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### Tell It On the Mountain: Fannie Lou Hamer's Pastoral and Prophetic Styles of Leadership as Acts of Public Prayer

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TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN: FANNIE LOU HAMER'S PASTORAL AND PROPHETIC  
STYLES OF LEADERSHIP AS ACTS OF PUBLIC PRAYER

By

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Undergraduate Professional Paper

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Approved by:

Dr. Tobin Miller-Shearer,  
African-American Studies

## **ABSTRACT**

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History

Tell It On the Mountain: Fannie Lou Hamer's Pastoral and Prophetic Styles of Leadership as Acts of Public Prayer

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Tobin Miller-Shearer

Fannie Lou Hamer grew up in an impoverished sharecropping family in Ruleville, Mississippi. In 1962, she became active in the Civil Rights Movement and her dual leadership style would prove central to the African-American struggle for civil rights. The duality of Hamer's model of leadership centered on acts of public prayer in a prophetic style—through public speaking and discourse—and a pastoral style—through the use of sung prayer. This research examines why Hamer used this model of leadership, how this leadership style was constructed, and relays why this leadership style proved to be so influential to the grassroots organization of the Civil Rights Movement. This research also analyzes the ways Hamer's acts of public prayer culminated in a prophetic style and pastoral style during her time as a civil rights leader. It explores the results of this combined leadership style and how this inspired strength, solidarity, and a sense of safety within her community of Ruleville and the Civil Rights Movement at large. This research draws from a rich primary source base, gathered largely from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History in Jackson, Mississippi. Unlike past biographical accounts of Hamer's life, this work examines her dual leadership style which provides a deeper understanding of African-American women's leadership during the Civil Rights Movement. Women's participation historically has been understood in terms of supporting roles instead of leadership positions. Rarely explored, Hamer's foundational activism embodies both religious heritage and African-American women's traditions.

## Tell It On the Mountain: Fannie Lou Hamer's Pastoral and Prophetic Styles of Leadership as Acts of Public Prayer

Fannie Lou Hamer became involved in the Civil Rights Movement in 1962, at the age of forty-four, when organizers from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee began voter registration work in her hometown of Ruleville, Mississippi. Until SNCC came to Ruleville Hamer was unaware she even had the right to vote.<sup>1</sup> Hamer was one of eighteen individuals who travelled to Indianola, Mississippi, on Friday, August 31, 1962, in the hopes of registering.<sup>2</sup> Upon arrival to Indianola, the Clerk of Court told Hamer to copy and interpret the section of the Mississippi Constitution that deals with de facto laws. She was unable to do so and failed the test.<sup>3</sup> While the group of African Americans from Ruleville attempted to register, a mob of angry whites and police officers gathered outside of the courthouse. When the group left the courthouse an officer followed them, pulled them over and subsequently fined them for driving a bus that was too yellow and looked too similar to a school bus.<sup>4</sup> During this encounter with the police, Hamer sang the song “This Little Light of Mine” to calm and comfort her companions. Hamer’s booming voice could be heard over the anxious noises made by her companions, both comforting and inspiring those around her as she continued to sing.<sup>5</sup> This trip to Indianola would launch Hamer into the heart of the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi.

Hamer’s leadership utilized acts of public prayer through both a pastoral style—sung prayer used to comfort and strengthen her community—and a prophetic style—spoken prayer used to convey what she believed was God’s will for America and to disrupt the established white social order. Both Hamer’s pastoral style and her prophetic style were built on an element of performance. She performed in a pastoral fashion by singing spirituals, modifying lyrics, and carefully choosing when and where to invoke sung prayer. Hamer’s prophetic performance was manifested in her desire to persuade her audience of God’s plan for America. She verbally pushed back against a racist white social structure throughout her speeches while also using Biblical references to strengthen the message she believed God had sent her to deliver—equality

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<sup>1</sup> Maegan Parker Brooks, *A Voice That Could Stir An Army: Fannie Lou Hamer and the Rhetoric of the Black Freedom Movement* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 38.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-38.

