advisory Council on Negro Problems as part of the city relief commission, and directed the commission to hire more black supervisors. In addition, white store owners agreed to hire more black workers.⁵³

Although the ballot afforded, in theory at least, some political power, perhaps the most formidable task facing the African-American community was eradicating the destructive characterizations that were used to undermine their fitness for American citizenship. Burroughs would raise the issue of identity frequently in her speeches and writings, as she did on the eve of WWII, “America has worked overtime, impressing other races in every conceivable way, that the role of the Negro in world relationship is that of servant, flunkey, shine-cutter, pompous-parader, buffoon, or mud-sill.”⁵⁴ Burroughs addressed these charges throughout her career--to African-American audiences she established their American identity, promoting black history, inculcating racial pride, urging self-determination, and encouraging civic participation.

52 “Youth Movement and Attack on All Fronts Against Prejudice, New N. A. A. C. P. Program,” *Oklahoma Black Dispatch* 18 July 1935, 1.

53 Klinkner and Smith, 146.

54 Nannie H. Burroughs, “And We Call Ourselves Good Neighbors,” 22 February 1941, newspaper article found in NHB Papers.

Epilogue

“Looking backward in 1960, I nominate as the outstanding 'American,' the little girl who is attending the William Francis School in New Orleans, Louisiana.

She walks, daily, unfrustrated through an angry mob of whites and takes her seat in her classroom, ready to learn from a book printed in black ink, on white paper.”

Nannie H. Burroughs⁵⁵

Burroughs spent her life promoting the the ideas contained in the Declaration of Independence and the U. S. Constitution—using the press, pen, and platform to demand full citizenship rights for African-Americans—the right to vote, speak, protest, learn, work, and enjoy life without hindrance. These rights, in the two decades between the two world wars, were tenuous for many African-Americans as they were subjected to violence, their racial identity undermined, political agency thwarted, and morale diminished by intentional effort, or material circumstance.

Burroughs met the demands of this period—the need for power, vision and identity—with discourse that would awaken and inspire change among African-Americans. The quest for American citizenship, Burroughs believed, would be satisfied through individual and collective struggle, and while she never advocated directly the use of physical force, she often evoked martial themes—using terms such as battles, enemies, crusades, weapons, and sacrifice—along with ideas related to movement and progress, to motivate action among African-Americans. Her discourse tended to be

⁵⁵ Burroughs to Samuel Hoskins, 19 December 1960, NHB Papers.

future-oriented and forceful, inspiring action rather than reflection. Moving audiences forward with agendas, lists, and commands, Burroughs employed a clear, vivid, energetic style of language to stimulate action. This stylistic approach suited well Burroughs' philosophy toward action. The composition of her texts featured varied sentence structure, combining short quick sentences with well-devised periods, blending declarative and imperative sentences, with interrogation and exclamations. Her words could infuriate, delight, stun, inspire, and stimulate; they were rarely ignored.

In this dissertation I have attempted to demonstrate how Burroughs used language to address three recurring and urgent needs in the African-American community during this period: power, vision, and identity.

In her 1928 editorial, "What the Negro Wants Politically," Burroughs argues for black political empowerment, interpreting the outcome of the election in such a way that strengthened and unified black voters—despite the rampant discrimination and trickery that undermined their political power. Her speeches during the campaign, the searing depiction of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments as "blood amendments, baptized in the carnage of Gettysburg," made African-American voters attentive and responsive. Her authoritative interpretation of the election—using speed and humor to mock and dismiss uninspiring post-election speculation, encouraged readers of the black press to move beyond fruitless political analysis and toward decisive political action. Her audacious demands to the RNC sent a message to both audiences, African-Americans and Republicans, that the race meant to be taken seriously. Her carefully-crafted political

agenda for the race developed further the notion of a unified, effective political force.

In her 1934 Tuskegee Institute commencement speech, “The Challenge of the New Day,” Burroughs, as the first woman to address a graduating class, invites her audiences to change, fundamentally and dramatically, their view of themselves and their standing in America. She attempts this by convincing them that they were part of a grand force in the quest for justice. Marshalling historical examples of great cultural revolutions, references to the Gettysburg Address and Declaration of Independence, and various themes related to movement and progress, Burroughs offers a compelling vision of a “new day” as she fortifies the weary, transforms the current struggle, and proclaims future victory for all Americans. Several stylistic features assist these arguments—lists focus the mind and direct the attention to the underlying features of the new civilization; temporal and spatial references, along with structural and figural choices create a sense of momentum, and natural imagery depicts the power and force of this movement. The style commands attention, heightens emotion, encourages action, and thereby encourages the belief that one is indeed involved in a great quest to transform America.

As officials scrambled to determine the cause of one of the nation's most powerful racial riots, Burroughs' offered an alternative explanation for the cause of the riot. Employing the language and ideology of the American Revolution, Burroughs skillfully framed the Harlem Riot as a typically American response to long-standing oppression. The actions of the rioters, she would argue, were the predictable outcome of many years of patient suffering under an unjust government. By depicting the Harlem rioters as

American patriots she strengthens their American identity, justifies the use of violence in the face of continued injustice, quells the charge of communism, and shifts the discussion of the underlying causes of the riot to the issue of lynching. Stylistic elements of the text combine with these ideas to create vivid, energetic prose.

