“Something is Happening in Memphis”: Black Spirituality and Culture of Resilience in Memphis, Tennessee

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A Senior Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Divinity

Harvard Divinity School

Cambridge, Massachusetts

May 2021

Abstract

Memphis, Tennessee is a majority Black city located at the southwestern corner of Tennessee bordering Mississippi and Arkansas. The unique geographic location has created a beautifully urban-country energy that gives Memphis its edginess. There is a spiritual and relational component to the bold lives and culture people in Memphis create. During his last sermon on April 3, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke at Mason Temple in Memphis. He said, "Something is happening in Memphis. Something is happening in our world". There has always been something happening in Memphis, and there exists a profound and distinct culture of resilience that deserves to be acknowledged and complexified. In this study, I will honor that brilliance and explore how a culture of resilience has been the site of innovation in Memphis. Some of Black Memphian life represents Black spirituality. Black spirituality invokes freedom of mind, body, and soul for Black people. Through a womanist lens, I will engage with Memphis's Black history and culture to highlight its depiction of Black spirituality and deliberate, imaginative resilience for Black survival. I will do this through sections on the genesis of Memphis, creativity, defiance and activism, community and fellowship, and lastly, music, dance, and soul. I understand this city as a predominantly Black city. There is no Memphis without its undeniable influence from Black traditions, language, food, style, and residents. I will use "Memphis" and "Black Memphis" interchangeably through my perspective that Memphis is Black. This thesis is my way of expressing my love for the 901 and articulating its authentic beauty and societal contributions.

For our angel Jaylen "JRock", my niece Kennedi, and my godson Ace.

Deep gratitude to my ancestors for their protection and guidance. I am forever appreciative of my supportive village and my hometown Memphis.

"Black Lives Matter. Black Ink reminds us of why".
- Nikki Giovanni, *Make Me Rain*

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“Memphis, TN is my home. Orange Mound TN is my neighborhood. I have a deep appreciation and love for both. I grew up with pride in my heart, to be born and raised in this city and neighborhood 💖💖💖”.

- Delores Strickland (Grandma)

“Memphis had better education opportunities for my children than Mississippi from my experience”.

- Betty J. Smith-Hicks (Grandma)

“Living in Memphis is normal to me. I have lived here my whole life, so I honestly have nothing to compare it to. However, what I can say is that even though the city of Memphis is widely recognized as a violent and dangerous city, I have always felt safe here. There are a few neighborhoods where you know you have to be more cautious in, but that is any city. I love Memphis, it is my home”.

-Rashard “Champ” Watkins (Younger brother)

“Memphis is a great city to live in and be from because you have diversity and culture”.

-Lola G. Perry (Younger cousin)

"Memphis, Memphis, Memphis (17x), nothing but Memphis. Everywhere we go, it's Memphis. Memphis, TN the beautiful land in the world", stated personal trainer Donnie Young after a winning match from his client, boxer Macro Hall Jr. in July 2018.[1] This now-viral post-match interview became a motto for the entire city. Memphis, Tennessee is a majority Black city located at the southwestern corner of Tennessee bordering Mississippi and Arkansas. The unique geographic location has created a beautifully urban-country energy that gives Memphis its edginess. You can find shirts in the city that say Memphis vs. Errbody, Memphis Mane, Just A Kid from Memphis, and Choose 901. In 1973, the Memphis Area Chamber of Commerce created the slogan "Believe in Memphis".[2] The city's NBA team, the Memphis Grizzlies, even has a motto of grit and grind.[3] I am incredibly proud that Memphis is my hometown. My upbringing was rooted in love, community, and joy. This was deliberate to defy anti-Blackness and the shortcomings of togetherness that occur through the frequent violence in the city. My Memphis upbringing, full of love and lessons, attracted me to womanism once I was in college. By college, I had language to describe the beauty of the everydayness of Black Memphian life. I often observe this everydayness, and I embrace belonging to this community and lineage of history. My city taught me how to survive and thrive in my beautiful melanin skin and be firm in the proudness of my Southern heritage.

My family and the people of Memphis were my first educators. Their lives and experiences have been wisdom to me. I include quotes from family members throughout this body of work because they are still my sources of knowledge. I found a home in womanist

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[1] *Nothin' But Memphis: The Story Behind The Viral "Memphis Memphis Memphis" Video*, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dywMLr38kRM.
[2] Robert Alan Sigafoos, *Cotton Row to Beale Street: A Business History of Memphis* (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1979).
[3] "Memphis Grizzlies," Memphis Grizzlies, accessed September 29, 2020, https://www.nba.com/grizzlies/.

scholarship to explore and appreciate being Black, a person of African descent. Through direct human experiences, relationships, and storytelling I get to enjoy my spirituality and have a lens to think critically and uniquely about our journeys through and beyond life.

There is a spiritual and relational component to the bold lives and culture people in Memphis create. In this study, I will honor that brilliance and explore how a culture of resilience has been an innovation site. I must note that I am aware of the burden and continuous causes of even needing a culture of resilience. People should not have to be strong and create drastically alternative realities to feel whole. We all deserve full dignity from birth and to simply be left alone and without oppression. These resilient narratives offer us lessons and moments to heal. There is also an opportunity to better connect to those who came before us. To counter the exhausting realities of an anti-Black society, Black Memphians have centered intentional care for self and others. I see this as a necessary form of ministry and area of study for sources of hope, moving beyond struggle, and appreciating local Black defiance and contributions. Though we are under-researched and still largely unknown beyond our most visible historical moments[4], Black Memphians' grittiness has made influence throughout the world. We are connected through our shared embodiments of freedom and joy. Some of the relational and communal aspects of Black Memphis life represent Black spirituality.[5] Black spirituality invokes freedom of mind, body, and soul for Black people.[6]

[4] Aram Goudsouzian and Charles W. McKinney Jr., *An Unseen Light: Black Struggles for Freedom in Memphis, Tennessee*, Civil Rights and the Struggle for Black Equality in the Twentieth Century (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2018).
[5] Archie Smith Jr., "Reaching Back and Pushing Forward: A Perspective on African American Spirituality," *Theology Today* 56, no. 1 (April 1999): 44–58.
[6] Carlyle Fielding Stewart III, *Soul Survivors: An African American Spirituality*, First (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).

I will be exploring spirituality as defined by Carlyle F. Stewart III- "the full matrix of beliefs, power, values, and behaviors that shape people's consciousness, understanding, and capacity of themselves in relation to divine reality".[7] A higher purpose and calling fuels and solidifies freedom for Black people in a way no earthly entity can provide or remove. Through a womanist spiritual lens, I will examine how the history and culture of Memphis have generated an untouchable layer of protection from within the soul that promotes fearlessness individually and collectively. Memphis is soul. And soul is sacred in the city, as stated and affirmed by a wearememphis.com billboard I sometimes see on the highway.

Being a social witness is what Emilie Townes refers to as womanist spirituality. Engaging with Alice Walker, who coined the term womanism[8], Townes states that "the womanist cares about her people-contemporary and historical".[9] There is power in knowing history to make sense of the present.[10] Memphis is a place that has been home to and visited by

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[7] Carlyle Fielding Stewart III, *Black Spirituality and Black Consciousness: Soul Force, Culture, and Freedom in the African-American Experience* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1999).

[8] Layli Phillips, ed., *The Womanist Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006). *"1. From womanish. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "you acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. Serious.*

2. "A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually.
Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength.

Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually.
Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.
Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist…

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness.
Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless."

4. "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender"

[9] Emilie M. Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).

[10] This is apparent to me through the strong oral tradition from African descended people with emphasis on interconnectivity.

community giants such as Ida B. Wells, Zora Neale Hurston, W.E.B. Du Bois, Aretha Franklin, Dr. Alvin Howell Crawford, Dr. August A. White III, Dr. Charles Champion, Morgan Freeman, Al Green, Benjamin Hooks, Issac Hayes, filmmaker and activist Tourmaline, scholars Hortense J. Spillers and Zandria Robinson, and of course Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. During his last sermon on April 3, 1968, Dr. King spoke at Mason Temple in Memphis. He said, "Something is happening in Memphis. Something is happening in our world. I'm just happy that God has allowed me to live in this period to see what is unfolding. And I'm happy that He's[11] allowed me to be in Memphis".[12] There has always been something happening in Memphis, and there exists a profound and distinct culture of resilience that deserves to be acknowledged and complexified. I understand this city as a predominantly Black city. There is no Memphis without its undeniable influence from Black traditions, language, food, style, and residents. I will use "Memphis" and "Black Memphis" interchangeably through my perspective that Memphis is Black.[13]

I will engage with Memphis's Black history and culture to highlight its depiction of Black spirituality and deliberate, imaginative resilience for Black survival. I will do this through sections on the genesis of Memphis, creativity, defiance and activism, community and fellowship, and lastly, music, dance, and soul. Each section provides concrete examples of Black spirituality being present in the critical choices and actions of a people who have had to reimagine and build liberation. The genesis of Memphis is important to name for acknowledging the inhabitants of the land before colonization. Additionally, linking the beginnings show how the city eventually became predominantly Black both demographically and culturally. The

[11] This is a direct quote from Dr. King, but I would like to note that I do not gender God. I certainly think God is much more than our earthly generalized understanding and image of a man. Defaulting God to be in the image of man is steeped in a patriarchal tradition that I personally prefer to no longer participate in.
[12] Martin Luther King Jr., "I See the Promised Land," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1986), 279–88.
[13] Jared "Jay B" Boyd, *Memphis Is Black Playlist*, Spotify, n.d., https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5q2zDxNbhm6CKGdhCVEUvG?si=G-A3oFXTTGa6xySvOuP64g.

creativity from Black residents of Memphis gave the city a reputation for radical freedom dreaming[14] and living. It is both a matter of head and heart in Memphis. We first believe in our humanity and then, as I understand it, are spiritually fueled to act on that core belief. The moments of defiance and activism from Black Memphians let any oppressors know who really run it in the city. The way Memphis is centered around community and fellowship through diverse public and intimate gatherings is both spiritual and physical nourishment. You get a firsthand account of what it is like to live on the streets of Memphis and the various understanding of Blackness through Memphis's Black music, dance, and soul. I include these sections because they capture all of the necessary fullness of Black culture and history in Memphis. To add, I view these cultural aspects are spiritually grounded. These sections are all connected, but they are distinct and important enough for independent analyses.

I hope to show that the in-depth spectrum of Black Memphian culture offers direct experiences on caring, loving, being bold, and showing up for one another. This is a vital form of ministry that everyone has the qualifications and capacity if willing to participate in. Gaining better knowledge of the particularities of these extraordinary Black Memphians and organizations committed to wholeness in their communities offers insight on how to be a better society. You will read the words of current Memphians throughout this body of work, all of whom mean a great deal to me and have unique and real perspectives to offer about Memphis. As Flora Wilson Bridges states, the sections in this thesis are the "folk sources and materials" necessary to examine to reveal "the truest spiritual imagination, perceptions, and complex

[14] Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).

imagery of the minds and souls of black folks".[15] This thesis is my way of expressing my love for the 901and articulating its authentic beauty and societal contributions.

"Oh Memphis, oh Tennessee. No other place will be home for me."[16]*: Genesis*

Knowing origins as far back as possible matters because culture is not created and sustained overnight. There is a history that is always interrelated with the present. Acknowledging the genesis also is a way of honoring the ancestors who contributed to the land before us. Their spirits, memories, and experiences still inhabit the atmosphere. The indigenous roots of togetherness are embedded within Black spirituality in Memphis. Memphis, TN is located on the Chickasaw Bluffs near the Mississippi River. Before the city had its name, Native Americans from mostly the Chickasaw and Choctaw[17] tribes, and Cherokee (my ancestral lineage) inhabited the land during pre-recorded history.[18] The last era of pre-recorded history in Tennessee was the Mississippian period. This period consisted of peak religious-social culture of chiefdoms, ceremonies, and residential living on mounds for high-ranking people. The platform mounds were created and used between 1000-1500 CE by the Mississippian people. Those earthen mounds still exist and can be viewed at the Chucalissa archaeological site.[19]

As the nation-state of the United States of America was founded on colonialism and native genocide, Tennessee's own Andrew Jackson, the seventh President of the United States, was responsible for the land displacement and abuse of thousands of Indigenous peoples through

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[15] Flora Wilson Bridges, *Resurrection Song: African-American Spirituality*, The Bishop Henry McNeal Turner/Sojourner Truth Series in Black Religion 16 (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001).
[16] Yo Gotti and K. Michelle, *My City*, Spotify, The Art of Hustle (Epic/CMG, 2016).
[17] John E. Harkins, *Memphis Chronicles: Bits of History from the Best Times*, American Chronicles (Charleston: History Press, 2009).
[18] "Tennessee's Native American History," ArcGIS StoryMaps, accessed September 23, 2020, https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/2feccdf99b344a79a54c1c53f82184b3.
[19] "Chucalissa," accessed September 26, 2020, https://www.memphis.edu/chucalissa/index.php.

the Trail of Tears. He also was Memphis's original proprietor, along with Watkins Overton and James Winchester.[20] Despite efforts to completely erase Native people and culture, Indigeneity still exists in Memphis and is an unknown ancestral lineage for many. I am reminded of the Indigenous ancestors' greater presence during pre-colonial times through current local street names such as Cherokee, Seminole, Semmes, Choctaw, and Chickasaw.