<sup>3</sup> Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 36-37.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-37.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

for all American citizens. Her gender and racial identities, and their intersection in her life, heavily influenced her performance of both styles. In sum, Hamer employed pastoral and prophetic styles built on acts of public prayer that enabled her to motivate, encourage, and comfort her community while also opposing a corrupt and unjust social hierarchy in the United States.

Past scholarship on Hamer is positioned primarily around the experiences and events in her life. Scholarship on Hamer tends to focus on the story of her life, her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi, and her passion to attain equality for all Americans. Previous scholarship begins to explore Hamer's leadership style at points, but does not complete an in-depth analysis of the composition, or dualistic nature, of her leadership style or emphasize these styles as acts of public prayer. The scholarship in this paper builds on three biographies and a few secondary sources which focus on Hamer's experiences in the Civil Rights Movement. In *A Voice That Could Stir an Army: Fannie Lou Hamer and the Rhetoric of the Black Freedom Movement*, Maegan Parker Brooks explores the rhetoric used in Hamer's speeches but neglects to discuss the ways in which Hamer utilized sung prayer.<sup>6</sup> These pastoral and prophetic styles interacted and created the framework of Hamer's leadership style during the 1960s, producing unique results during her activism in the Civil Rights Movement. Kay Mills's *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* gives more attention to Hamer's pastoral style than does the scholarship by Brooks, though Mills does not emphasize Hamer's prophetic style during the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>7</sup> Chana Kai Lee, in *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer*, focuses on Hamer's childhood and familial experiences to explain Hamer's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement but does not provide adequate attention to the formative factors highlighted in this essay.<sup>8</sup> The research put forward in this paper will illuminate the ways in which women, especially in rural Mississippi, participated in the Civil Rights Movement. Charles Payne writes that women, especially rural women, were even more active politically than men in the 1960s. In the age range from thirties to fifties, "some of my respondents estimated that women were three to four times more likely to participate than men."<sup>9</sup> Women's

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<sup>6</sup> Brooks.

<sup>7</sup> Mills.

<sup>8</sup> Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Charles M. Payne, *I've God the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 266.

participation in the Civil Rights Movement is often limited to discussion of supporting roles. Hamer's leadership in the Civil Rights Movement discredits the assumption of women as simply supporting actors. She was a female leader who changed the face of the Civil Rights Movement. This research will also incorporate a theoretical framework of prayer showing how Hamer's pastoral and prophetic styles worked together to build a unique leadership style which Hamer founded on an African-American women's religious tradition passed down through her mother. Hamer's style is unique in its construction and the incorporation of both sung and spoken prayer and demonstrates the gender dynamic which influenced and shaped Hamer's dual leadership style.

Fannie Lou Townsend, later Fannie Lou Hamer, was born on October 6, 1917, the twentieth child of two sharecroppers, James Lee and Lou Ella Townsend, in Mississippi.<sup>10</sup> When Hamer was two years old her family moved to Sunflower County, Mississippi, near the town of Ruleville.<sup>11</sup> Hamer was tricked into working at the age of six by the owner of the plantation on which her parents worked. The plantation owner promised Hamer snacks and sweets she could not afford on her own from the plantation owned commissary store.<sup>12</sup> In childhood Hamer often wondered why African Americans had to work so hard to be so poor, while the whites she encountered made money by sitting around and making African Americans work. She even asked her mother as a young child why she could not have been born white. Hamer wanted to know why white people had food and clothes but African Americans worked hard and did not have anything. Her mother responded to Hamer, "I don't ever want to hear you say that again honey." She said, "Don't you say that, because you're black!" She said, "You respect yourself as a little child, a little black child. And as you grow older, respect yourself as a black woman. Then one day, other people will respect you."<sup>13</sup> Hamer's mother was teaching Hamer to both respect herself and to perform her gender in a way that reflected the respect she had for herself and her race. For Hamer, respect for herself and her race was intrinsically tied to religion and religious practices.