This study also expands our knowledge of an African-American leader whose influence was broad and enduring. By considering an understudied facet of Burroughs' leadership among African-Americans, I hope I have contributed to previous scholarship that highlights her work among women. Although these studies have great value and have laid an important foundation for understanding an enduring aspect of Burroughs' leadership, they do not tell us much about how she used language to initiate change in the larger black community. The rhetorical strategies Burroughs employed when writing for the Associated Negro Press, the *Baltimore Afro-American*, or delivering speeches to mass audiences in political and civic contexts, were the same strategies she used in her annual speeches to the Woman's Convention, or when raising money for the National Training School. Through her speeches and writings, Burroughs argued for action, encouraged protest, and demanded participation—crafting an identity for her audiences of capable, moral, active citizens. During this period, especially, she encouraged collective activism in the form of political participation, mass protests, and boycotts, and she also advocated hard work, self-respect and individual initiative.

Burroughs and other activists worked steadily through the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, laying the foundation that would support an explosion of public protest during

the mid-1950s and 1960s. One wonders what might have happened if they had not prepared the protesting spirit—undaunted and self-assured—of the women and men who would fuel the protests throughout the South. Many of these activists like Juanita Jackson Mitchell, Ella Baker, Thurgood Marshall, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Jessie Jai McNeil had grown up under the influence of Burroughs, and had World War II not intervened, taking with it the attention and will of the American community, such mass protests might have happened two decades earlier.

Burroughs worked steadily for over sixty years to build among African-Americans an educated, confident, organized, and active citizenry. She believed that right words inspired right action and that intelligent, coordinated action was key to citizenship. Through her speeches, letters, editorials, and essays she lived out what might be considered her creed: “The great battles of the world have not been decided by musket and sword. Those that have changed the course of civilization have been fought upon the field of intellect and the weapons that have decided these battles have been those of clear, orderly intense thought [and] forceful expression.”⁵⁶

56 “Minutes from Woman's Convention,” 1918. Although these were not Burroughs' words, but the comment of her colleague and WC President Sarah Layton, they seem to summarize well Burroughs' rhetorical efforts.

Appendix A

“What the Negro Wants Politically”

At least six witnesses of this text are available, including a type-written manuscript from the Nannie H. Burroughs papers (NHB), a version prepared for the Associated Negro Press (ANP), and variants published in the *Pittsburgh Courier*(PC), *Philadelphia Tribune*(PT), *Washington Tribune*(WT) and the *Oklahoma Black Dispatch*(BD). The article first appeared under Burroughs’ by-line as “What the Negro Wants Politically,” in the *Oklahoma Black Dispatch*. Published on page six, it abruptly stops after the command, “Do not let them out,” eclipsing about one-fourth of the text. The editorial ran in the *Philadelphia Tribune*, also under Burroughs’ name, but with a very different title, “Negroes Now Demand Political Recognition By Republicans: Government Should Prosecute Railroads for Charging Negroes ‘First Class’ Fares for Cattle Accommodations.” The *Washington Tribune* printed the article on page one and gave it the audacious title, “‘Listen, Mr. President!’: Miss Nannie Burroughs Tells of the Negro’s Demands.” The most truncated version of the text ran with no by-line on page ten in the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Although the piece was entitled, “Nannie Burroughs Outlines Race’s Political Wants,” the *Courier* omitted two of Burroughs’ three lists and about three-fourths of her manuscript material.

With these possibilities in mind, I have selected for the copy text the Associated Negro Press version of the text, a choice, I believe, best mediates authorial intent and audience reception of “What the Negro Wants Politically.” On one hand, the text should reflect the author’s intention, and the content of this article makes intent especially important; Burroughs apparently meant to communicate carefully to the audience. On the other hand, the dissemination of this particular text, appearing in at least four nationally-circulating newspapers, with its intervening editorial control seems equally compelling. The wire report represents Burroughs’ intention for the text, preserving most of her manuscript with minimal alterations and a few small omissions, which I have noted below. The omissions, two hand-written additions to the typewritten manuscript, were brief and did not substantially alter the meaning of the text.

WHAT THE NEGRO WANTS POLITICALLY¹

- 1 You heard about the election.²
- 2 The Democratic Party is pretty well banged up.³The Republican
Party is all set up.⁴ It was a landslide! It was a political miracle! It is a
waste of time trying to explain how it happened. It got started and
nobody could stop it.
- 3 Now that a grand and glorious victory has been achieved in the
name of Righteousness, let no group or race try to hog the victory. "We
cannot say that this great victory is attributable to any one source.
Every vote helped. Take your share of the glory."⁵
- 4 Of course, the "Wiseacres" will say, "I told you so," and then
proceed to tell how it all happened. The job-seekers will say, "I did it.
With my bow and arrow, I killed 'Cock Smith." So over against what
they put down as the "How and the Who" please do not allow them to