Memphis got its name from an ancient Egyptian city capital. Memphian G.P. Hamilton writes that Memphis, Egypt was a great city on the banks of the Nile river. It was one of the most significant historical cities of the world with a large population, walls, and hundreds of gates.[21] Once Memphis was a city with the official agreed upon birth year of 1819[22], its geographical location was used for opportunistic moments for people of all walks of life. Memphis's name even connects with its sacred land area, meaning a place of good abode.[23] Many people lived into this name during a time when this good abode was bargained by white supremacy. For Black people in the Memphis area, good abode was more of an aspiration given their enslaved reality.

Enslavement was vital for the city's founding and growth. Memphis is a part of Shelby County, and the county depended greatly on enslavement for its economic development. In 1820, enslaved Black people were 29% of the county's population; in 1830 it was 38%; in 1840 (48%), 1850 (46%), and by 1860, (33%). Most enslaved people lived in the rural areas outside of Memphis. By 1850, Memphis coined itself the "Biggest Intake of Cotton in the World" and later to "Largest Spot Cotton Market in the World". Cotton was an essential economic base during the

[20] Sigafoos, *Cotton Row to Beale Street: A Business History of Memphis*.
[21] G.P. Hamilton, *The Bright Side of Memphis: A Compendium of Information Concerning the Colored People of Memphis, Tennessee, Showing Their Achievements in Business, Industrial and Professional Life and Including Articles of General Interest on the Race*, Black Biographical Dictionaries, 1790-1950 115 (Memphis: Hamiltom, 1908).
[22] (Sigafoos 1979)
[23] "Memphis | Facts & Points of Interest | Britannica," accessed September 26, 2020, https://www.britannica.com/place/Memphis-Tennessee.

antebellum period. Memphis profited off enslaved labor also through railroads, roads, telegraph lines, levees, and public buildings. Enslaved people were sold at various prices based on their skill set and age. During the 1850s, a carpenter was sold for $2,500, blacksmith helpers ($1,114), painters ($1,005), field hands (from $700 to $1,000), twelve-year-old boys ($700), and twelve to eighteen-year-old girls ($600-800). Memphis's best-known slave market was operated by the firm of Hill and Forrest, as in Nathan Bedford Forrest- the notorious Confederate general[24] and first grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.[25] The system of enslavement deliberately tried to diminish the African identity of enslaved people. The ancestors were displaced and brought across large bodies of water, carrying their African traditions and principles with them internally. Some chose freedom and an early escape to glory through the water over bondage[26]. The oceans and rivers will always symbolize their strength and courage.

Black Southerners have an undeniable direct lineage of an enslaved history. Our culture is embedded in that traumatic experience that passed on immense strength and boldness to descendants because of the profound spirituality of the ancestors. We do not have the communal luxury of knowing our exact African origins. Nevertheless, that African DNA and spirituality have remained and are so culturally intertwined into African American lifestyles. Through imagination and adaptation, the ancestors counteracted anti-Blackness to self-determine what Blackness is and can look like for them. Their lived reality was not solely determined by whiteness. The creativity and spiritual stronghold that started with the enslaved family members birthed the unapologetic Blackness in Memphis that boomed immediately after the official end of chattel slavery. Memphis was their home, and Black Memphians poured labors of love into an

[24] (Sigafoos 1979)
[25] "Nathan Bedford Forrest," American Battlefield Trust, December 19, 2008, https://www.battlefields.org/learn/biographies/nathan-bedford-forrest.
[26] James H. Cone, *The Spirituals And The Blues: An Interpretation* (New York, 1972).

area where city leaders and everyday civilians desperately tried to solidify a standard of Black inferiority. Bridges notes, "The African-American spiritual sensibility most clearly reveals itself in the people's longing and struggle for the freedom to be in community in the midst of an alien and racist surrounding culture that sought to destroy their culture".[27] The immediate descendants of enslaved people in Memphis had each other, their African spiritualized roots, and their visions of freedom as catalytic sources for a self-determined, liberating life.

"We're representing Memphis"[28]: (Creativity)

Black Memphians' distinct culture of resilience is rooted in adaptability. Adaptation is an element of Black spirituality that fuels the imagination to create a more fulfilling reality for Black life. Carlyle Stewart III adds that creativity is also an essential tool along with adaptation for Black survival. Black spirituality combined with Black culture creates a positive soul culture, an alternate mode of consciousness.[29] This alternate mode of consciousness provides the opportunity to imagine and then create a better reality than the present troubles Black people constantly encounter due to racism. Memphis has been described as "a city which has managed to survive innumerable crises".[30] This can be credited to the Black residents of the city, who were determined to make Memphis a comfortable home for themselves and their communities despite the most nationalized moments of racial terror. The city has undoubtedly experienced some significant troubles, which has tainted Memphis's reputation.

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[27] Bridges, *Resurrection Song: African-American Spirituality*.
[28] Booker T. Jones, Matt Berninger, and Sharon Jones, *Representing Memphis*, Spotify, The Road From Memphis (Deluxe Edition) (Anti/Epitaph, 2011).
[29] Stewart III, *Soul Survivors: An African American Spirituality*.
[30] (Sigafoos 1979)

Memphis experienced a race riot on May 1-3, 1866. It ended with over 40 murdered Black people and several more wounded, raped, and robbed. Additionally, many Black churches, schools, and homes in the city were burned to nonexistence. Two White Memphians were killed, but this was not from the actions of any Black residents. The Memphis Riot is major because it is one of the best-documented moments in the United States during the 19th century. There were 122 witnesses interviewed and recorded verbatim by the Freedmen's Bureau, the United States Army, and a specially formed congressional committee. The interviewees came from different backgrounds, gender, age, and racial identity. Most people interviewed were poor and illiterate.[31] Those Memphians were not afraid to speak the truth and name the ugly horrors of white supremacy, which was an extremely radical act for the time. One riot testifier, Frances Thompson, was formerly enslaved and the first known trans woman to testify before a congressional committee in the United States.[32] Thompson spoke about the horrific incidents of rape she and several other women experienced by a gang of Irishmen. Lucy Tibbs, another testifier, recalled having seven men break into her home. "She implored them not to do anything to her, as she was just there with 'her two little children'".[33] These testimonies to me represent the embodiment of womanism, which seeks and demands justice and truth-telling. Additionally, these Black women's testimonies display declared ownership of their bodies and innate protection for the youth.

[31] Stephen V. Ash, *A Massacre in Memphis: The Race Riot That Shook the Nation One Year after the Civil War.*, First (New York: Hill and Wang, a Division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013).
[32] Desi Hall, "Our Mission," The Frances Thompson Education Foundation, accessed January 22, 2021, https://www.tftef.org/our-mission.
[33] First Session Thirty-Ninth Congress, "The Reports of the Committees of the House Representatives, 1865-'66" (Government Printing Office, 1866), https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B9PKOj6mbUzdajlTOTRyRFhTOG8/view?usp=embed_facebook.

After the riot, the tragedies of the city and poor race relations did not dwindle. Yet, the internal collective power of Black Memphian communities strengthened and literally saved the city more than once. Elizabeth Gritter, the author of *River of Hope: Black Politics and the Memphis Freedom Movement, 1865—1954;* wrote,

> "It is equally important to give adequate attention to black agency. Doing so gives not only a fuller, more accurate picture of the black experience but also a better understanding of the human condition more broadly. Human beings often have displayed amazing resilience in the face of oppression and worked to better their conditions. Although they have not always seen changes in their lifetimes, their efforts have led to a better tomorrow. These stories, then, provide us with an essential reason for studying history: its capacity to inspire hope, especially in the face of current injustices". [34]

The immediate days after the legal end of enslavement, Black Memphians chose immense freedom and disruption to the continued brutal history on the soil. This was perhaps most evident during the era of Robert R. Church Sr., the South's first Black millionaire.

Robert Church Sr. and Beale Street

Church Sr. was a bi-racial man who was owned by his White father. His father gave him access to studying the White and wealthy planters and gamblers. Church Sr. saw more and wanted more agency over his own life choices. He swam across the Mississippi River to Memphis's shore in 1862. Preston Lauterbach noted, "Church had taken his first stand for equality, not to access the ballot box or the classroom but to freely promote vice. He would make a life of such brilliant plot twists".[35] Church Sr. became wealthy from his businesses that consisted of real estate, saloons, pool halls, and prostitution spots that included interracial employees and customers. He would be the first person to buy a bond in Memphis for $1,000, which encouraged the White capitalists to do the same. Church Sr. brought this bond following

[34] Elizabeth Gritter, *River of Hope: Black Politics and the Memphis Freedom Movement, 1865-1954*, Civil Rights and the Struggle for Black Equality in the Twentieth Century (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014).
[35] Preston Lauterbach, *Beale Street Dynasty: Sex, Song, and the Struggle for the Soul of Memphis*, First (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015).

the Yellow Fever epidemics in 1873, 1878, and 1879. The city's population went from 40,000 in 1876 to 18,500 by 1879 because of death and rapid emigration.[36] 5,000 Memphians died, and 25,000 others fled the city because of the epidemics. The Black mortality rate was 40% in comparison to the White mortality rate, 7%. The remaining Black Memphians took care of the city. Black people constituted 70% of the remaining Memphis population. They were the workforce. Black Memphians distributed the $700,000 worth of supplies that were donated from all over the nation. They buried thousands of corpses. Two local Black militia companies, The McClellan Guards and the Zouaves, patrolled the streets to prevent looting. From that moment, their presence kept order.[37] The Zouvare Guard originated on Beale Street in downtown Memphis. Beale Street's success is due to Robert Church Sr.'s commitment to the city and Black Memphians. Church Sr. created Church Park and Auditorium near Beale. This was momentous because Black Memphians did not have a park for their families nor a place to gather before Church's creations. The Church Auditorium was in the center of Church Park. Built in 1899, the Church Auditorium had 2,200 seats and was used for church gatherings, political and fraternal meetings, conventions, vaudeville performances, and musical performances.[38]

Church Sr. also brought a lot of property on Beale, making this street a staple in the city for Black folks. In 1900, approximately 14,600 Memphians were born in Mississippi. After 1900, thousands more Mississippians came to Memphis for economic opportunities. The Black Memphian population increased by 60% between 1890-1900. Nearly half of Memphis's population in 1900 was Black. This was the largest percentage of Black residents out of the 38 cities at the time, with more than 100,000 people. Birmingham had 43%, Atlanta 40%,

[36] Gritter, *River of Hope: Black Politics and the Memphis Freedom Movement, 1865-1954*.
[37] Lauterbach, *Beale Street Dynasty: Sex, Song, and the Struggle for the Soul of Memphis*.
[38] Beverly G. Bond, *Beale Street: Images of America*, Images of America (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2006).