Hamer expressed her varying pastoral and prophetic styles while actively engaged in public prayer. Hamer utilized different modes of delivery determined by the kind of event she

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<sup>10</sup> Brooks, 12.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Mills, 7-8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

attended or the experiences, often involving terror or violence, she endured. Carol and Philip Zaleski, in *Prayer: A History* offer this definition of prayer, “Prayer is speech, but much richer than speech alone. It is a peculiar kind of speech that acts, and a peculiar kind of action that speaks to the depths and heights of being.”<sup>14</sup> They go on to elaborate, “Much of the time, prayer seems to be nothing but talk: praising, cajoling, or pleading with God; sending messages to guardian angels or tutelary spirits; appealing to benevolent cosmic powers. But to pray is also an act.”<sup>15</sup> If prayer is defined as an act, prayer embodies an active role; prayer is not restricted to a passive role. Prayer becomes an action, or series of actions, used as a tool to change the established societal status quo. Through this lens we can see how Hamer used pastoral and prophetic modalities in the form of public prayer to enhance and develop her leadership.

Prayer as a performance is evident in both Hamer’s pastoral and prophetic styles. Hamer’s pastoral style is a community-building style constructed in a few different ways. She was first of all famous for singing songs during the Civil Rights Movement. She often sang spirituals, religious songs, that critiqued the established social order. The songs often centered around Biblical stories, especially from the Old Testament, which portrayed God and Jesus as friends and protectors who offered hope to the oppressed.<sup>16</sup> Hamer employed these spirituals as acts of sung prayer to promote a sense of strength, comfort, and solidarity within the African-American community.

While Hamer sang spirituals familiar in the African-American community, she would often change the lyrics of common spirituals to reflect the struggles and oppression faced by the community. Hamer transformed traditional Christian spirituals into sung prayer in this way in order to call for an upheaval of the social hierarchies in the United States, especially in her home state of Mississippi. This is reflected in Hamer’s rendition of “Go Tell It On the Mountain,” in which she changes the lyrics of the popular Christmas spiritual. Hamer changed the lyrics from, “Go tell it on the mountain/ That Jesus Christ is born” to “Go tell it on the mountain/ To let my people go.”<sup>17</sup> Hamer also emphasized the values of freedom in her song “Wade In the Water” when she sang, “You can hinder me here./ You can hinder me there./ But the Lord in heaven/

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<sup>14</sup> Carol Zaleski and Philip Zaleski, *Prayer: A History* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, “Mississippi Rebels: Elvis Presley, Fannie Lou Hamer, and the South’s Culture of Religious Music,” *Southern Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (2013): 16.

<sup>17</sup> Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Let the Church Sing ‘Freedom,’” *Black Music Research Journal* 7, (1987): 111.

Going to hear my prayer.”<sup>18</sup> Hamer used sung prayer in the form of spirituals to preach what she believed was God’s plan for both Mississippi and the United States at large.

Hamer also transformed music to prayer through the timing of her singing. She often sang prayer in times of great stress, terror, or in the face of violence. Hamer sang after she was arrested in Winona, Mississippi, and jailed for a few days in 1963. While jailed in Winona, Hamer received a brutal beating with a blackjack by two African-American men who were forced to beat her by a white sheriff, a white highway patrolmen, and another white man. In this time of great turmoil, Hamer called out to God and her companions in song. The spiritual she chose to sing told the Bible story of the imprisonment of Paul and Silas. Part of the lyrics declared, “Paul and Silas began to shout, let my people go. Jail doors open and they walked out, let my people go.”<sup>19</sup> As Hamer sang, her companions in the surrounding jail cells began to join her in sung prayer, a testament to Hamer’s ability to lead others in her pastoral style.<sup>20</sup> Hamer used acts of prayer to lift the spirits of her companions and provide a sense of comfort during her most terrifying experiences.