1 Three versions of the text use this title; three publish the article under a different title. The Nannie Helen Burroughs Papers at the Library of Congress contains an undated, unsigned, typed manuscript entitled, "What the Negro Wants Politically" (NHB). The article next appeared as part of the Associated Negro Press wire service: Nannie H. Burroughs, "What the Negro Wants Politically," 19 November 1928, 1 (ANP). The article first appeared in print: Nannie H. Burroughs, "What the Negro Wants Politically," *Oklahoma Black Dispatch*, 22 November 1928, 6 (BD). Other versions appeared in print: Nannie H. Burroughs, "Negroes Now Demand Political Recognition By Republicans: Government Should Prosecute Railroads for Charging Negroes "First Class" Fares for Cattle Accommodations," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 29 November 1928, 2(PT); Miss Nannie Burroughs, "'Listen, Mr. President!': Miss Nannie Burroughs Tells of the Negro's Demands," *Washington Tribune*, 30 November 1928, 1 (WT); and finally the shortest version of the editorial ran with no by-line, "Nannie Burroughs Outlines Race's Political Wants," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 1 December 1928, 10 (PC). WT omitted the Associated Negro Press attribution and changed the by-line, using "Miss Nannie Burroughs," instead of "Nannie H. Burroughs."

2 This sentence appears as a handwritten addition in NHB.

3 In WT and PT Party is not capitalized; in NHB and ANP it is.

4With the addition of the first sentence, Burroughs rewrote the second sentence, changing the two clauses to two sentences. This change shifts the rhythm of the opening sentence slightly from, "The Democratic Party is pretty well banged up, the Republican Party is all set up." to the opening above. The new construction gives the introduction a more abrupt sound, rather than a balanced rhythm, and more efficiently secures the reader's attention.

5 The source of this quote is unknown. The original manuscript (NHB) contains a typographical error, "We cannot say that this great victory is attributable to any one source * Take your share." The error remains uncorrected in the manuscript, yet in the wire report (ANP) the sentence is broken into three and becomes "We cannot say that this great victory is attributable to any one source. Every vote helped. Take your share of the glory!" in ANP, PT, BD. This seems more consistent with the abrupt style used in the first two paragraphs. The quote is presented without quotation marks in WT and omitted altogether in PC.

overlook the real factors that gave to the Republican Party an unprecedented victory.

- 5 1st . . . The strength of the platform
- 2nd . . . The superior fitness and sanity of the candidates
- 3rd . . . The efficiency of the Hoover organization
- 4th . . . The perfection of the radio
- 5th . . . The power of the press
- 6th . . . The service of the “Spell-Binders”⁶
- 7th . . . The horse sense of the electorate
- 8th . . . The Democratic Party that unwittingly ran a showman
instead of a statesman.⁷
- 9th . . . And above all, millions of women who talked Herbert Hoover
up and talked Al Smith out.⁸
- 6 Despite the fact that the campaign was begun on an elevated
platform from which the American people were to discuss their ideals,
hopes, and dreams in terms and promises of prosperity, projects,
protection and peace, it ended in a fight on the sidewalks of New York,
over rum, race and religion.⁹
- 7 The injection of the race issue into the campaign raised two
questions:¹⁰
- 8 First — Did many Negroes bolt the Republican Party? No. It is
true that a larger number of colored people voted the Democratic ticket
this year than at any time since they have had the franchise. There were
two reasons:
- 9 (a) The race is actually chafing under national injustice and the
Republican Party is justly charged with some “sins of omission” and
dereliction of a patriotic duty.
- 10 (b) Tammany Hall helped finance the Democratic Party, and
Tammany Hall bids for Negro votes because it needs them and it knew
that in order to help the Democratic Party win, they would have to have
a large defection of Negro votes. They did not get the large defection
and Tammany Hall was kicked from the side walk into the sewer and

6 Burroughs is likely referring to the speakers who, like herself, campaigned for Hoover. The Chicago Tribune referred to Burroughs and William Pickens as “two Negro spellbinders” after they drew record crowds at a Republican rally in October.

7 NHB included the sentence, “He woke them up and got them out.” This addition in NHB was one of the few handwritten insertions in the original manuscript to be omitted from ANP. Accordingly, it does not show up in any of the subsequent versions.

8 This list of items is omitted from WT.

9 During the fall campaign, Democratic candidate Al Smith used the song, “Sidewalks of New York” as a campaign song.

10 The NHB manuscript used a dash here; the ANP replaced the dash with an *, a likely typographical error. PT, WT and BD use the colon to set off the list. NHB introduces other lists in the article with either a dash or a colon. I have used a colon throughout for consistency.

the Democratic Party, which is the “solid South,”¹¹ was smashed to pieces and “all the king’s horses¹² and all the king’s men will never put the “solid South” together again.”¹³

11 The Republican Party cannot sweep this country without the Negro's vote. Oh, yes, it is said they can, but try it — “It can't be did.”¹⁴

12 Secondly—What does the Negro want politically? He wants his rights as an American citizen and not simply jobs for a few politicians. That's what he wants.

13 Thirdly — He wants general relief from demoralizing evils, rather than personal rewards for party fealty.¹⁵

14 He will therefore call upon the Republican Party to:

1. Enforce the Constitution and all of its amendments.
2. Compel the Interstate Commission to make the railroads operating in “Jim Crow” states provide equal accommodations for the races on the trains and in the waiting rooms. The railroads are guilty of highway robbery. They charge Negroes first-class fares and give them cattle accommodations.
3. Break up segregation in the Departments at Washington.¹⁶
4. Appoint a National, Non-partisan, Bi-racial Welfare Commission whose duty it will be to make unbiased investigations and practical suggestions that will give relief from:
 - (a) Disfranchisement.
 - (b) Unequal accommodations in travel.
 - (c) Segregation in Federal Departments.