Washington D.C. 31%, New Orleans 27%, St. Louis 6%, Philly 5%, and Chicago 2%.[39] Beverly Bond wrote vividly on the significance of Beale Street. She described that for the first thirty and forty years of the 1900s, Beale Street was known as "The Main Street for Negro America". There were Black offices above storefronts such as medical, dentistry, law, and real estate offices, insurance brokers, tailors, photographers, and undertakers. The storefronts consisted of pool halls, saloons, banks, barbershops, beauty shops, dry goods and clothing stores, theaters, drugstores, gambling dens, jewelers, fraternal clubs, churches, hotels, pawnshops, entertainment agencies, blues halls, and juke joints. There were six theaters on Beale: The Savoy, Pastime, Daisy, New Daisy, Grant, and Palace that featured Black vaudeville and musical entertainers.[40] Beale Street was the place to be for Black entertainment and freedom. Cash Mosby did train excursions from rural areas to Memphis using Robert Church Sr.'s reputation and businesses to attract people. Some of those visitors became permanent residents in the city.[41]

In *From Cotton Row to Beale Street*, there is a note that since Reconstruction, Black Memphian communities have had several retail and service businesses that were exclusively for Black consumers.[42] In 1906, Church Sr. helped create the Solvent Savings Bank and Trust Company, the first bank in Memphis owned and managed by Black people. It was also the third-largest Black bank in the country by 1912. Church Sr. was its first president.[43] Solvent Trust and Savings Bank was instrumental for local Black business owners.[44] A Maceo Walker created Universal Life Insurance Company and Tri-State Bank, more essential businesses catered to Black people and made by Black people.[45] Memphis still has a solid and wide-ranging

[39] (Sigafoos 1979)
[40] Bond, *Beale Street: Images of America*.
[41] (Lauterbach 2015)
[42] (Sigafoos 1979)
[43] (Gritter 2014)
[44] (Bond 2006)
[45] (Sigafoos 1979)

community of Black-owned businesses. There is an annual Best in Black award ceremony honoring the local iconic Black-owned services and creations.[46] Church Sr.'s vision of anti-racist and efficiently Black-controlled communities and culture helped bring a lively and distinct aspect to Memphis. His innovation aided the careers of famous Blues artist W.C. Handy and activist and journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett.[47]

Ida B. Wells and Physical Spaces for Freedom of Speech

Wells published *Free Speech and Highlight* on 169 Beale. During the 1900s, Memphis was home to a few Black newspapers. There was the *Evening Striker*, the *Bluff City News*, the *Memphis Times*, and the *Memphis Moon*. *Memphis World*, which had an office on Beale, was considered the most militant and aggressive during the 1930s and 40s. They became more reserved during the 1950s, likely due to heightened anti-Black ideology and practices.[48] There was also the *Mid-South Express*.[49] The *Tri-State Defender*, a sister newspaper to the *Chicago Defende*r, began publications in the early 1950s. They focused extensively on civil rights related issues and included photos from Memphian photographer Ernest Withers. The *Tri-State Defender* is still in existence. Before Ida B. Wells-Barnett had an office on Beale for *Free Speech and Headlight*, she worked in the basement of the Historical First Baptist Beale located on Beale and Fourth.[50]

First Baptist Beale is one of the oldest Black churches in Memphis. In the 1860s, Black members of First Baptist Church on Beale wanted their own building. It was completed by 1885 and became the first brick, multistoried church in the United States built by Black people for

[46] "Best in Black Awards - Memphis, TN," accessed October 5, 2020, http://www.bestinblackawardsmemphis.com/.
[47] (Gritter 2014)
[48] (Bond 2006)
[49] (Sigafoos 1979)
[50] (Bond 2006)

Black people.[51] Memphis is also where Charles Mason, a Black man, founded and created Church of God in Christ (COGIC). COGIC is the world's largest Pentecostal organization.[52] Mason founded this denomination in 1897. Mason Temple in South Memphis is COGIC's global headquarters.[53] Black Memphians have been carving out spaces for themselves and building in various aspects. No space in Memphis has experienced this more than Orange Mound.

Orange Mound, TN

Orange Mound, TN, is considered one of the oldest Black neighborhoods in the United States, built in 1890 by former enslaved Black people for Black people.[54] Orange Mound got its name from an Osage orange hedgerow that grew naturally on the side of the Deaderick Plantation that once occupied the area. The neighborhood included shotgun houses that were built in 20 ft wide lots. Houses were quite close to each other, and lots were sold for less than $100. Orange Mound residents consisted of teachers, preachers, entrepreneurs, blacksmiths, barbers, shoemakers, and service employees such as firefighters and house painters.[55] Orange Mound had everything its residents needed from their own grocery stores, movie theaters, and schools, so there was never really a need to branch out and very likely experience being dehumanized in other parts of the city. My family has lived in Orange Mound since 1936, when my Great Aunt Mary and Uncle C, birth names Ella Mae Adams and Charles Christopher Adams, built a house that my Grandmama still lives in and was born in. Prior to my great

[51] Ibid.
[52] David M. Tucker, *Black Pastors and Leaders: Memphis, 1819-1972* (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1975).
[53] "Our History," *Church Of God In Christ* (blog), accessed October 5, 2020, http://www.cogic.org/about-company/our-history/.
[54] Angela Dennis, "100 Years of Orange Mound, Memphis: America's 1st Black Mecca," Medium, June 7, 2019,https://medium.com/@AngelaDennisWrites/100-years-of-orange-mound-memphis-americas-1st-black-mecca-412bb31c645.
[55] Charles Williams, *African American Life and Culture in Orange Mound: Case Study of a Black Community in Memphis, Tennessee, 1890-1980* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013).

grandmama's, Mary Lee "Granny" Owens Reynolds, earthly transition in January 2021, we had three generations of kin neighbors on the same street, all taking care of each other.

WDIA 1070 Radio Station

Black Memphians in their self-sufficient communities have had to keep each other informed to take care of each other. Information is shared through word of mouth, group meetings, worship services, and media such as the radio. WDIA 1070 in Memphis was the first radio station in the country to change its entire programming format for a Black audience. The station was originally White-owned and operated until they realized the profit from Black consumerism in Memphis. They were initially unsuccessful with their White-centered format in 1948. WDIA was also the first in the South to air a Black disc jockey, Nat D. Williams. Additionally, WDIA was the first all-Black radio station to go 50,000 watts, the first Memphis radio station to gross $1,000,000 in a year, and the first in the country to present an open forum to discuss Black issues. The forum, "Brown America Speaks", occurred on Sunday afternoons and was led by Nat D. Williams. It first aired on September 11, 1949. By 1954, WDIA reached 10% of Black Americans.[56] These various platforms for Black representation in the city sparked that no-nonsense mentality in Black Memphians that we still have. Just like the witnesses from the Memphis Massacre race riot of 1866, Black Memphians were ready to live boldly and confidently with a grounded mind and spirit of belonging. Memphis embodies the meaning of F.U.B.U, for us and by us. For us means standing "ten toes down"[57] with embracing and protecting our places of gathering, our homes, and our livelihood. The Black spaces we have for

[56] Louis Cantor, *Wheelin' on Beale: How WDIA-Memphis Became the Nation's First All-Black Radio Station and Created the Sound That Changed America.* (New York: Pharos Books, 1992).
[57] 8Ball and MJG, *Ten Toes Down*, Spotify, Ten Toes Down (eOne Music, 2010).

expression, shelter, worship, and vice in Memphis were created by us to be everything we need and desire.

"Who Run It?"[58]: Defiance and Activism

Black Memphians have been concerned about the community's wellbeing and future since their arrival to the city. Black autonomy and unity were a guiding force for local liberation. The previous section highlighted some of the inventive responses from Black Memphians. This section will share historical moments of thoughtful rebelliousness in Memphis to local anti-Black violence, whether it be mentally, spiritually, or physically. White supremacy aims to control every dimension of marginalized lives. However, Black Americans were never simply compliant with white supremacy[59], and Black Memphians would be no different. In 1856, the Memphis City Government put out an ordinance that prohibited Black preachers from preaching to their congregation. This certainly was not maintained nor widely adapted because Black Memphians, even in the early 1800s, let it be known that they wanted their own preachers and places of worship free from white control.[60] The enforcement to believe and act in inferiority was not going to fly for Black Memphians. This was especially true for the post plantation generations, as Laurie B. Green explores in her work.

Challenging Racist Practices and Education

In *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle*, Green defines this stubborn "plantation mentality" where White people still had desires to dominate Black Americans post chattel slavery. To add, they expected Black people to be servile and too

[58] Three 6 Mafia and La Chat, *Who Run It*, Spotify, Three 6 Mafia Presents: Hypnotize Camp Posse (Hypnotize Minds Productions, 2000).
[59] Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*.
[60] Tucker, *Black Pastors and Leaders: Memphis, 1819-1972*.

timid to confront their racist employers. These direct reminders of plantation life are what Black people wanted no more. Green writes that Black Southerners wanted to measure "their own sense of self with commitments to mobility, activism, and independent thought". [61] Resmaa Menakem's *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* claims that Black Americans have survived centuries of brutal anti-Blackness because of our resilience that continues to be passed on generationally. Additionally,

> "Many Black bodies have proven very resilient…. Resilience can be built and strengthened, both individually and collectively. We African Americans took pains to build resilience in ourselves and our children for many generations; if we didn't, we wouldn't have survived. For 400 years, with many successes and many failures, we have sought to counter new and old trauma with both the resilience we were born with and the resilience we grew and taught each other to grow".

Without knowing all of the particularities, I understand enough about the strength it took to survive the Middle Passage, enslavement, sharecropping, segregation, Jim Crow, wars, political and medical terror, and now mass incarceration. I know there must be a spiritual guiding life force that assists with enduring constant violence and being seen as a threat every day of your life. There is the core principle of community within Black culture.

I resonate with and admire this culture of Black resilience so greatly because of my interest in womanism. Emilie Townes states focusing on Black communities rather than Black people as a monolith experiencing autonomous experiences is a part of the work of womanist ethics. At the end of her book *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, she shares a poem of the everydayness that seems minor but is huge for sustaining joy and mental peace. She mentions, "the everydayness of speaking to folks and actually meaning whatever it is that is coming out of our mouths; the everydayness of being a presence in people's lives; the

[61] Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

everydayness of sharing a meal; the everydayness of facing heartache and disappointment; the everydayness of joy and laughter; the everydayness of blending head and heart; and the everydayness of getting up and trying one more time to get our living right".[62] Townes's poem represents the foundation of Black Memphian life. It's the intentionality to make every day an opportunity to better your community and heal from trauma. Black Memphis women attacked racism to center the youth and their future for more intergenerational resilience.

Green writes, "African Americans in Memphis cared deeply about the conditions of education for black youth. Recent migrants from rural Mississippi, Arkansas, and West Tennessee, especially women, often identified achieving a better education for themselves and their children as the primary motive for moving to Memphis".[63] Education and wellbeing of Black youth remained a primary interest in Memphis. Black civic clubs were birthed in the city during the late 1940s and early 1950s, and these clubs challenged the implementation of *Brown v. Board*. Since it was legally declared Black youth should receive non-discriminating educational support, Black women would keep folks accountable for this. Maxine Smith and Laurie Sugarmon led the "Black Monday" movement in 1969. Considered a controversial move, Black students and staff were asked to remain at home from school on Mondays for at least five weeks. School funding depended on average daily attendance; thus, "Black Monday" was a success and resulted in the seating of Black school board representatives, Black administrators, and ultimately Memphis's first Black superintendent. The weekly "Black Monday" protests consisted of 67,000 students and several hundred teachers staying away from schools. The protesting only stopped once two Black advisory members (non-voting though) were added to

[62] Emilie Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, First (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
[63] Ibid.

the board. After some encouragement and persuasion from her supporters, Maxine Smith became the first Black woman elected to a city position in Memphis when she won a school board seat in 1971. She served on the board until retirement in 1995.[64] On December 6, 1978, Willie Herenton became Memphis City Schools' first Black school superintendent after three months of debate. Over 400+ protesters showed up due to their disapproval of Herenton initially being rejected for school board superintendent when he was the most qualified. The White ("liberal") school board members refused to vote for him solely because he was Black. The board members wanted to have an outsider fix the issues with Memphis City Schools, but local Black parents were not accepting the explicitly racist organizing board members were guilty of. Herenton would eventually also become the city's first Black mayor in 1991.[65] Before the successful mayoral election for Herenton, Memphis had previously dealt with much turmoil and trauma from the white supremacy within the city. And Black Memphians have never been afraid to speak out about it.