In addition to singing prayer in times of great terror, Hamer employed the use of sung prayer during mass meetings. These provided a sense of solidarity and energized those gathered. Hamer performed “This Little Light of Mine” during a 1963 mass meeting in Greenwood, Mississippi. Hamer invigorated those gathered. As a period observer noted, “The song swelled as it continued, and one could sense the energy level of the congregation being stirred as the last sung line was covered by a rich sprinkling of ‘Amens’ coming from all sections of the room.”<sup>21</sup> This energizing of her community can also be heard in a recording of Hamer’s song “Walk With Me Lord.” During the first verse of song, a man in the background exclaims, “That’s what we need! Need Jesus!” while Hamer asks God in song to walk with her on her journey, her participation in the Civil Rights Movement, and by the second verse, those who are with her join her in the song.<sup>22</sup> Hamer’s pastoral style contained a performative element, made clear by her use of spirituals and the times in which she would employ these spiritual songs.

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<sup>18</sup> Fannie Lou Hamer, “Wade In the Water,” itunes song file, *Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs, 1960-1966*, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 1997.

<sup>19</sup> Wilson, 26.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>21</sup> Reagon, 109.

<sup>22</sup> Fannie Lou Hamer, “Walk With Me Lord,” itunes song file, *Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs, 1960-1966*, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 1997.

Hamer's prophetic style also relies on performance in the way she structured and delivered public speeches during the Civil Rights Movement. Hamer sought to persuade her audiences of the prophetic plan God had laid out for the United States. She also fought against the racist white structure and incorporated of the struggles faced by the African-American community into her speeches. Even Hamer's persona reflected the performance she put into her speeches. Tracy Sugarman, a white northern volunteer during the summers of 1964 and 1965 in Ruleville, commented on Hamer's presence. He wrote of Hamer, "She [Hamer] is an imposing woman: heavy, impressive, vigorous, sweaty; she has a deep throaty voice—somewhat hoarse from all her speaking—and a booming cadence that moves swiftly from conversation to a public utterance."<sup>23</sup> She incorporated her public persona into her performance of her prophetic style. Public speeches usually seek to persuade audiences in some way. Hamer wanted to convince her audiences of God's plan for America through her speeches. Hamer believed this was the need for the equality of all American citizens, despite race or socio-economic class.

Hamer began her earliest recorded speech, which she delivered at a Freedom Vote Rally in Greenwood, Mississippi, in the fall of 1963, by referencing her call from God to speak about his will for Mississippi and the nation as a whole. Hamer started her speech by quoting a verse from the book of Luke in the Bible, in the fourth chapter and eighteenth verse, about preaching the gospel to the poor: "He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captive, and recover the sight to the blind, to set at liberty to them who are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord."<sup>24</sup> In a different speech, during a mass meeting in Indianola in September of 1964, Hamer affirmed her prophetic identity when she compared the Old Testament exodus with the African-American experience. Hamer interpreted civil rights leader Bob Moses to be the biblical Moses of the Civil Rights Movement. Hamer made this clear during her speech when she noted, "And God made it so plain He sent Moses down in Egypt-land to tell Pharaoh to let my people go. And He made it so plain here in Mississippi the man that heads the project is named Moses, Bob Moses."<sup>25</sup> She continued, stating, "And He sent Bob Moses down in Mississippi, to tell all of these hate groups to let his people go."<sup>26</sup> Hamer incorporated biblical

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<sup>23</sup> Tracy Sugarman, journal entry, Sunday, July 19, 1964, folder 2, box 1, Sugarman (Tracy) Logbooks [Manuscript], 1964-1965, Mississippi Department of Archives and History (Jackson, Mississippi).

<sup>24</sup> Maegan Parker Brooks and Davis W. Houck, eds., *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To Tell It Like It Is* (Jackson, Mississippi: The University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 4.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

references and her perceived will of God for the United States throughout her speeches, while criticizing and calling attention to the racist societal status quo.

Hamer was blunt in her orations, often criticizing those who did not fight for their right to vote or tried to keep white power structures in place by keeping the African-American community complacent.<sup>27</sup> Hamer believed, and prophesied to her audiences, that equality for all people in the United States was imperative to God's plan and that they must respect one another or fail in the struggle for human rights.<sup>28</sup> In her speeches, Hamer would blend the telling of her experiences with Biblical scripture to call on her audience to join the fight for civil rights.<sup>29</sup> Hamer wove religion throughout her public discourse as well as advocated for African Americans to demand their rights.