11 The NHB manuscript, along with ANP and PT omit this second comma. BD adds the comma. I have included it as it is necessary to set off a clause.

12 BD omits “the” in “All the king's horses.”

13 WT re-arranges this section of the article, conflating the two questions, omitting the humor, changing the structure and altering the diction. The change strips the prose of the vivacity contained in the original: “My answer to the first question is, “No.” However, it is true that a larger number of colored people voted the Democratic way this year than ever before. One of the main reasons for this deflection is that the race is actually chafing under national injustices and the Republican party is justly charged with some “sins of omission” and dereliction of its patriotic duty. My answer to the second question is, the Negro wants his rights as an American citizen and not simply jobs for a few politicians. That's what he wants. He also wants general relief from demoralizing evils, rather than personal rewards for party fealty.”

14 PC omits all campaign analysis of the campaign and begins with this comment.

15 In NHB this third item appears as a hastily written addition. Although she sets up this section by announcing two questions raised by the campaign, this insertion, introducing a third question disrupts her structure. While the addition seems to emphasize the sentence “He wants general relief from demoralizing evils, rather than personal rewards for party fealty.”

16 The WT omits two items from the list of demands made to the Republican party.

2. Compel the Interstate Commission to make the railroads operating in “Jim Crow” states provide equal accommodations for the races on the trains and in the waiting rooms. The railroads are guilty of highway robbery. They charge Negroes first-class fares and give them cattle accommodations.

3. Break up segregation in the Departments at Washington.

- (d) Race discrimination in Civil Service appointments.
- (e) Discrimination in relief work in times of floods and disasters.
- (f) Unequal opportunity in times of peace, to learn the arts of war in army, navy and aerial service.

5. Appoint two colored women, specialists, to work in the Children's Bureau and the Women's Bureau, the former for child welfare and the latter for industrial and economic welfare among women.¹⁷ Both positions would require highly trained women and their work among colored women and children would parallel the work that is being done by the heads of these two bureaus, primarily for white children and women and incidentally for colored children and women. Conditions and needs among the children and women of the Negro race justify these appointments.

15 Politicians¹⁸ need not try to further deceive the Republican Party by trying to make them believe that a recordership, registership, ministership, assistantship, or any of the usual “sop” appointments will ever be accepted by the Negro race as substitutes for simple justice and equal opportunity.

16 At the proper time and in the proper way the men and women who are seeking relief for the masses from the injustices herein listed, will prepare their case, secure the backing of every Negro organization, political, and non-political, and lay their petition before Congress and the Chief Executive and seek and work for redress.

17 In preparation for more effective action, the Negroes throughout the country should keep all of their political clubs in tact, hold regular meetings, carry on a campaign of education and enlightenment and thereby build up a vigorous morale and be ready for the “fire-works” four years from now.

18 The best advice to give our people, politically, is organize and keep organized, study men and measures, put down every “sin of omission, or commission,” get every congressman's number — know what he is saying and how he is voting, and “meet him at Philippi.”¹⁹ At the same time do not forget to repudiate all of the Negro political leaders who drag around begging for jobs for themselves and never contending for justice and opportunities for the race. They are more

17 The NHB manuscript lists the “Woman's Bureau;” the correct title of the organization was the “Women's Bureau.” The organization was established by Congress in 1920 as part of the Department of Labor.

18 WT begins the paragraph by adding “Negro” to designate politicians.

19 She possibly refers to a scene from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Caesar's ghost appears to Brutus before the battle at Philippi. Brutus asks the ghost why he has come, and the ghost responds “To tell thee thou shalt see me at Philippi,” warning of impending doom. See *Julius Caesar*, act 4, sc. 3, line 283.

responsible for our political undoing than the whites. Do not let them out.²⁰

19 There is one thing that we do not want to see again “Jim Crow” National Republican Headquarters. This year we had three. Ye gods, what next? — A duplication of machinery, a place for Negroes to disagree on everything from the personnel and the modus operandi to the postage stamp and sheet of paper, which they cannot get without an order.

20 We are calling upon the Republican Party to break up segregation in the Departments and in the same breath we ask the National Republican Committee — the machine which puts the Party in power — to give us three “Jim Crow” headquarters. “Consistency, thou are a jewel.”

21 The breaking up of the “solid south,” regardless of whether we believe it now or not, and the building up of a two-party government in the South is a move in the right direction. As long as the south remains a government of white men, by white men, and for white men instead of a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, the Negro in the South will never enjoy his rights as an American citizen nor receive anything like just consideration in the distribution of funds from the taxes which he pays for public education, protection and general welfare.

22 With the ballot in his hand he has a weapon of defense, protection, and expression. Both parties will need his vote and he will learn to use it wisely.