Anti-Lynching Activism

Ida B. Wells used her newspaper, the *Free Speech and Headlight*, to condemn lynching and other racial injustices. In 1892, she was forced to leave Memphis after she protested the lynching of three Black men- Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Henry Stewart[66], from the local Black-owned Peoples' Grocery Store.[67] These Black men were arrested in 1892 after physical violence started by White business owners who were jealous of losing business to the Peoples' Grocery Store across the street. Nine White men, supposedly deputy sheriffs, took the

[64] (Gritter 2014)
[65] Otis Sanford, *From Boss Crump to King Willie: How Race Changed Memphis Politics*, First (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2017)
[66] Goudsouzian and McKinney Jr., *An Unseen Light: Black Struggles for Freedom in Memphis, Tennessee*.
[67] (Gritter 2014)

Black men out of jail, shot them, and then lynched them. There were strong recommendations of "On to Oklahoma" that had already been in conversation but was deeply encouraged during a Black town meeting following the lynching. Wagon trains were sent West with hundreds of people on them. David Tucker notes that the clergy took an active role in the exodus in Memphis. One reverend moved his entire congregation to California, and other ministers went to Kansas and Oklahoma. 2,000 Black Memphians left in total.[68] Robert Church Sr. donated $10,000 to Cash Mosby's Central Oklahoma Emigration Society.[69] In Nikki Giovanni's *Make Me Rain,* she wrote a poem honoring the Black Southerners who did not leave the South. She writes, "we forget the strength, of those who stayed, behind, we sometimes don't recognize what it took, to decide to build".[70] The intentional organizing and simply living and surviving on Southern U.S. soil is significant. W.E.B. Du Bois even spent some time organizing in the South, particularly in a Memphis building. In 1905, W. E. B. Du Bois began publication of the *Moon Illustrated Weekly,* a Black magazine that was the first to include illustration[71], in a Beale Street building. The magazine only lasted a year; however, Du Bois used it to promote the principles of the Niagara Movement. This was assimilated into the NAACP four years later from Du Bois and other Black leaders and White liberals. The NAACP advocated for political rights and anti-lynching, and the *Moon* was a precursor to the NAACP's *Crisis* magazine.[72] Anti-lynching efforts, political activism, and political bossism were significant in Memphis and eventually led to a Memphis Chapter NAACP. The NAACP Memphis chapter started in 1917 after the lynching of Ell Persons, who was falsely accused of raping and murdering a fifteen-year-old White girl.

[68] (Tucker 1975)
[69] (Lauterbach 2015)
[70] Nikki Giovanni, *Make Me Rain,* 1st ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2020).
[71] Miriam DeCosta-Willis, *Notable Black Memphians* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2008).
[72] (Gritter 2014)

Persons' lynching was publicized, made as an entertainment event, and promoted through the local newspapers.[73] The NAACP was such a critical presence for several Black freedom movements in Memphis, including political independence in the early 1900s.

Politics

Black political independence in Memphis was challenged by the political dominance of Edward Hull (E.H.) Crump. E.H. Crump was a White Democrat and powerful political figure in Memphis once he became mayor in 1910 until he died in 1954. He created the longest-running political machine in U.S. history to date. Crump relied on Black votes to maintain his power. Elizabeth Gritter writes that it was "a two-way relationship developed that gave black Memphians a degree of leverage. They formed political clubs, ran for office, engaged in voter registration and education activities, held the balance of power in elections, participated in party politics, used the political arena as a forum for advocating civil rights, and petitioned public officials for better public services and employment opportunities" (pg. 3).[74] Robert Church Jr. was a leading example in Memphis for using political strategies for Black freedom.

Robert Church Jr. turned to politics and away from businesses as his father did. Church Jr. was the nation's most distinguished Black Republican during the 1920s. He helped organized the Memphis NAACP chapter.[75] He also created the Lincoln League, a Republican organization that used his now-deceased father's auditorium for political meetings and community space for educational-related things and weekly church gatherings and speakers. Church Jr. understood politics as a tool for combating racial injustice and encouraged Black people to be Republicans. The Grand Old Party allowed Black political participation, and this is important to note Black

[73] "History – NAACP Memphis Branch," accessed October 16, 2020, http://www.naacpmemphis.org/history/.
[74] (Gritter 2014)
[75] "History – NAACP Memphis Branch."

Republicans' role in the earlier 20th century before the New Deal in the 1930s. Memphis had the largest amount of Black registered voters in the South due to Black activism and exploitation from Crump, who bullied and manipulated Black Memphians, regardless of party alliance, to vote for him or his candidates.[76] Also known as the "Crump machine", he received national attention for his control over local elections, involvement in labor conflicts, censorship of Hollywood movies, and when Black Memphian activists reached out to national civil rights leaders for support. Following Tennessee's elimination of the poll tax in 1951 and the death of E. H. Crump in 1954, more Black Memphians joined neighborhood civic clubs, registered to vote, and campaigned for Black political candidates. [77] The 1959 Negro Volunteer Ticket was an all-Black voting bloc that increased qualified Black voters up to 50,164 in Memphis.[78] None of the candidates won, but it created immense unity among Black Memphians and even received support from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.[79]

WDIA radio station promoted Black political action as well. During the 1952 election season, deejays registered voters and campaigned on-air for candidates. Elizabeth Gritter noted the station offered an award to the radio personality who had the most listeners attend a political rally sponsored by the nonpartisan registration committee. [80] WDIA also fought for a separate, segregated day for Black people to go to the Memphis Fairgrounds, instead of no access at all during the Jim Crow era. WDIA would later raise funds to make Lorraine Motel a civil rights museum to honor Dr. King. [81] Dr. King came to organize in Memphis because of labor inequality. Prior to his arrival, Black Memphians had already been challenging the city and E.H.

[76] Ibid.
[77] Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle*.
[78] (Sigafoos 1979)
[79] (Goudsouzian and McKinney Jr. 2018)
[80] (Gritter 2014)
[81] Cantor, *Wheelin' on Beale: How WDIA-Memphis Became the Nation's First All-Black Radio Station and Created the Sound That Changed America.*

Crump's leadership especially. In 1943, Crump bullied several Black leaders into canceling a public speech by Black labor and civil rights leader A. Philip Randolph. One Memphis minister, Reverend George A. Long of Beale Avenue Baptist Church, invited Randolph back to the city and publicly declared that "Christ, not Crump, is my Boss".[82]

Labor Rights

Criticizing racist practices from Black employees' actual bosses, labor activism began in Memphis almost ten years before Dr. King's arrival and the infamous 1968 sanitation strike. The returning WWII veterans were livid to return to jobs at home that were under racist conditions. The 1968 sanitation strike brought together various concerns and organizing from the Black working-class Memphians. The postwar era included prejudiced labor practices, police brutality, civil rights, and political power. Memphis's NAACP chapter had to confront city officials about various service employees' salaries. There were complaints from Black maids, janitors, cooks, and kitchen helpers working in public hospitals, schools, and parks. Laura Green notes that many service employees earned pay low enough to qualify them for food stamps.[83] The labor conflict initially began over the right of city employees to have unions. Then, the strike soon became a more significant movement led by poor and working-class Black Memphians with the most laborious and racially marked jobs in Southern cities.[84] By the late 1940s and early 1950s, Memphis was the most organized city in the South, with close to 20% of workers unionized.[85] The local NAACP chapter was very visible and active during this time as well. Memphis had the

[82] (Green 2007)
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid.
[85] (Gritter 2014)

largest Southern NAACP branch during the 1960s[86] and since 1919. Black Memphians collectively organized to protect themselves from equalities in the workplace and beyond.

There were quite inhumane conditions Memphis sanitation workers experienced. They had to supply their own clothing and gloves that had to fit standards. Some work depended on the weather, and they did not get paid or go to work in any inclement weather. The men could not afford the city's self-financed life insurance of $2,000. Also, their work was listed as "unclassified, hourly employees". Robert Walker (29) and Echol Cole (35) were killed by a faulty garbage truck while working and seeking shelter during the rain on February 1, 1968.[87],[88] The Sunday after that tragic day, 800 Black workers showed up at the Memphis Labor Temple. There was high energy for striking, and at the time, it was illegal to strike against public services. However, a protest march was still called. Ministers and local preachers backed Rev. T.O. Fuller's remarks about the two men's death being 'a sin and disgrace". To add to the disrespect, coverage of the men's death was overshadowed with press releases on the birth of Elvis Presley's daughter, Lisa Marie, at Baptist Memorial. Stuart Cosgrove writes, so "the Sanitation Workers Strike had to create its own visibility". Thus, the creation of the I AM A MAN posters.

The I AM A MAN slogan, initially used in Memphis due to labor inequality, came to represent a rallying cry against all of the dehumanization Black Memphians experience. The local patriarchal civil rights scene symbolized demanding dignity for Black Memphian men but also their families and neighbors as well. So, all Black bodies are equally human, and it was past time to be treated as such. On Sundays during the spring of 1968, ministers called on their

[86] (Green 2007)
[87] Stuart Cosgrove, *Memphis 68: The Tragedy of Southern Soul. Sixties Soul Trilogy*, Second, Sixties Soul Trilogy, Second (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2017).
[88] This occurred at the corner of the middle school I attended. Today you can find a memorial plaque honoring the men on Colonial and Sea Isle Road.

congregations to participate in a series of protest marches planned for the weeks ahead. The Black church community reached out to the local music community and got the city's gospel choirs and well-known singers to participate. Issac Hayes and others supported the strike and showed up to an eight-hour gospel marathon at Mason Temple "to raise money and morale".[89] Rev. James Lawson persuaded Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to detour to Memphis to help with the sanitation strike. The march seemed like the perfect chance to start Dr. King's and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's (SCLC) Poor People Campaign. Memphis was known as an NAACP town, and local Black liberation leadership was primarily represented by the older, middle- and upper-class groups.

Black Power and Youth-led/Student Organizing

Some of the Black Memphian community were not content with what Shirletta Kinchen describes as "token gains" established by these groups. The final desegregation of recreational facilities and schools that happened in 1963 in Memphis (note that the *Brown V. Board* decision occurred in 1954) was not enough. Memphis was able to hide under this false illusion as a progressive Southern city, but the young people were ready to expose and transform the city. Charles Cabbage and Coby Smith founded the Black Organization Project (BOP) and the Invaders. Kinchen writes, "BOP attempted to organize and politicize Memphis's black youth to provide an alternative model of empowerment to young people who felt disaffected by the city's more conservative models of civil rights activists". The majority of the group consisted of Carver High students and graduates. They did not limit membership only to college students nor any age requirement. There was a recruitment slogan that read, "Damn the Army, Join the Invaders". Kinchen notes that not everyone under the BOP umbrella considered themselves or the group a

[89] Cosgrove, *Memphis 68: The Tragedy of Southern Soul. Sixties Soul Trilogy*.

part of the Invaders. [90] The Invaders were made up of late teenagers and early twenty-year-olds who were returning veterans from Vietnam, students, the impoverished, and the unemployed. They were all politicized.[91] Coby Smith said, "The Black Organizing Project organized in the streets, in the schools, in the churches, in the pool rooms". Membership was primarily based out of South Memphis, where Cabbage was from. [92] South Memphis was the spot for antipoverty grassroots organizing.[93] BOP feared that Dr. King would undermine their grassroots efforts.

Dr. King was originally supposed to help lead a march in Memphis on March 22, 1968. However, it was postponed to March 28 because of the random and unusually heavy snow that day. On March 28, some people, towards the end of the march, shattered glass from some Beale Street's storefronts. The event was called "Tough Thursday" by the local press since Dr. King was associated with it. Violence was blamed on the Invaders and the BOP.[94] The Invaders asked to speak to Dr. King in person and wanted it to be known that they were not responsible for the actions that started at the march.[95] After the unsuccessful peaceful march, Dr. King reached out to the youth because he wanted to make amends for the SCLC and older leaders not including the youth in the organizing and planning process. Dr. King was prepared for another more inclusive and peaceful march in the city, but he was assassinated on April 4, 1968, at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis.[96] A riot broke out the day Dr. King was killed, and the city brought in tanks from the National Guard, policed the neighborhoods, and gave the city a curfew. On

[90] Shirletta Kinchen, *Black Power in the Bluff City: African American Youth and Student Activism in Memphis, 1965-1975*, First (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2016).
[91] (Cosgrove 2017)
[92] Kinchen, *Black Power in the Bluff City: African American Youth and Student Activism in Memphis, 1965-1975*.
[93] (Green 2007)
[94] (Kinchen 2016)
[95] (Cosgrove 2017)
[96] (Kinchen 20116)

April 8, 1968, approximately 42,000 people silently marched through the city led by Coretta Scott-King for the Dr. King Memorial March. The Invaders served as Peace Marshals.