Hamer believed her prophetic style should inspire action, both on the part of herself and her community. This was exemplified during her campaign against racist Mississippi Congressman Jamie Whitten. In 1964, Jerry DeMuth wrote an article for *Nation* and acknowledged that there was a very slim chance of Hamer coming out victorious but focused on the importance of challenging the seat. He wrote, "Until Mississippi stops its discriminatory voting practices, Mrs. Hamer's chance of winning is slight, but she is waking up the citizens of her district."<sup>30</sup> The emphasis was on the challenge to the Congressional seat and action on the part of the African-American community to begin to fight racist structures, not on the actual victor of the Congressional race. Hamer emphasized action, instead of simply talking and learning, in an instance during the Freedom Summer of 1964, as Sugarman recorded in his journal. In his entry dated Monday, July 20, 1964, Sugarman relayed an instance when Hamer stormed up to some women standing outside of the Ruleville Freedom School and told them to go register to vote in Indianola. Sugarman wrote, "She shoved her way into the group and cajoled, seduced and implored—all in a bellow—and by the time she returned to the car a number of overwhelmed women were choosing seats in the cars available to proceed to register

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<sup>27</sup> Reagon, 113.

<sup>28</sup> Brooks, 116.

<sup>29</sup> Reagon, 113.

<sup>30</sup> Jerry DeMuth, news article, "Tired of Being Sick and Tired," June 1, 1964, folder 3, box 2, Hamer (Fannie Lou Townsend) Collection [Manuscript], 1967-2001, Mississippi Department of Archives and History (Jackson, Mississippi).

at Indianola!”<sup>31</sup> During the speech Hamer delivered at a mass meeting in Indianola in September 1964, Hamer declared God’s opposition to the racial violence and extreme poverty which inundated the state of Mississippi. Hamer stated, “God is not pleased at all the murdering, and all of the brutality, and all the killings for no reason at all. God is not pleased at the Negro children in the state of Mississippi suffering from malnutrition.”<sup>32</sup> Hamer publicly condemned the injustices committed against African Americans and her community responded to her prophetic calling.

The December 1982, edition of *Sojourners* magazine featured an article titled, “Fannie Lou Hamer: Prophet of Freedom.”<sup>33</sup> The editors included two photos along with the article’s text. The photo on the cover depicted just the face of Hamer looking serious and solemn. It captured the violence, suffering, and struggle for equality that she endured. The second picture framed Hamer during a demonstration.<sup>34</sup> She is holding a picket sign and appears to either be singing or speaking during this part of the demonstration. She is out with her community doing the work she believes God has called her to do. She is calling for the freedom and equality of African Americans. Hamer used performance in her speeches to convey what she believed to be God’s intended plan for the United States and, especially, Mississippi. These photos capture Hamer’s zeal for justice. They illustrate the ways she utilized her prophetic calling to change the power structure in Mississippi.

Hamer’s understanding of performance, especially in prayer, was shaped by her gender and her identity as an African-American woman. Lou Ella Townsend, Hamer’s mother, taught Hamer how to take pride in and embody, or perform, her identity as an African-American woman. Gender studies scholar Judith Butler argues that gender is intrinsically performative.<sup>35</sup> She makes an important distinction between categorizing gender as “expressive” versus “performative,” selecting the term performative as the correct term in regard to gender because it

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<sup>31</sup> Tracy Sugarman, journal entry, Monday, July 20, 1964, folder 2, box 1, Sugarman (Tracy) Logbooks [Manuscript], 1964-1965, Mississippi Department of Archives and History (Jackson, Mississippi).

<sup>32</sup> Brooks and Houck, 52.