23 Regardless of the cost to the Negro race of a few offices which we have held in the South as political rewards for party fealty, the gain to the race and to the Negroes of the South in a two-party government will be worth transcendently more than all the jobs which are given a few Negro politicians who have not been able and who would never be able to build up a Republican Party in the South and thereby deliver their race from political bondage. Only one Negro, Bob Church has really been able to build up a fighting organization.²¹

24 The only hope for a semblance of even handed justice for the Southern Negro is in a two-party government. It is an American ideal and without two parties this country is not a democracy. It is half democracy and half oligarchy. On with the two-party government in

20 BD ends here.

21 Robert Reed Church, Jr. (1885-1952), NAACP board member, founded the Lincoln League in Memphis, TN in 1916 to organize African-American voters, and served as a delegate to the Republican National Convention. He was regarded by many as an effective organizer for the party.

the South or out with some of the representatives in Congress who ride into office on the backs of Negroes whom they use as political ponies.²²

25 Since the Negro vote helped the Republican Party win the 1928 victory, the question has been asked again and again, what does it profit the Negro to give his vote to keep the Republican Party in power? Here is the answer. With all its faults it is the better party. In this campaign the Negro voted against the Democratic Party's ideals for his race, against tampering with the Constitution, against an increase of the emigration quota, against tinkering with the tariff, against a man who is not qualified to be President of the United States. The Negro simply voted for the strongest platform and the better qualified man.²³

26 The Negro gave his vote to Herbert Hoover, because Mr. Hoover stood four-square on the strong platform of the Republican Party and pledged equal opportunities²⁴ to all, regardless of faith or race. The American Negro asks nothing more and will be satisfied with nothing less.

22 Burroughs had originally written "political slaves." She changed "slaves" to "ponies," a choice less inflammatory and more in keeping with the imagery she used in the beginning of the text.

23 This paragraph omitted in WT.

24 WT uses the singular "opportunity."

Appendix B
The Challenge of the New Day
Commencement Address, May 24, 1934
By Nannie H. Burroughs¹

- 1 We are on the most sacred spot in America and in the world. We are on the grounds dedicated to the future hopes and dreams, aspirations and prophecies of the founders of our democracy. You and I today are surrounded by the most marvelous achievement that has taken place in American history during the past seventy years.² The class that returns here today after ten years on the firing line witnesses a new Tuskegee, its magnificent buildings, its marvelously improved campus, its splendid and modern equipment, its great faculty and the Commander-in-chief in the person of the President of Tuskegee Institute.³
- 2 Today I shall speak to you as members of the graduating class and as men and women who are going to contribute their part to the building of a great, new, vital social order on our continent—you who are going to dedicate yourselves again to those spiritual and moral ideals which moved the founders of our country to build on this continent a government of the people, by the people and for the people, and as Abraham Lincoln said in his famous Gettysburg Speech, he entertained the hope that "a government so conceived and so dedicated shall not perish from the earth."⁴ If the saints are permitted to look from the battlements of heaven today they rejoice to witness this magnificent scene in the heart of the deep South wherein you are making the spiritual and social and economic contributions to our great republic. They must be happy today to see here in the midst of our new dreams, new hopes and aspirations this magnificent audience of white and black people who believe that we shall in deed and in truth build on this

1 Nannie H. Burroughs, "The Challenge of the New Day," *The Tuskegee Messenger*, June 1934, 2.

2 Emancipation came to American slaves in three waves between 1862 and 1865. First, in 1862 Abraham Lincoln issues two executive orders freeing slaves located in territories in rebellion, the second effort on Lincoln's part, the Emancipation Proclamation was enacted on 1 January 1863. Finally, the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, adopted in December 1865, abolished slavery.

3 Several physical changes had been made recently at Tuskegee Institute; Robert R. Moton is president.

4 Lincoln delivered his Gettysburg Address on 19 November 1863 at a ceremony dedicating the Gettysburg cemetery. Although Lincoln was not the featured speaker that afternoon, he was asked to deliver dedicatory remarks. Many consider the 272-word text among the best-known American speeches.

continent a Christian civilization not for blacks, not for whites but for all who shall come to our land and contribute spiritual, moral, social and economic advancement to the world.

- 3 I shall talk to you this afternoon on the “Challenge of the New Day.” First of all what is the new day? The new day is the day Tennyson visioned in *Locksley Hall*:

“When I dipt into the future far as human eye could see;
Saw the vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be.

Till the war-drum throbbed no longer, and the battleflags were furl'd
In the Parliament of man, the Federation of the world.

There the common sense of most shall hold a fretful realm in awe,
And the kindly earth shall slumber, lapt in universal law.”⁵

- 4 As you go forth from here today I would have you realize that the things that have been prophesied, all the things that have been promised, all the things that are to be reaped in abundance in this world shall be enjoyed by you. Not by gift, but by struggle, by sacrifice, by indomitable will, by courage, by hope and by every human and spiritual effort that is possible for you to put forth in whatever fields you shall labor and find yourself. And as you go forth from here you will work for six things. You will dedicate yourselves to a new social order and to the building of it in the hearts of men. You will work first of all for life—abundant life—life promised by Him who came over two thousand years ago and said that he came that we might have life and that we might have it more abundantly.⁶
- 5 You will work for liberty—absolute and complete freedom for all men of every nation under all suns and skies and flags. You will dedicate yourselves as did the man who fired the hearts and imaginations of the American people in the great struggle of the Revolution. You will stand forth as men and women in a new day facing a new challenge and

5 Alfred Tennyson, *Locksley Hall*, 119-20, 127-130. She quotes only six lines from the 194-line poem. Burroughs often included poetry in her speeches and essays, sometimes her own and other times taken from poets or songs. This was an apt choice for her audience as well. A poll taken by the English Department to ascertain the reading habits of Tuskegee students found that Tennyson ranked third among the students as a favorite author. “Likes and Dislikes of College Students,” *Tuskegee Messenger*, February 1934, 6.