In efforts to remember Dr. King's legacy and the recent focus on poverty, Resurrection City in D.C. was created as a new community that was part slum and part campsite. Juanita Miller was a single mother of two, an advocate for poverty, welfare, and disability rights activist who led the Memphis mule train to Resurrection City. The Memphis mule train was the last to arrive. The group consisted of Black Power activists, welfare mothers, and children. Their signs read "Invaders Have Landed", "Memphis Soul", and "Le Moyne Goes To Washington". Dr. King's untimely death fueled energy in the young people of Memphis to be bolder in their racial justice beliefs and actions for Black Power and liberation. The radical young people were a significant interest to the local police and FBI department. As part of COINTELPRO (the nation's counterintelligence program), there was a national commitment to spy on Black militant organizations. The Invaders were infiltrated by the Memphis Police Department and the Memphis Branch of the FBI with Black spies who also observed Dr. King closely. There were twenty-one different and unconnected sources spying on the group by the FBI. This infiltration would eventually dissolve the group, but those who were not jailed were still committed to the Black Power movement. [97]

In the summer of 1968, BOP and the Invaders seized the opportunity to participate in a federally funded program named the Neighborhood Organizing Project (NOP). The NOP was mainly staffed by members of the BOP and the younger group of Invaders. They taught Black history, Black arts, and Black politics. They also taught people how to vote, registered them to vote, and taught the importance of knowing and making decisions on your own about local and

[97] (Cosgrove 2017)

national politics.[98] Young Black Memphians in the 1960s were taking over the activism scene in the city. On March 18, 1960, seven students from Owen Junior College (now LeMoyne-Owen College) went to a McLellan's on Main Street to do a sit-in at the White only counter. They were escorted out, and none were arrested. The next day, forty students, mainly from Owen and Lemoyne College, did a sit-in at the Cossitt Branch library downtown and the main library on Peabody and McLean in Midtown. They were all arrested and charged. The now older, more established, and higher-class Black Memphian leaders of preachers and NAACP members supported the students.[99] The Ministers and Citizens League were composed of political parties, activists, and ministers who bailed out the students. The sit-in was a victory two years later, and this is credited to the Black Memphian community unifying. The young people, business people, ministers, and everyday residents got that win with no help called from the SNCC, SCLC, or CORE.[100]

Kinchen states that LeMoyne-Owen College was the only institution in Memphis for Black higher education for many years. On November 25, 1968, a student rebellion at Lemoyne-Owen occurred due to what students understood as a lack of respect from instructors, staff, and administration. A document titled "Force and Power (A Senior's Commitment)" displayed the students' demands and grievances: use of facilities at all times, a Blacker curriculum, a bookstore filled with more contemporary books, more courtesy from the business office, use of student lounge, knowledge of qualifications of a new president, more availability of health services on campus, lower tuition, allocation of an activity fee, and improved dormitory facilities for athletes. At around 4:00 p.m., LeMoyne-Owen students, along with the Invaders, the Students

[98] (Kinchen 2016)
[99] Sanford, *From Boss Crump to King Willie: How Race Changed Memphis Politics*.
[100] (Tucker 1975)

for a Democratic Society, and the Memphis State (now the University of Memphis) Black Student Association, began to gather around Brownlee Hall, which was the administration building and main campus area. They barricaded the doors and draped a "Black Flag of America" outside Brownlee Hall. The school did not punish or prosecute anyone involved, and classes began again on December 2. The administrative committee and the student council agreed to all demands except two: lower tuition and public dances on campus.[101] My grandmama, the same one still chilling in Orange Mound, has shared a comical reflection with me before on accidentally being a part of the lockdown and ending up on the front-page cover story about it in a local newspaper. She was dating my grandfather, George Lee Gossett Jr.[102], at the time, who was a member of the Invaders and did not warn her what she was walking into.

Black students at Memphis State were also student activists during the 1960s. Their Black Student Association (BSA)'s newsletter, the *Black Thesis,* began in the spring of 1968. They formed book clubs to assist members who could not afford to purchase books every semester. They unsuccessfully discussed and confronted their Dean a few times about their campus grievances, including an attempt on April 23, 1969. So, they then decided on more aggressive actions. BSA members quickly issued copies of a special edition of their newsletter, *Black Student Appea*l, with their demands listed again. The students asked for an extensive Black Studies program, a Black Dean, and more Black instructors and Black athletes. A few days later on April 28, BSA did a sit-in in a Memphis State administration building after concerns over the police presence on campus were ignored. Some students left after police were called, but the

[101] (Kinchen 2016)

[102] I never got a chance to physically meet and talk with my grandfather. White supremacy had greatly deteriorated his mental state by the time I was around. He died in 2010. I have my own spiritual relationship with him. And I have a personal inquiry and understanding of his life through the memories and accounts shared with me. My grandfather was a revolutionary, a Vietnam veteran, and a flat-out brilliant and talented man. I thank him and deeply love him for his courageousness, intelligence, and activism. His spirit lives on through his descendants.

determined students remained. Ester Hunt told the group, “Everybody come on that’s going to jail with me”. Memphis police gathered 109 students onto a police bus. The students were nonresistant and were arrested and charged under the then newly passed Tennessee State Code, 39-1214. This law made trespassing, illegally taking possession of a public school or educational building, and refusing to leave school property a misdemeanor. Embodying the ‘jail no bail’ strategy coined by SNCC, the students denied bond. Some students wore toothbrushes around their necks because they anticipated staying overnight. The University suspended students involved in the sit-in. Ester Hunt, David Acey, and James Pope were all leaders of the BSA and military veterans who experienced life beyond the segregated South.[103] Returning home, the young people were less patient and watched how slow dragged, and bare minimalist responses to the civil rights movement were. The committed activism of Black Memphians across generations was rooted in the love of their community. This activism and communal love remain prominent today. I remember attending some of the Black Lives Matter marches in 2016, and Memphians showed out in numbers to display their frustrations. There were memorable photos taken of different gang flags tied together, symbolizing unity and the city’s collective outrage. In 2020, following the highly publicized death of George Floyd, Memphis had a month straight of protesting and demonstrations.[104] The courage to call out and actively undermine injustices is a part of Black spirituality. James Cone notes that Black people have never stood “passively by while white oppressors demoralized their being. Many rebelled physically and mentally. Black

[103] Ibid.
[104] FOX13 Memphis News Staff, “One Month of Memphis Social Injustice Protests,” WHBQ, accessed January 22, 2021, https://www.fox13memphis.com/news/local/one-month-memphis-social-injustice-protests/BSJ72K5E7RCC7CDZI4U53JJKCI/.

history in America is the history of that rebellion". [105] From that collective defiance, it solidifies a strong community and sense of belonging.

[105] (Cone 1972)

"One thing I would say is Memphis is a city of family. Lol because it seems like somehow everybody knows me, or is connected to one another in some kind of way even before we even realize it".

-Kierra Patterson (Cousin)

"Memphis is a nice city to live in. We have produced a lot of talent in Memphis such as Al Green, Issac Hayes & Rufus Thomas in the music business. We are also known for being a great basketball city, it's where Penny Hardaway is from.

Memphis represents family. If you ever visit you will see a lot of family get togethers. I love living here because it's family oriented. I'm proud to say I'm from Memphis because of the history. It's not too big, you can get anywhere in Memphis quickly. It's an enjoyable place".

-Vernard Watkins (Dad)

"Memphis is a city with an abundance of creative people. Memphis is full of history, culture, and is filled with opportunities. I'm a proud Memphian / Orange Mound native. I feel pride when I say I'm from "The Mound". I have never been to Graceland, I'm a true Memphian! My city as any other city, has its faults but some great assets too. I love to visit other places, but nothing feels like home or gives me that warm feeling like Memphis does".

-Roberta Watkins (Mama)

"Being born and raised in Memphis in the 1970s and 1980s prepared me for the world. There is nowhere on earth tougher and filled with more love than Memphis, TN. Because of that, my upbringing prepared me for life. To me, it's the best hometown in the world and to this day has that real Southern, down to earth, hometown feel".

-Philly Fire Deputy Chief Carl Randolph (Uncle)

"I'ma bring the whole hood with me"[106]: Community and Fellowship

Community and kinship hold significance in Black spirituality. Bridges notes that Black spirituality assists Black people in establishing "their own sense of identity, their own culture, and their right to build and live in harmony in their own vision and ideal of community".[107] The prominent value of community in Memphis aided me in being blessed to grow up and be oriented around love. The public love within Memphis's Black community is displayed through what Saidiya Hartman refers to as "the public intimacy of the streets". Additionally, Hartman writes about, "the communal luxury of the black metropolis, the wealth of *just us*, the black city-within-the-city, transforms the imagination of what you might want and who you may be, encouraging you to dream...This collective endeavor to live free unfolds in the confines of the carceral landscape".[108] Communal liberating takes many forms. This section willl explore Black Memphian cultural artists, our exquisite, comforting food, communal gatherings, places of worship, religious-affiliated and secular groups, and displays of neighborly love across different time periods. Deliberately opposing anti-Blackness through collective joy, self-determination, and proximity is essentially nourishing for a community.

Capturing Black Memphian Life

There is a strong tradition of Black Memphians who have creatively displayed this gem of viewing and understanding daily Black life in Memphis and the nation. Brenda Joysmith (1952-) is an artist from Memphis who graduated from Booker T. Washington High. Her most famous artworks were featured in the living room of *The Cosby Show*. Her works were also

[106] Evvie McKinney, *Bring The Whole Hood*, Spotify (Motown Gospel (EGS), Big Yellow Dog Music, 2020).
[107] (Bridges 2001)
[108] Saidiya V. Hartman, "Minor Figures," in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*, First (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019).

featured on sets of other classic Black television shows such as *A Different World, The Jamie Foxx Show, Everybody Hates Chris* and more. Joysmith creates pastel portraits of ordinary Black life. Her works sell for thousands of dollars, but she also wants her work accessible to all art lovers and has some portraits online in her gallery and through national distributors. Her Black cultural paintings were owned by celebrities such as Maya Angelou and Roberta Flack. Ernest C. Withers (1922-2007) was a photographer born and raised in Memphis and was called "Memphis's great living natural historian", because he covered some prominent events. He photographed the trails of Emmitt Till's murder, Montgomery Bus Boycott, desegregation of Little Rock schools, Memphis Sanitation Strike, and the aftermath of Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination. Withers graduated from Manassas High.[109] Archiving visuals of Black people further humanizes our experiences. Documenting that everydayness of Black life is important work. I understand it as an expression of appreciating our spirituality and fullness as a people. G.P. Hamilton shared a similar sentiment in his work dedicated to Black Memphis in the early 20th century.

In 1908, G.P Hamilton's *The Bright Side of Memphis: A Compendium of Information Concerning the Colored People of Memphis, Tennessee* was published. In this Black Memphian, essentially Yellow Pages book, Hamilton notes, "The colored population of Memphis is probably the fourth largest in the United States and is in position to do great things towards promoting the city's growth and prosperity". He explores the diversities of Black life for folks in Memphis. His book included advertisements for some Black businesses, and some had photos. Through Hamilton's book, readers get to know local names, stories, and experiences.[110] Hamilton

[109] DeCosta-Willis, *Notable Black Memphians*.
[110] Hamilton, *The Bright Side of Memphis: A Compendium of Information Concerning the Colored People of Memphis, Tennessee, Showing Their Achievements in Business, Industrial and Professional Life and Including Articles of General Interest on the Race*.

understood in the early 1900s the importance of passing down knowledge and our history to keep growing and healing.

Food!

A significant part of how we fellowship in Memphis is around food. Food is, of course, vital for survival, but really delicious food can also transform the spirit and enhance overall wellbeing- remarkably when experienced with a group of people. Memphis has such amazing food that sometimes I would get really sad while in Cambridge, MA that I could not go to Jack Pirtle's for some chicken or pull up at one of the 24-hour Dixie Queen spots for a burger and shake. Food is a love language that Memphis has perfected. You can find directories to numerous Black Memphian cuisine businesses. Thousands of people, including myself, are a part of the Where Black Memphis Eats Facebook group that promotes and praises our abundant amount of outstanding culinary establishments of all kinds.[111]

Craig Meek writes, "Memphis is equal part music and food- the products of a community marked with grit and resilience". Memphis is known worldwide for our barbecue (BBQ). Our specialty is dry rub seasoning, adding coleslaw to a barbecue sandwich, BBQ spaghetti, and BBQ nachos (smoked meat topped with BBQ sauce and cheese). I agree with Meek that the best BBQ in Memphis is made by people in their backyards across the city. There are several independent locally owned BBQ spots that there is never a real need to branch out beyond my neighborhood for quality smoked meats and Southern food of all kinds. In a 1989 *Commercial Appeal* article, Charles Vergos, owner of the famous touristy BBQ spot Rendezvous, reflected on walking through downtown Memphis as a child and seeing Black families cooking pork over hot

[111] "Where Black Memphis Eats | Facebook," accessed October 20, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/groups/794070277794249.

coals in washtubs in their yards. "'That's the original barbecue. Black people invented barbecue', the paper quoted Vergos. 'White people just capitalized on it.'"