<sup>33</sup> *Sojourners* magazine cover, picture of Fannie Lou Hamer with article title “Fannie Lou Hamer: Prophet of Freedom,” December 1982, folder 3, box 2, Hamer (Fannie Lou Townsend) Collection [Manuscript], 1967-2001, Mississippi Department of Archives and History (Jackson, Mississippi).

<sup>34</sup> *Sojourners* magazine photo, photo of Hamer during a demonstration, December 1982, folder 3, box 2, Hamer (Fannie Lou Townsend) Collection [Manuscript], 1967-2001, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, (Jackson, Mississippi).

<sup>35</sup> Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 527.

emphasizes the ways in which gender is socially constructed. She argues that characterizing gender as expressive reifies the notion of gender itself. She elaborates on this, writing, “Indeed, gender appears to the popular imagination as a substantial core which might well be understood as the spiritual or psychological correlate of biological sex.”<sup>36</sup> She combats this theory by pointing out the ways in which society wishes to hide the intrinsic performativity of gender in favor of characterizing gender as expressive, and, therefore remains in the traditionally accepted sex and gender binaries. This means gender is presented as a concrete fact in our society. Gender as a reality is constructed by polarizing the concepts of masculinity and femininity and essentializing gender into two distinct categories, erasing the element of performance.<sup>37</sup> She further contends that gender is socially constructed when she writes, “Genders, then, can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent. And yet, one is compelled to live in a world in which genders constitute univocal signifiers, in which gender is stabilized, polarized, rendered discrete and intractable.”<sup>38</sup> The idea of gender as performative, as well as socially constructed, becomes even more complex in light of the intersections between Hamer’s racial and gender identities.

Townsend taught Hamer to use her role as an African-American woman to lead, both in her family life and in her community. She would sing songs about freedom and the want of a better life as the family worked in the cotton fields when Hamer was a child. The lyrics of one song often sung by Townsend reflected her yearning for a better life: “Oh, Lord, you know just how I feel... Oh, Lord, they say you’d answer prayer... Oh, Lord, I’m comin’ to you again... Oh, Lord, we sure do need you now.”<sup>39</sup> Hamer identified her mother as a source of strength to keep her going in her years of activism in the state of Mississippi when she stated, “My mother was a great woman. She went through a lot of suffering to bring the twenty of us up, but she still taught us to be decent and to respect ourselves, and that is one of the things that has kept me going.”<sup>40</sup> Her mother also imparted a lasting faith in Hamer. One of the most important religious principles Townsend taught Hamer was not to hate those who hated her.<sup>41</sup> She taught Hamer to portray Jesus’s love even for those who wished her harm. This would give Hamer strength in

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 528.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 528.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 528.

<sup>39</sup> Mills, 16.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 17.

years to come. Her religious faith, as well as her mother, shaped the way she would use acts of public prayer to lead and organize during the Civil Rights Movement. Motivation through religious faith has a long history in the African-American women's tradition and Hamer used this tradition to strengthen her ability to lead in the African-American community. Townsend showed Hamer the power singing could have on the people around her. Hamer took her mother's example as the foundation of her religious leadership style around the use of song as prayer.

Analysis of the roles that racial and gender identities played on the part of African-American women as resisting and outright refusing to conform to white, racist society can be identified throughout Hamer's leadership style in the way she comforted and solidified her community using prayer and religion. Women in the African-American community have a long tradition of resistance to traditional white norms. Through "resistance cultures" African-American women have utilized acts of resistance which refused racist, classist, and patriarchal structures of power and were passed down through generations.<sup>42</sup> African-American women's resistance cultures are demonstrated in the fact that women were more politically active than African-American men, especially during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s.<sup>43</sup> Religious faith motivated many African-American women to enact political change and demand their equality.<sup>44</sup> These resistance cultures were necessary in the face of so much oppression by white society on African-American women. They were relegated to the bottom levels of society, denied basic human rights, distrusted by many white women, and susceptible to abuse by white men.<sup>45</sup> Despite these oppressions, African-American women formed the backbone of their communities.<sup>46</sup> Partly as a result of these resistance cultures, African-American women have a long tradition of being leaders, especially spiritually, in their community.