6 A reference to Jesus’ statement in the Gospel of John, “I am come that they might have life.” John 10:10.

speaking as did that famous, humble American who interpreted the hopes and dreams of centuries that are to come. Out of humble Williamsburg, Virginia, realizing the purposes for which this republic was founded, Patrick Henry stood forth as you shall stand forth and declared for our new day and for those new challenges that “it matters not the cost to other men but as for me, give me liberty or give me death.”⁷ That challenge to America, that rededication to the Declaration of Independence rings and reverberates in the hearts of all men in America, in the North and in the South.

- 6 You shall work for another ideal. You shall work for love, the love of humanity, the love of the humblest—the least man and the lost man whether he lives in America or in India or in China or in Burma or in the isles of the sea. We shall work and dedicate ourselves to the end that all men everywhere shall enjoy the love of God and develop the best that is in them. And we shall not by act nor deed nor word nor association put a single stumbling block in the way of any humble struggling human being in all the world. We shall work for love.
- 7 You shall go forth and accept the new challenge not only for love but for learning. There is no substitute for learning. The hope of every hamlet and section of our America and every part of the world wherever mankind is found is that we shall give men the learning which Tuskegee represents—the learning which all great schools have. Schools that have received the sacrificial benedictions of philanthropists and the wonderful and rich contributions of the taxpayers of America and the world. It is the investment of our hopes and dreams for the generations that are to come. We shall dedicate ourselves to the great ideal that all men everywhere must know—must learn—must be given an opportunity to develop the best in them. You must dedicate yourselves—your mental powers to the fields in which you find yourselves—to science, to art, to literature.
- 8 Then you must work for another 'L'—Labor. Work for it to the point that everyman, high or low, will be given an opportunity to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow, to contribute to the support of his family, to purchase a home, to cultivate his own farm and like the famous blacksmith that every child knows about he can “look the whole world in the face for he owes not any man.”
- 9 We must work for leisure. Having worked for life, for liberty, for love, for learning, and for an opportunity to labor, and having dedicated ourselves to the advancement of human society in whatever field we

7 Scholars are not certain of Henry's proclamation as no transcriptions of that speech were made. It has become, however, part of American memory.

find ourselves, we owe it to ourselves and to our great social order to spend our hours of leisure away from work and toil and strife, that we may learn again what to man and what to God we owe. It will be that great period of meditation, of renewing our spiritual selves from which we may go forth into the struggle of life, into the great avenues of employment and take our place beside our brother. It is this ideal of leisure for which we shall have to battle all over our country and the world. As long as men and women are being turned out of schools like this, we shall dedicate ourselves to the great ideal of giving them a chance to devote themselves to these things for the advancement of human society, to the development of cultural things that make life worthwhile.

- 10 So we rededicate ourselves to the new day in spite of the darkness that surrounds us, in spite of the depression, which after all is not a depression only but a sort of spiritual, moral and social discipline through which we are passing. When we come out of it as individuals, as groups or as nations, if we have taken our medicine like men and women, we are going develop for the next generation whether it be twenty-five or fifty or a hundred years hence a type of man and woman stronger and more durable mentally, socially and spiritually. This discipline through which we are passing is going to be the best tonic that we have ever had, serving to tone up our inner equipment.
- 11 We are going to accept the challenge to build a new social order. We have dedicated ourselves for the past hundred years to building a material civilization and there are those who sit in this audience today who are in doubt and wonder what is going to become of us when the things all around us seem to be crumbling and failing; when bank accounts and great fortunes which were built up in the past hundred or more years have been wiped away; when the material possessions that we had, homes, farms and things of the flesh have been taken away. You stand in wonderment as to what will become of us. When we talk about the war clouds that are gathering in Europe, Russia, China or in South America, when all European territory is in a restless condition and in America we talk of the failures of the past few years, you are shocked with the facts and begin to think that all civilization is trembling in the balance and that nobody knows when the night will come. I stand here young men and young women of the Class of 1934, and say to you that what you see all about you are things material, nothing to be compared with those things moral and spiritual out of which you are going to build the new social order.
- 12 The Lord is preparing some spiritual giant, some magnetic human being

to deliver the people from the bondage of this material world. We are going to be more humanitarian, more spiritual and dynamic. It is to be a civilization such as we have never known.