There is the annual Memphis in May competition, where BBQ folks around the world come to compete. In 1977, the annual Memphis in May festivities started honoring a country every year, and in 1978 the BBQ competition was added. Memphis in May draws in more than 250 teams and 100,000 visitors. Ribs, shoulders, and whole hogs are the official category the booths are divided into.[112] Nearly all of my favorite places to eat at home, and recommend to friends visiting, are Black-owned and have quite a local, authentic vibe. For BBQ, some of my local favorites are A&R, Interstate, Neely's, and Tops. Honeygold is a uniquely Memphis sauce for wings. My favorite wing spots are Crumpy's, All Stars, Ching's, Wing Guru, Chicken Coop, and BJ's. Memphis also indulges in some uniquely Southern dishes. Deep fried sushi is fantastic and so Southern. Rotel (ground beef, Velveeta cheese, and undrained cans of Rotel-some get fancy and add in shrimp and cream cheese) is a staple at any function revolving around a sports game or for a party. Every weekend, there is a party in Memphis Mexican restaurants that really turn into the club with a banging DJ or live music. The Mexican spots have delicious food and drinks that are quite affordable, so there are always rounds of pitchers on peoples' tables. The actual clubs in Memphis have great food too, and it is not unusual for someone to be eating a fresh plate of wings in the middle of the club or have a plate of soul food. There are Black-owned soul food spots all over the city. Some of the best are those in a corner store and places that served you cafeteria-style. Food trucks are significant in Memphis as well. You can catch someone on a corner grilling for hours. I love when there is a food truck or independent chef

[112] Craig Meek, *Memphis Barbecue: A Succulent History of Smoke, Sauce & Soul. American Palate* (Charleston: American Palate, 2014).

providing concessions during a football game. We are a sports city and delicious food pairs well with the excitement and commentary from a game.

Communal Gatherings

Sporting events are another staple to Black Memphian culture and spirituality. This is chosen time together to focus on the young people, our beautiful athleticness, and competitive drive to be great in your respective field. Sporting events and communal gatherings are also about celebrating us. Black celebration is "an ultimate symbol of defiance". [113] The Elks Lodge sponsored the annual Blues Bowl football game during the early 1900s, where local high school teams played each other. They also had a Miss Blues Bowl competition.[114] There was an Orange Mound Bowl at one point as well. Led by Robert Wright, the bowl game took place from 1948-1958, and it supported the Orange Mound Nursery, which lasted for 39 years.[115] Fred Jones Jr. (1948-) created the Southern Heritage Classic in 1990. This is a three-day event that ends with a football game featuring historically Black universities Jackson State University vs. Tennessee State University. The game is played at the Liberty Bowl. Fred Jones Jr. was born in Memphis and went to Booker T. Washington High School. So, Jones understood the important cultural traditions around supporting Black sporting events. The Classic brings in $5-11 million annually, and the Southern Heritage Foundation donates tens of thousands of dollars to nonprofits and schools.[116] Classic time is always so fun, and I love attending the Orange Mound parade that happens during this time. Parades and festivals have been a part of Black Memphian life as yet again another intentional assembly to celebrate our lively culture.

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[113] (Stewart III 1997)
[114] (Bond 2006)
[115] Williams, *African American Life and Culture in Orange Mound: Case Study of a Black Community in Memphis, Tennessee, 1890-1980*.
[116] (DeCosta-Willis 2008)

In 1937, Black Memphians created the Cotton Makers Jubilee Carnival, where the carnival royalty consisted of the Memphis Black elite and business professionals. Baseball games were played at the Black-owned Martin Stadium, and it was also where the carnival king and queen were crowned. In the White- created Cotton Carnival in Memphis, Black people were only the horses of the parades as described by a Black youth. This is why Black Memphians did not like that parade and decided to create their own festivities. [117] The Jubilee had three parades: coronation, children's parade (featuring junior royalty), and the grand jubilee parade. Majorettes and bands bring a lively dynamic to football games and are the show of parades. Miss Jubilect was a band competition in Memphis where Black and White fans could purchase tickets for the competition and a vote for Miss Jubilect. Majorettes existed in Memphis by at least the 1940s, as they can be seen in Beverly Bond's *Beale Street*. The photos were of Booker T. Washington High majorettes. Bond mentions Melrose and Douglass High majorettes and bands, and bands from Dixie Home and Foot Homes projects tenant associations.[118] I have a special appreciation for majorette and band life because I was a majorette from age five until I started college. I was captain of my high school team during my senior year.

I loved the freedom of getting lost in the live music and moving and strutting sassy to drums. The percussion section leaves you no choice but to move your body. Carlyle Stewart III states, "The black soul must find spiritual and cultural expression. This is the essence of the African American freedom". Additionally, "to dance gracefully and defiantly to move deftly through space and time, is to discover that dimension of reality and being that transcends the dimensions of life itself" (pg. 104). Black dance is both liberating and transformative.[119]

[117] (Bond 2006)
[118] (Bond 2006)
[119] (Stewart III 1997)

I got my dance team experience and passion from my mama. She danced and was a cheerleader in high school. Cheer offs amongst Memphis's Black high schools are a sight to see. There is a lot of attitude and confidence in their moves and sassy cheers that let the other squad know they ain't backing down from a challenge. You will hear the loud "oooo" responses from the crowd. I love when the cheer off happens during really intense games too. Memphis is a huge basketball city as well, and competition is elite on every level, from 3–4-year-olds all the way to adult leagues. This is especially true for AAU (Amateur Athletic Union) games. Between my brothers playing ball and dad coaching, I have easily been to well over a hundred of their games combined throughout my life.

Another essential gathering atmosphere is, of course, religiously affiliated groups and places of worship. Charles Williams notes, "Memphis was known to most southerners as 'the city of churches,' meaning that it had a preponderance of churches within its limits. Churches were so plentiful that it was not unusual to find two churches side by side, directly in front of each other, or within the same street segment.[120] By 1924, 107 Black churches existed in Memphis. Most churchgoers belonged to the Baptist tradition, along with Methodist and Church of God in Christ denominations. [121] Charles Mason's sermons had recurring themes on love, social empowerment of the poor and powerless, spiritual and physical renewal, and racial equality. Mason taught that preachers had to have "Holy Ghost power", a spiritual weapon that allowed them to challenge and condemn racism and lynching. As previously mentioned, Dr. King's last speech ever was at Mason Temple in Memphis. He praised COGIC for their racial harmony, and he told the sanitation workers to keep standing up for themselves. Like Bishop Mason, Dr. King cared about poor people. Kip Lornell states, "The church and its many allied

[120] (Williams 2013)
[121] (Gritter 2014)

support services have been the backbone of black social and religious life for many decades, extending their community work in Memphis far beyond a strictly sacred context". Quartet communities and gospel groups constantly raised money to help people and families in need. Some quartets would sing in local jails and prisons.[122] For groups such as the quartet communities, there is an undeniable religious and spiritual obligation to work against the many ways Black bodies are held in captivity.

Representing Memphians' religious commitment to Black freedom, Reverend Lonzie (L.O.) Taylor was a Baptist minister, photographer, moviemaker, audio recorder, poet, essayist, musician, songwriter, electrician, and candy maker. For more than thirty years, Rev. Taylor organized or pastored at least four churches in Memphis, trained young ministers on the art of preaching, and taught young people how to be photographers. Beverly Bond writes, "To L. O. Taylor, 'church' was not just the focus of religious activity; it was the physical and emotional center of community life. For Memphis's growing African American migrant population (of whom Taylor was one example), the church was the major social center where 'country folk' brought their old-time religion into an urban setting." [123] After the Union victory of the Civil War, White Northerners came to the 901 to open worship spaces called the Lincoln Chapel for the freed Black people. However, Black Memphians made it known that White preachers could not invoke the same spiritual presence and tone as Black preachers. No Black churches under White leadership were able to sustain in Memphis, but the churches built for and operated by Black Memphians were the most successful.

[122] Kip Lornell, *Happy in the Service of the Lord: African-American Sacred Vocal Harmony Quartets in Memphis*, Second (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995).
[123] (Goudsouzian and McKinney Jr. 2018)

David Tucker notes that Memphis freed people made more secret societies than they did organizing churches. Some of the societies were the Sons of Ham, Daughters of Zion, Christian Relief Society, Mechanics Benevolent Association, Union Forever Society, Independent Order of Pole Bearers, Mutual Relief Society, Draymen's Association, Gymnastic Society, Sisters of Lincoln Relief Society, Laborers Union, Israelites Society, and the Jerusalem Society. Local lodges had secret passwords, handshakes, and special regalia. Parties and public celebrations were regular occurrences and not just for national holidays. There were celebrations for the anniversary of Emancipation Day (January 1, 1860) and the day the U.S. Union Army captured Memphis (June 6, 1862). The local fraternal orders did a lot of charitable work, spending collectively $3,000 a year on medical expenses for people. They also took on a leading political engagement role when Memphis let Black people vote in 1867. They critiqued churches for trying to get folks to heaven while the fraternal orders were making life easier in the present. [124] The Memphis Lodge of Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the World was a fraternal organization that drew in local Black elites such as Robert Church Sr. and Lt. George W. Lee. They fought adult illiteracy and believed that Black Memphians should learn the Bible, the Constitution, how to write their names, and the fundamentals of voting. They also had a Christmas basket fund where they gave food for Memphis families in need. The Elks had prizes and monetary awards for essay and oratorical contests in Black schools.[125]

Though Memphis is a Christian majority city with also a history of secret societies and lodges, there are Black Memphian Muslim communities with their own unique history. Talib-Karim Muhammad (1937-1997) was a religious leader and city councilman who grew up in South Memphis. He was a former boxer, political activist, and head of Memphis's Muslim

[124] (Tucker 1975)
[125] (Bond 2006)

community. He founded and directed the Islamic Center of Memphis in 1985. Muhammad also established the Tennessee Chapter of the International Pan African Movement and served as the National President of the Pan African Movement U.S.A.[126] The Memphis Dawah Association offers lectures and classes about the Islamic faith and African American history, and there is physical space for their multilingual and multiethnic communities to convene. They have a low-powered radio station, The Memphis Clarion, to inform the local community on pressing Muslim issues and cultural matters.[127] I offer some context on Black Memphian spirituality beyond Christianity to show how Black spirituality is neither a religious monolith nor are the principles of togetherness and resilience found only in religious spaces. The audacity to achieve greater liberation is found in every aspect of Black Memphian life.

Neighborly Love

In his business and economic history of Memphis, Robert Sigafoos noted there was a lot of neighbor helping neighbor energy in the 1930s in the city.[128] This energy has remained present before and since that time amongst Black Memphians. The intimacy of proximity for Black Memphians made people of no familial or romantic ties care so deeply about one other. The Memphis State's (University of Memphis) Black Student Association in the 1960s started the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Scholarship fund to help recruit students in need from the community. The Memphis Chapter of the Black Panther Party had a Survival Program that offered food, clothing, housing, and more to those in need of those resources the most. In addition to their Free Breakfast program, the group also had the Free Shoes and Free Clothing programs. Their Busing to Prisons program assisted families and incarcerated people staying

[126] (DeCosta-Willis 2008)
[127] "About | Memphis Dawah Association," accessed January 27, 2021, https://whitehavenkulliye.org/about/.
[128] (Sigafoos 1979)

connected by providing transportation for family members to visit their loved ones.[129] Family bonds and kinship values have been prominent in Memphis's majority Black neighborhoods, such as Orange Mound.

In 1968, Orange Mound was known as the second most concentrated population of Black people in a United States neighborhood. Harlem, New York was the first.[130] Orange Mound was one of the few areas available to Black Memphians during the late 1800s, so people of various economic conditions lived there. In 1940, the Orange Mound Civic Club was led by President Robert Wright, Jr. In 1949, New Light Civic Club was led by President Rev. Percy C. Polk. The two clubs merged in 1961 to become the Consolidated Orange Mound Civic Club. There were also social and fraternal orders, churches, and schools present in the Mound. Melrose is a historical high school in Orange Mound that my mama, grandmama, and a few aunts graduated from. It is not uncommon for people in Orange Mound to have intergenerational graduates from Melrose. There is a National Alumni Association of Melrose High School Golden Wildcats that keeps Wildcats connected all over. When important milestones are reached, people come out in masses from wherever and make elaborate plans to celebrate together as a Melrose family.