Another factor that has played into the tradition of African-American women as community leaders came out of their knowledge of how African-American men had been robbed of all authority by white society. African-American women recognized the ways African-

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<sup>42</sup> M. Bahati Kuumba, "African Women, Resistance Cultures and Cultural Resistance," *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, no. 68 (2006): 120.

<sup>43</sup> Payne, 266.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>45</sup> LaVerne Gyant, "Passing the Torch: African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of Black Studies* 26, no. 5 (1996): 629.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 629.

American men were denied their dignity and self-worth and actively fought to gain respect for the members of their community.<sup>47</sup> Religion was a major source of motivation for these African-American women. They believed God and his teachings empowered them to fight against discrimination and injustice enacted against their community.<sup>48</sup> African-American women had a long prophetic tradition and saw this as a quality given by God. They believed it was to be shaped and grown within them to express their frustrations and to critique society around them.<sup>49</sup> Rural women were especially important to the civil rights struggle in Mississippi. Often described as “towers of strength” and “mamas,” rural women gave care and nurturing to their communities while remaining determined to change a broken and racist system of hierarchy.<sup>50</sup> All of these factors came together in Hamer’s dual leadership style to create both a prophetic and pastoral way to lead her community while refusing racist norms.

Hamer’s approach deeply motivated white volunteers, as well as members of her own community, who came to Mississippi in the summers of 1964, and 1965, for Freedom Summer. One photograph taken by Christopher T. Hexter, a white volunteer during the summer of 1964, captures Hamer and McLaurin sitting on the steps of the church across the street from the Ruleville Freedom School.<sup>51</sup> The photo depicts many facets of Hamer’s leadership in the Civil Rights Movement. First, the setting of the photo is relaxed and casual. This shows how Hamer was accessible to the volunteers. She appears to be in conversation with someone outside of the frame while the photo was shot. This demonstrates how she was engaged with what was going on around her. The photo is also captioned by Hexter. The caption is important in a few respects because it begins with, “Two of my heroes,” in reference to Hamer and McLaurin.<sup>52</sup> First, this is significant because this is a white man referring to two African Americans as his “heroes.” This demonstrates a reversal of the typical racial hierarchy of the time by having a white person say that African Americans are his heroes. The second reason this is such a powerful statement is the fact that Hexter, a white man, is saying this about Hamer, an African-American woman. Not

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 643.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 637.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 641.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 634.

<sup>51</sup> Christopher T. Hexter, photo of Fannie Lou Hamer and Charles McLaurin, 1964, folder 1, box 2, Hexter (Christopher T.) Mississippi Freedom Summer Project Papers, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, (Jackson, Mississippi).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

only does he show a reversal of the racial power structure but also a reversal of the gender power hierarchy.

The results of Hamer's pastoral and prophetic styles of leadership in the Civil Rights Movement reflect the ways in which Hamer was able to motivate and encourage community-building through her use of public prayer in her pastoral style, through the use of music. Her community was so inspired by her leadership during the Civil Rights Movement that they organized a day of recognition in honor of Hamer in 1970. In one letter from Mayor C.M. Durrough, Sr., he spoke to the importance of Hamer's leadership.<sup>53</sup> In the letter he commended her for her service and devotion to her community, even in the face of horrifying opposition. He went on to speak about the lasting change she inspired in her community when he wrote, "The history books of tomorrow will record your efforts and the results, but I am sure you are interested in the tangible things around your own community that speak of a better, more comfortable way of life for those around you."<sup>54</sup> This letter was written by a white man who was also an authority figure to Hamer. This shows the respect she was able to garner in her community of Ruleville. She was able to critique the existing white power structure through her use of public prayer in her prophetic style, utilizing public speaking and discourse. These two styles left a lasting impression on those with whom she served and garnered her a great reputation for speaking. Hamer believed "she had a divine responsibility to use her gifts of speech and song to bring about change in Mississippi."<sup>55</sup> Hamer believed she was delivering God's plan for the United States and used song and speech to express this message of equality.<sup>56</sup>