- 13 So this afternoon you young men and women who are soon going away sit here in doubt, and wonder whether you will get a job, whether there is a ready-made job for you in the world. I have come all the way down to Tuskegee to tell you NO! All the jobs we have had are taken. There are no ready-made jobs anywhere; but there are one hundred and twenty million jobs that can be made; and that is your job. If you can't take that challenge, if you can't go out and blaze new trails and find new avenues of employment make new roads, find new highways and discover new ways to do old things—if you can't do that, well, “look to the Lord and be dismissed.”
- 14 Open your mouth and the Lord will fill it—with air.
- 15 The civilization now in the making, spiritual, moral, social and mental is yours. It is yours to make, yours to possess and yours to glorify. Men before you made the civilization of which they were a part or they gave to the world new ideas and started it off on a new trail. We have come over it for some two thousand years working on the ideals and dreams of one man here and another there, in one generation after another. We started it with that man who came to redeem this world with an individual ideal of human brotherhood, social justice and the idea of peace on earth good will toward men. For two thousand years the world has been marching toward that social ideal. We have not arrived and we are thousands of years distant from it, but we are facing in the right direction, marching towards justice, equality, brotherhood.
- 16 During these thousands of years men have waged bloody warfare for life, liberty, love, learning, labor and leisure and it is in part going to be realized by this generation; then they will pass on the torch to another generation. But we are going to witness a new heaven and a new earth right here worked out in the hearts of men. It is coming in proportion as we dedicate our faith, our courage, our hopes and our indomitable will. Young people, there is no force on earth, no handicap, no barrier on earth that can stay any race or individual who organizes its courage, its faith, its hopes, its industry and its indomitable will. You can't defeat it. You may delay it, or place a barrier around; you may block up the stream, but it will swing around the dam and join the current and continue on its way to the great ocean beyond.
- 17 I want you today to remember that there are thousands of men who dream dreams for you; you are realizing some of them today. But you

do not realize it fully because you are too near to it, too much a part of it, to sense what is taking place right here in the southland. Today in spite of the prejudice, barriers and handicaps we are thousands and thousands of years, which are but a yesterday in the divine plan, thousands of years beyond the dreams of our fathers over seventy years ago. It has been a marvelous development in such little time.

- 18 It is a long way from an ox-cart to a good car hitting on all cylinders, but you have made it and you have made it in less than twenty-five years. And we are going to make more speed—I mean mental, moral, social and spiritual speed in the next twenty-five years than we have made in the past one hundred years. We are going to make it because we desire it. In the heart of every young man who sits in this audience today is the desire to be a man, to be somebody and to do something and to go somewhere. It is in the heart and it is burning as a spirit aflame. Out of that human desire we are going to create a civilization characterized by courage, faith, hope, cooperation and sympathy. We are going to get it because men desire it. It is true of every generation. Martin Luther's reformation was a success because he dreamed a dream. Yes, that is true, but there was in the hearts of millions of people of his day the desire for certain spiritual freedom. They hungered and thirsted for it and when he tacked the thesis on the door and was responsible for the calling of the Diet of Worms,⁸ it was a declaration of what men had desired for generations hence they caught it up, fanned the flame and baptized it with the spirit of their great desire. So today, we are marching to a new reformation of social and spiritual betterment in spite of difficulties. I would have you realize that in the challenge of our new day these things are going to come in America and in the world. We are going to forget this incidental thing, color, and come to

8 Burroughs possibly refers here to two separate rhetorical acts: The first occurred on 31 October 1517 when Martin Luther nailed to the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, Germany his famous "Ninety-Five Theses on the Power of Indulgences," protesting the teachings of the Roman church on repentance, forgiveness, and the absolution of sin. Many believe this document triggered the Protestant Reformation in Germany. The second reference in this passage, "The Diet of Worms," was a meeting called not by Luther, but by German Emperor Charles V, and held from 28 January 1521 through 25 May 1521 in Worms, a small city in southwestern Germany. Luther's writings were among the topics addressed by the nobility, clergy and others assembled. Luther appeared only briefly during the diet, and when called upon to repudiate his writings, he refused, delivering as part of his defense the famous lines, "Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen." See Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1950, 60-61, 138-48. In keeping with her previous references to the speeches delivered by Lincoln and Henry, Burroughs likely refers to this particular speech of Luther's at Worms rather than the meeting itself.

the day of which Emerson wrote, "if you can make a better mouse-trap, or preach a better sermon than anybody else though you build your house in the woods the world is going to make a beaten path to your door."⁹

- 19 What are some of things to be done? First, we have got to have better automobiles. Those out there twenty-five years from now will be objects of curiosity in some museum. They will go out of style but some mind is going to conceive new ways to build automobiles and to improve them. Some mind is going to conceive new things in medicine, new ways of keeping men well, ways of building in men the physical and moral stamina that will enable them to carry on in their work. Some mind is going to conceive a finer and better way of lighting our homes and heating our houses. We now heat them from things in the cellar called furnaces or stoves but some mind is going to conceive a way of heating homes directly from the mine without hauling coal from all over the United States and then carrying it downstairs. They are going to get sense enough to pipe it to us so we can press a button and have heat. Somebody is going to conceive a finer and better way to stay up in the air. The world will not think of the color of the skin but will accept whatever contrivance or machine or conveyance that will get one safely where one wants to go—and on time.
- 20 I want you to take the struggles, the hardships and the handicaps of this civilization and turn them into stepping-stones. That is what other races have done, black and white. Disregarding handicaps, they have decided within their own souls that they were men and could look this old world in the face, could beat down barriers and climb the rough side of the mountain. I heard an old woman praying one time. She asked, "Lord please don't take me up on the rough side of the mountain." I spoke to her afterwards and told her please not to include me in that number because that was not the side I wanted to go up on. I wanted to go up on the rough side because I knew there was some chance for me to get to the top, but if I went up the smooth side I might slip down. You young men and young women are going up the rough side of the mountain, going through handicaps and barriers; you will have to meet the struggles of this world but out of the depression you are going to come forth a new group of men and women, strong and with powerful

9 Ralph Waldo Emerson's (1803-1882) famous line reads: "If a man can write a better book, preach a better sermon, or make a better mouse-trap, than his neighbor, though he builds his house in the woods, the world will make a beaten path to his door." Martin Luther King, Jr., would use this quote correctly in one of his early speeches, "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," delivered in December 1956 at the end of the Montgomery bus boycott. He repeats themes of progress and brotherhood found in Burroughs' text.

characteristics and lasting influence.