Another way Black Memphians connect is through humor, and this was significantly a part of WDIA's platform on the radio. Humor is essential for Black life because we witness and experience great hardships so often that it has become synonymous with Black identity. An early 1950s survey discovered that 69.6 percent of Black households in Memphis tuned in to WDIA daily. Laura Green notes that Nat D. Williams and other DJs brought a lively sense of humor to WDIA.[131] Black humor is an integral part of Memphis culture and Black Americans more

[129] (Kinchen 2016)
[130] (Cosgrove 2017)
[131] (Green 2007)

broadly.[132] In Memphis, someone will check (or make fun of) you just because. It is best to have some tough skin because your family and friends will talk about you. Even with the joking, people still show up for one another. The WDIA Goodwill Fund started in 1949 "to provide aid for needy Negro children. This was the birth of the Goodwill Station policy to 'help people to help themselves'". For the first four years, all profits were turned over to established Memphis charities. As it grew larger by 1954, WDIA purchased and operated special buses for disabled Black children to receive a proper education. Also, a WDIA Little League started (first of its kind in the U.S.), and almost 400 youth played in the baseball league.[133]

There was a softball team as well under WDIA. The Goodwill Fund was additionally used for college scholarships, establishments of youth clubs, and a juvenile home for Black children. The Goodwill Village was set to provide low rent-supplement housing and essentially create a permanent emergency funding resource for Black people in the Mid-South. The Goodwill Revenue event supported this.[134] Since Memphians have lineages from Mississippi and Arkansas, the community love extended to rural areas outside of the city. Also, some of the culture in the city represents our country roots. My family comes from Olive Branch, Mississippi. I see rural and urban combined culture in Memphis with groups of people who commonly ride four-wheelers in the streets. There are tight-knit motorcycle clubs, constant illegal drag racing, and people who religiously go fishing and hunting in Mississippi. There is also a significant Black Greek fraternities and sororities community in the city that represents the Divine Nine hard. Memphis's performing arts community has some Black-run organizations

[132] (Stewart III 1997)
[133] Lornell, *Happy in the Service of the Lord: African-American Sacred Vocal Harmony Quartets in Memphis*.
[134] (Cantor 1992)

such as the Hattiloo Theater[135] and Collage Dance Collective.[136] There are also the Beale Street flippers, who entertain and collect donations as they do complicated backflips up and down Beale.[137] Artistic expression offers intimate joy for Black communities. Kleaver Cruz, the creator of the Black Joy Project, claims, "Black joy is also community. When we understand what brings joy to the people around us it allows us to conjure it for them when they are most in need or are looking for support. It gives room to love each other more deeply".[138] Just as James Cone described his musical and lively hometown in Arkansas, the people in Memphis need to "refresh their spirits in the sound and rhythm of black humanity". [139]

"See that's that Memphis shit": Music, Dance, and Soul[140]

Black Memphians claim and embrace their humanity through sharing physical space, group interest, entertainment, and most profoundly through our words and expression. The authentic sound and messages Black Memphians create represent our soulfulness. Our soulfulness is electrifying, spiritual energy that is present in our music, dance, and words. Cone notes, "Black music is unifying because it confronts the individual with the truth of black existence and affirms that black being is possible only in a communal content". Additionally, "Black music is functional. Its purposes and aims are directly related to the consciousness of the

[135] "Hattiloo Theatre – Black Repertory Theater in Memphis, TN," accessed October 18, 2020, https://hattiloo.org/.
[136] "Collage Dance Collective," Collage Dance Collective, accessed October 21, 2020, https://collagedance.org/.
[137] "Beale Street Flippers | Memphistravel.Com," accessed October 18, 2020, https://www.memphistravel.com/beale-street-flippers.
[138] Kleaver Cruz, "Black Joy Is Resistance: Why We Need a Movement to Balance Black Triumph with Trials," black youth project, n.d., http://blackyouthproject.com/black-joy-resistance-need-movement-balance-black-triumph-trials/.
[139] (Cone 1972)
[140] Al Kapone, *That Memphis Shit*, Spotify, Whoop That Trick (Diamond D Records, 2006).

black community". He further claims Black music is a living reality, and it is social and political, and theological.[141] Music is everything for Black Americans, and Memphis is no exception.

There is an indescribable freedom that comes from articulating yourself however you please and moving your body to sounds made from Black creatives. As previously mentioned, Beale Street was once the core of Black Memphis life. Stax singer Rufus Thomas once said, "If you were black for one Saturday night on Beale, you'd never want to be white again".[142] Nat D. Williams stated, "There will always be a Beale Street, because Beale Street is a spirit. Beale Street is a symbol … Beale Street is a way of life… Beale Street is hope".[143] He and Rufus Thomas hosted Amateur Night at the Palace Theater on Beale. The Palace Theater was the largest theater for Black people in the South. It was the equivalent of the Apollo Theater in Harlem. On Amateur Night, people had to please the "tough hometown crowd". The prizes were $5 for 1st place, $3 for 2nd place, and $2 for 3rd place. Rufus Thomas was right beside Nat D. to get people off the stage when they were booed off. Amateur Night lasted for 30 years.[144] Another prominent competition scene in the 20th century Black Memphian community was quartet battles and the Ballet. In the 1950s, the quartet concerts in Memphis were most frequently held at Mason Temple off Crump Blvd in South Memphis, a 7,000-seat facility. The quartet song battlers would go head-to-head, and the audience chose the winner through applause.[145] The Ballet was a variety show highlighting local talent only and was created and ran by Booker T. Washington (BTW) students. Only BTW students from the home economics department made the costumes. What started as a high school fundraiser grew into a major Black

[141] (Cone 1972)
[142] (Cosgrove 2017)
[143] (Cantor 1992)
[144] (Bond 2006)
[145] (Lornell 1995)

talent show for the city. It expanded so much that the show had to move to the downtown Ellis Auditorium. However, they still had to run the show for two to three consecutive nights for the growing number of interested and excited audience members.[146] The highly competitive but good-hearted atmosphere in the 901 means that artists need to be good enough to wow a crowd who can just collectively decide from their spirit if a performance or song was excellent or not. Memphis's music and dance culture is authentic and matches the creativity and resilience present throughout the city.

Quartet and Gospel

Memphis is most known for its musical roots in blues, R&B, and soul music. However, Kip Lornell argues for how largely overlooked gospel quartet singing is an integral part of Black Memphian music history. Most Memphis quartets were associated with community churches or specific neighborhoods, and they stayed away from the more commercial network. Local quartets active during the 1930s and 1940s included the Orange Mound Harmonizers, the North Memphis Harmonizers, the Lake Grove Specials, the Gospel Writers, the Four Stars of Harmony, the Middle Baptist quartet, the Busyline Soft Singers, the True Friends Gospel Singers, the Veteran Jubilees, and the Independent Quartets. The Harmony Four was one of the most respected singing groups in South Memphis at the time. In North Memphis, there was The Old Red Rose Quartet and the Royal Harmony Four, which stayed active for nearly fifty years. Sermonettes became popular in Memphis during the late 1940s, and this is a long narration that accompanies a gospel song. Metaphors, allusions, and related images to travel were important language for the quartet gospel singers, and other forms of African American folk music such as the blues. The Spirit of Memphis "is unquestionably the best known and most commercially

[146] (Cantor 1992)

successful home-grown black gospel group". Their roots likely go back to 1927 or 1928.[147] By 1950, the Spirit of Memphis had become one of the highest paid professional quartets. To counteract the despair of the Cold War, quartets began to dress in brightly colored suits and were well choreographed. Programs were created that centered quartet competitions, and these competitions would fill auditorium seats. Memphis quartets took on the gospel compositions from Memphis songwriters such as Reverend W Herbert Brewster and Lucie E. Campbell.[148]

Lucie Eddie Campbell is considered "one of the foremost composers of gospel music in the United States. She was also one of Memphis's most outstanding public-school teachers". She taught English and American History for 42 years at Booker T. Washington High, her alma mater. She was President of the Tennessee Negro Teachers Association from 1941-46 and was elected Vice President of the American Teachers Association. A decade before Rosa Parks' action, Campbell defied Jim Crow laws and refused to give up her seat in the White section of a streetcar. At nineteen, she organized the Music Club, which grew from a small group of Beale Street musicians into a thousand-voice choir that performed at the National Baptist Convention. She was also one of the founders of the National Sunday and Baptist Training Union Congress of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A. Her first published gospel song was "Something Within" (1919). She has over a hundred compositions, including "Touch Me, Lord Jesus", "Hold My Hand, Precious Lord", "Something Within", and "He Understands, He'll Say Well Done". In the 1940s and 50s, she gave recitals, directed choirs, and taught music to future singers.[149] Alex Green writes, "Everywhere you turn, the influence of African-American churches on the

[147] (Lornell 1995)
[148] "Spirit Of Memphis Quartet: Tracing the History of a Classic Gospel Group - Spirit Of Memphis," accessed October 26, 2020, https://www.crossrhythms.co.uk/articles/music/Spirit_Of_Memphis_Quartet_Tracing_the_history_of_a_classic_gospel_group/39430/p1/.
[149] (DeCosta-Willis 2008)

Memphis sound — even in the era of hip-hop — is inescapable. The church crops up in nearly every musician's biography". [150] Blues was the next musical phenomenon to take over Memphis.

Blues

Memphis is known as the "Homes of Blues", and its Mississippi Delta origins and proximity made blues quite popular in Memphis and essential on Beale Street. Nikki Giovanni proclaims, "the blues is our history, the blues is our encyclopedia".[151] From the 1910s to the 1930s, a distinct Memphis blues sound was born. Frank Stokes is known to be the originator of the Memphis Blues Guitar Style. Memphis Minnie was a blues vocalist who recorded over 200 songs. Blues continued to evolve throughout Memphis, influenced by artists such as B.B. King, Willie Nix, and Joe Hill Louis.[152] B.B. King or "Beale Street Blues Boy" is considered the King of Blues with a live music-infused restaurant named in his honor on Beale. W.C. Handy is known as the Father of Blues, whose house museum resides on Beale. McKinley Morganfield (Muddy Waters), Dwight "Gatemouth' Moore[153], Furry Lewis, and Bobby "Blue" Bland were also important artists shaping the Memphis blues sound in the 1900s, and there are many more.[154] Bobby "Blue" Band was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1992. In 1997, he received a Grammy for Lifetime Achievement. He also received many other awards such as Billboard's Special Achievement Award, Rhythm and Blues Foundation's Pioneer Award, and he was inducted into the Blues Foundation's Hall of Fame. Peter "Memphis Slim"

[150] Alex Greene, "'Faith Cometh By Hearing': The Gospel Roots Behind the Memphis Sound," Memphis Flyer, accessed October 26, 2020, https://www.memphisflyer.com/memphis/faith-cometh-by-hearing-the-gospel-roots-behind-the-memphis-sound/Content?oid=21986282.
[151] Giovanni, *Make Me Rain*.
[152] "Memphis Music History | Famous Memphis Musicians | Memphis Singers," We Are Memphis, accessed October 26, 2020, https://wearememphis.com/music/.
[153] (Cosgrove 2017)
[154] "A Brief History of Memphis Music," accessed October 26, 2020, https://www.amromusic.com/amro-blog/posts/memphis-music.

Chatman II was a blues singer, pianist, and composer born in Memphis. He was one of the first blues artists to tour Europe.[155]

Jazz

Memphis has always been home to more than just primarily the blues. As blues became popular in the 901, a prominent jazz scene was also emerging. Phineas Newborn Jr., who played piano behind B.B. King on Beale Street, is known as one of the jazz greats. Dee Dee Bridgewater also was a successful jazz singer.[156] Walter C. "Buster" Bailey was a jazz musician born in Memphis. Buster Bailey was the first academically trained clarinetist to gain fame as a jazz musician, and he joined Louis Armstrong's All Stars. Kirk Whalum is an internationally acclaimed saxophonist from Memphis. He played at Bill Clinton's inauguration, was in Quincy Jones's all-star saxophone section, and he joined Whitney Houston on tour and played the tenor saxophone on her "I Will Always Love You" hit. He also worked with Luther Vandross.[157] Whalum comes from a musical family, which is common in Memphis, and as previously mentioned, includes gospel and church roots. In an interview, Whalum states,

> "Whether it's Quincy Jones — as many sessions as I've done with him — or many other artists, they hear Memphis in my sound. Not just Memphis, but Memphis church. And it's specifically the black church. I mean, Aretha Franklin — her dad was pastoring a black church here. And, you know, Maurice White and David Porter were singing in a black church group in their formative years. So those are the things I'm talking about when I say it's all about that soul that you get from that place. And that makes its way into art."[158]

Blues and jazz would eventually merge into rhythm and blues (R&B) and lead to the start of funk and soul music.[159]

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[155] (DeCosta-Willis 2008)
[156] Richard J. Alley, "All That Jazz in the Land of Blues," Memphis magazine, June 3, 2013, https://memphismagazine.com/June-2013/All-That-Jazz-in-the-Land-of-Blues/.
[157] (DeCosta-Willis 2008)
[158] Greene, "Faith Cometh By Hearing."
[159] "Memphis Music History | Famous Memphis Musicians | Memphis Singers."