Hamer's lasting impact on the Civil Rights Movement was also apparent in the number of people who attended her funeral. An undated and unnamed newspaper ran an article on Hamer's funeral and reported that more than 350 people were inside of Williams Chapel Baptist Church while more than 1,000 people gathered outside.<sup>57</sup> This is particularly amazing given that Ruleville counted only 2,500 residents at the time of Hamer's death. The fact that her funeral

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<sup>53</sup> C.M. Durrough, Sr., letter to Fannie Lou Hamer concerning her day of recognition, March 26, 1970, folder 1, box 1, Hamer (Fannie Lou Townsend) Collection [Manuscript], 1967-2001, Mississippi Department of Archives and History (Jackson, Mississippi).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Brooks, 31.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>57</sup> Undated newspaper article, news article titled "Funeral For Fannie Lou Hamer Like 'Class Reunion' For Her Allied Civil Rights Warriors, folder 2, box 1, Hamer (Fannie Lou Townsend) Collection [Manuscript], 1967-2001, Mississippi Department of Archives and History (Jackson, Mississippi).

was just about 1,000 people away from doubling the population of Ruleville illustrates the immense amount of respect and love she had from those who worked or were close with her. Hamer believed God was working through her and other civil rights activists in working towards equality for all people during the Civil Rights Movement.

Although Hamer grew up very poor, her mother instilled values into Hamer that would influence her for the rest of her life, especially in relation to her racial identity and her spirituality. After attending a mass meeting in the summer of 1962, Hamer would be one of eighteen African Americans from Ruleville to attempt to register to vote. Hamer would lose her job and house upon arriving back to Ruleville after her attempt to register for the first time.<sup>58</sup> Ten days later, Hamer would have to flee Ruleville in fear of her life.<sup>59</sup> After spending a short time at her niece's home, Hamer returned to Ruleville and continued to organize and participate in activism for as long as her health allowed, rocketing Hamer into the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>60</sup> She used religious lessons she learned from her mother and her deep spiritual roots to create a complex mode of leadership, comprised of a pastoral style of sung prayer and a prophetic style of spoken prayer. Both Hamer's pastoral style and her prophetic style used performance to lead and motivate her community. Hamer's pastoral style of sung prayer portrayed the aspect of performance through the focus on community-building, providing comfort, and calling out to God in tremendously difficult times. The element of performance in Hamer's prophetic style through the use of spoken prayer is evident in Hamer's attack on the white established order, Hamer's belief that God was conveying His will through her, and her use of scripture to form the foundation of her speeches. Her prophetic style allowed Hamer to energize, influence, and inspire her community while critiquing the established order in which they lived. Hamer's complex leadership identity resulted in her ability to become a very influential and respected organizer in Mississippi and across the nation as she demanded the equality of all human beings in the face of fierce and violent oppression.

Through the analysis of Hamer's dual leadership style, modern researchers and audiences are able to understand the instrumental role grassroots leaders and organizers played during the Civil Rights Movement. Close examination of Hamer's dual leadership style reveals the complexities faced by civil rights activists, especially in the South where white supremacy was

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<sup>58</sup> Brooks, 40.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-50.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-51.

the norm. Hamer responded to racism she encountered in all areas of African-American life, from subtle everyday injustices to large-scale discrimination and violence. She was a rural sharecropping woman from Mississippi who led her community to action in demanding their full equality. While criticizing racism in American society, Hamer also preached that it was God's will that African Americans, and all Americans, be equal. Her leadership played a fundamental role in the successes of the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi and nationally. She used a dual mode of leadership centered on acts of public prayer and traditions passed down by her mother to transform the landscape of the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi, later drawing national attention to the oppression endured by African Americans. Hamer's acts of prayer were deliberate in both their design and their delivery. Hamer believed she could help change American society for the better. Hamer crafted and maintained a dual leadership style to maximize the positive change she believed God called her to do in Mississippi.

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