Appendix C

DECLARATION OF 1776 IS CAUSE OF HARLEM RIOT¹

Nannie Burroughs Compares Smashing and Pillaging of New York Stores to Boston Tea Party; Duty of the Oppressed to Revolt, She Says

By NANNIE H. BURROUGHS

1 Harlem did not have a "race" riot. It had a "human" revolt.
2 Communistic propaganda, Red agitation and unemployment are
not the causes. Nor did a colored boy, a nickel pen-knife and a
screaming woman cause the uprising. Hush the voice that tells you so.

3 There is a world of difference between local manifestations of an
uprising and its creative influences. A statement of that fact seems
superfluous, but I make it because people so easily mistake the
manifestation for the cause.

4 That was the mistake of the Pharisees whose case Jesus summed
up in one sentence. He said to them: "You make void the law through
your traditions."² That is exactly what America has done in the case of
the colored man.

Abuses Tolerated

5 This nation openly endorses, tolerates and legalizes the very abuses
against which she originally waged a bloody revolution.

6 A colored boy, a nickel pen-knife and a screaming woman were no
more the cause of the Harlem uprising in 1935, than was a shipload of
tea in the Boston harbor, in 1773, the cause of the Revolutionary War.
The tea party episode was only the manifestation. "A long train of
abuses" created the cause.

7 Samuel Adams feared that the colonists were being lulled into
indifference to their rights. He was mistaken. The Boston tea party
convinced him.

8 The causes of the Harlem riot are not far to seek. They lie buried
beneath mountains of injustices done the colored man in every state and
in every relationship, through years of "patient sufferance" on his part.
In dealing with colored people, America makes "void the law through

1 The source for the text comes from "Declaration of 1776 Is Cause of Harlem Riot," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 13 April 1935. Burroughs appears to have submitted exclusive articles for the *Baltimore Afro-American* during the 1930s.

2 Matthew 15:6

custom” —that's the deep-seated cause of the Harlem riot.

Cause Out of Reach

9 A few years ago there was a gigantic explosion of dynamite on the New Jersey side of New York Bay. It shattered thousands of windows in Manhattan and even broke dishes in Brooklyn, fifteen miles away. All the fire engines in the lower part of New York came out and raced helplessly up and down the streets looking for the cause of the damage. They found plenty of manifestation of the explosion, but did not discover the cause, for that was miles out of their reach.³

10 The framers of the Declaration of Independence prophesied that uprisings would occur “in the course of human events,” if people are denied those inalienable rights to which the “laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them.”

11 Re-read their prophecy—their justification for such natural, human resentment after patient sufferance. It is written in every American history. They declared that “when a long train of abuses and usurpations pursuing, invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.”

Opposed Injustice

12 If that's Red, then the writers of the Declaration of Independence were very Red. They told Americans not to stand injustice after “patient sufferance.”

13 The colored man has reached the endurance limit—the point where the Declaration of Independence says, it is time to revolt when the “invasion on the rights of the people seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness and obstruct the administration of justice.” Yes, a long train of abuses caused the Harlem uprising.

14 A few days ago the daily papers excoriated Secretary Perkins for permitting deportable aliens to remain in the country. They called them Reds and enemies to American institutions and ideals. There are too many of them here, they say.

15 The newspapers are right. Since America manufactures her own Reds through the lynching industry and other forms of base injustice, she has a huge surplus of Reds of her own on hand.

Saves Uncle Sam's Face

16 It saves America's face to put the cause on alien propagandists,

3 Burroughs refers to the massive and unforgettable 1916 Black Tom Explosion on Black Tom Island in Jersey City, when over two million pounds of ammunition exploded at a depot where barges and freight cars sat loaded with war material waiting to be transported to the Allied Powers.

Communists and Reds—or on unemployment. They are good alibis, but they are not on that “long train of abuses” that actually engender bitterness and resentment.

17 America rewards all Reds—home-made and imported—by giving them unlimited opportunities to do anything they are big enough to do, but she seldom gives loyal, law-abiding blacks a square deal.

18 Day after day, year after year, decade after decade, black people have been robbed of their inalienable rights. They have been goaded, hounded, driven around, herded, held down, kicked around and roasted alive, by America's home-made Reds. In Harlem the cornered rats fought back. The worms turned over and turned around.

Cramped in Harlem

19 The majority of the colored people of Harlem came from mob-ruled sections, or are the victims of persecutions of various kinds. They came to Harlem seeking opportunity to enjoy life, liberty, labor and happiness. They are beginning to feel cramped and handicapped. Their hearts are hurt. They find themselves apparently pursued by the very evils from which they fled.

20 America's age-old attitude on the race question is the cause of the Harlem riot. That “long train of abuses” is a magazine of powder. An unknown boy was simply the match—a frightened woman's screams lighted it and threw it into the magazine of powder, and Harlem blew up.

21 Colored folks feel that Harlem is their last stand.

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