Soul

Stax Records, now Stax Museum of American Soul Music, in South Memphis was the world's epicenter for soul music. According to wearememphis.com, "Memphis Soul was distinct from other R&B developments of the time, having a more 'funky' sound than the competing productions at Motown".[160] Some famous Memphis soul artists are Al Green, Issac Hayes, Booker T. & the MG's, Ann Pebbles, The Bar-Kays, Sam & Dave, William Bell, Carla Thomas, and Rufus Thomas.[161] Al Green is one of a few artists who crossed genres of gospel and soul. Al Green gave us classic hits such as "Love and Happiness" and "Let's Stay Together". Today, you can see Rev. Al Green ministering his church, Full Gospel Tabernacle Church on Hale Rd. in Memphis every Sunday since he began in 1976.[162] Issac Hayes, aka Black Moses, grew up in Memphis and was the third Black person to win an Oscar. Booker T. Jones was a Stax child prodigy who graduated from Booker T. Washington High (BTW). He co-created the song 'Green Onions' with the M.G.'s, and it is one of the most known instrumentals ever. Booker T. and the M.G.'s was an interracial group who recorded at Stax. The Bar-Kays are a Memphis-based renowned soul band that backed Otis Redding. Most of the original members tragically died in a plane accident that also took the life of Otis Redding, famously known for his hits, '(Sittin' On) The Dock Of The Bay', 'Try A Little Tenderness', and 'A Change Gonna Come'. The Bar-Kays were students together at BTW, and after graduating high school, they joined Redding on tour. 'Soul Finger' was the song that got them some attention. The Bar-Kays originally were all from Orange Mound. In 1968, Memphis had a population of 500,000. 40% of the population was

[160] Ibid.
[161] "Top Memphis Soul Artists," Last.fm, accessed October 26, 2020, https://www.last.fm/tag/memphis+soul/artists?page=1.
[162] Bob Mehr, "Al Green: 40 Years at Full Gospel Tabernacle," The Commercial Appeal, accessed November 5, 2020, https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/entertainment/music/2016/12/16/soul-call-al-green-marks-40-years-church-pastor/95146078/.

Black, and 58% of Black Memphians live in poverty. Soul music was produced out of this reality. Sam and Dave recorded 'Hold On I'm Coming' (1966) and 'Soul Man' (1967) at Stax. Soul became a movement worldwide after first being a term from Black vernacular, and then it became a genre.[163] Carlyle F. Stewart III states, "The soul is the cosmic, spiritual, ontological, epistemological center of African American existence. The soul has a mind in capacity all its own that involves the process of cognition and intuition, analysis and sentiment, with head and heart".[164] To summarize, Black people uniquely create their own realities and self-identification of Blackness that is rooted in soulfulness. The soulfulness in Memphis, that spiritual energy and embodiment, is fueled by the everydayness of Black life.

Another popular Memphis soul artist is Rufus Thomas, the father of Memphian soul singer Carla Thomas. Rufus Thomas was a minstrel singer, turned blues, and eventually soul/funk artist. Known as the Ambassador of Beale, Rufus Thomas did an interview debunking the racial harmony myth of the interracial Stax Records. He also brought the house down at the Wattstax Festival in 1972. The Wattstax festival occurred at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum and was a day-long event commemorating the 1965 Watts rebellion. The festival also celebrated the influence of Memphis soul music in the Black Power era. There was a crowd of more than 100,000 Black people with performances by Isaac Hayes, the Staple Singers, and more. There were appearances by Rev. Jesse Jackson, who delivered his famous "I Am Somebody" speech to start the concert.[165] The festival centered Black pride, and the creators charged $1 for entry so that poorer families could attend as well. Wattstax was documented and later became a film.[166] Wattstax showed the impact of Stax and the soul era of Memphis that

[163] (Cosgrove 2017)
[164] (Stewart III 1997)
[165] (Goudsouzian and McKinney Jr. 2018)
[166] (Cosgrove 2017)

distinctively captured the ongoing tension and relationship between Black struggle and Black joy. Memphis's soul era also greatly influenced Memphis's rap scene.

Rap

Stax and the soul era of Memphis greatly influenced Memphis's rap scene. Stax artists are actually the most sampled artists in all of hip hop.[167] Memphian scholar Zandria Robinson wrote on Memphis rap origins. She notes due to the soul legacy and civil rights history of the city, most Black Memphian children are socialized at home and in public schools to understand the importance of civil rights and music in Memphis and their own identities as Memphians. Robinson writes, "Memphis hip hop is marked by a Southern articulation of gangsta, which includes the pimping and violence reflective of the city's persistent and often widespread poverty". Additionally, "from pimping to drug dealing to gun violence, Memphis' country, laid-back, and easygoing feel is disrupted by these familiar urban problems".[168] Memphis rappers share their reality in explicit and direct language, which created a subgenre of horrorcore rap. Memphis's horrorcore rap is quite grimy and shares the brutal details of the violence that occurs in the city.[169] With this harsh reality, Black Memphian creators provided music that encourages movement. Robinson states, "In fact, a great deal of what emerges on the Memphis hip hop scene is a product of the history of migration, the integration of urban-rural cultures, and African American efforts to express their distinctive being and life experiences through movement, song, and musical creation".

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[167] Zandria Robinson, "Soul Legacies: Hip Hop and Historicity in Memphis," in *Hip Hop in America: A Regional Guide*, ed. Mickey Hess, vol. 2 (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2009).
[168] Ibid.
[169] *WELCOME TO HELL: The History and Influence of MEMPHIS RAP (2018 Documentary)*, accessed November 5, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4gzwTgXrvk.

The call and response chants from crunk music made famous by Lil Jon originated in Memphis clubs. Songs such as Three 6 Mafia's 'Tear Da Club Up' (1995) and 'Hit a Muthafucka' (1997) combined chants and buck-jumping, which is "highly energetic jumping, either in place or from place to place---and frequently turned Memphis clubs into black mosh pits". Robinson importantly notes that these chants come from the slave chants, field hollers, work songs, and chain gang calls-and-responses from Black enslaved Southerners. The dance movements transcend Black Memphians from their constant reality of poverty and marginalization and get people excited and enjoying their collective time together. Other Memphian dances are gangsta walking and juking'/jukin'/jookin'. "The gangsta walk arose as a manifestation of both masculine and feminine posturing, a coordinated display of solidarity on the dance floor- or the floor of the skating rink after the skating had ended-- an articulation of the swagger of the pimp and the hardness of the gangsta". Robinson states the jookin' comes from the Black blues juke joints and dance clubs. It is, "an improvised mixture of break dancing, moonwalking, soul steps and spins, and gangsta bravado, executed in sequence and often in a competition context". [170] Memphis's hip-hop and R&B have such fundamental contributions to Black music today in the United States and abroad. So culturally, I feel obligated to share the names of these Memphis masterminds.

List of Memphis Rap and R&B Artists

Some classic Memphis rappers are DJ Spanish Fly, DJ Squeeky, Gangsta Pat, Al Kapone, 8ball & MJG (*Comin' Out Hard, Space Aged Pimpin)*, Playa Fly ('Just Gettin' It On', 'Nobody Needs Nobody'), Kingpin Skinny Pimp, Tommy Wright III (has ten self-produced albums from

[170] Robinson, "Soul Legacies: Hip Hop and Historicity in Memphis."

1992-2000), Project Pat, Three 6 Mafia- (first rap group to win an Oscar[171]), Gangsta Blac ('S.O.U.T.H. Parkway'), DJ Zirk, and Tela- ('Sho' nuff'). Gangsta Boo ('Where Dem Dollas At') and La Chat represent the mixed gutterness, sassiness, and gangsta and feminine sex appeal from Memphis women. More contemporary Memphis hip hop artists are Don Trip, Kia Shine, Bloc Boy JB, Young Dolph, Yo Gotti, Money Bagg Yo, Blac Youngsta, CoCash, Key Glock, NLE Choppa, and Duke Deuce ('Crunk Ain't Dead'- a homage to our Memphis rap roots). K.Michelle and Ervie McKinney are successfully representing Memphis R&B nationally.

Language

With our own Memphis sound and dances, we, of course, also have our own language. Stewart III writes, "Blackness is synonymous with being spiritual and the capacity to walk and talk in a very unique language than those in power".[172] Geoffrey Pete gives more details on the power of Black vernacular and autonomous ways of being. "The assault on language was the ultimate crime of slavery, so speaking in the black vernacular is a surviving Africanism in a sense. It's important to have something that we can claim as our own. The basis for any culture is language and history, that's power".[173] In Memphis, we often say "mane" and "junt", which is a genderless word for any person, thing, or matter. We also pronounce words in a deeply Southern accent saying things like "it's over hur or over thur", which highlights our Mississippi Delta roots most distinctly. Our language is a part of the soulful culture of Memphis. It is eloquent in its uniquely Black Memphian way that exemplifies Black spirituality and ingenuity.

[171] Oscars, *"It's Hard Out Here for a Pimp" Wins Original Song: 2006 Oscars*, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=du_01sqzsck.
[172] (Stewart III 1997)
[173] Geoffrey Pete, "Back to the Community," in *Black Eyed Peas for the Soul: Tales to Strengthen the African American Spirit and Encourage the Heart*, by Donna Marie Williams (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997).

Additionally, our soulful culture constructs an alternative reality that cannot be destroyed from external forces, and it unapologetically names and challenges any oppression.

"R-E-S-P-E-C-T": Culture of Resilience[174]

Through examining Black Memphians' origins in the city, key moments of creativity, defiance and activism, community and fellowship, and a genealogy of Memphis's Black music and dance, I claim that this all represents Black spirituality. Black spirituality is essential for Black survival, and it influences Black consciousness, community, and culture.[175] There is an undeniable Black culture of resilience in Memphis that holds significant power for coping with all of the troubles in the world. Freedom of expression, particularly through music, captures to me the most candid way Black Memphians claim their dignity and live in their truth. This is why I categorized each section by musical lyrics. Art is an essential gateway into the brilliant minds of Black people who came to know the world through their upbringing in Memphis. The scope of this thesis does not give justice to the fullness that is Black Memphian culture and history. As James Baldwin states, "What it means to be a Negro is a good deal more than this essay can discover".[176] My goal was to show the multiple ways Black people in Memphis straight up rebuke inferiority of any kind. To add, through their defiance, a beautiful, uniquely Memphis culture was created and sustained. To revisit the infamous local interview from boxing trainer Donnie Young, he said, "A lot of people don't know unless you're from Memphis. It's something about us Memphis people. You know, we carry that vibe. That Memphis vibe, you know that

[174] Aretha Franklin, *Respect*, Spotify, I Never Loved a Man the Way I Love You (Rhino Atlantic, 1967).
[175] (Stewart III 1997)
[176] James Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 19–34.

Memphis greatness, that Memphis don't give up, that Memphis endurance. It's that Memphis love. It's that Memphis energy. It's just what it is".[177]

There is an in-depth amount of love I have experienced growing up in Memphis through my family. We, too, have been witnesses to some of the vastly common tragedies that occur in the city, specifically around early deaths and frequent violence. I lost my middle brother due to gun violence on January 4, 2020. My brother's (Jaylen Vernard Watkins) passing created such a sharp pain that many other Black Memphians through shared trauma also hold in their memories. This is why togetherness, moments of collective joy, and fellowship are vital to the everydayness of Black life in Memphis. Simultaneously, we are not settling for the shortcomings that occur within our city. I pass a "Guns Down Orange Mound" sign whenever I visit my grandma. This sign symbolizes the push for community accountability and communal love seen historically and currently in Memphis. It is an intentional choice of care that the United States could easily prioritize and promote for all communities' wellbeing. Howard Thurman states, "spiritual wholeness and social wholeness are interrelated".[178] Resmaa Menakem writes, "Here are some especially good pieces of news about resilience: recent findings in neuroscience reveal that the human brain always has the capacity to learn, change, and grow. It is genetically designed to mend itself".[179] So, we already have all the resources needed to begin the essential community work and love on a national scale. The only thing really required is an open heart and mind filled with empathy and compassion.

As a nation, we experience A LOT daily in the U.S., and the year 2020 highlighted this far too well. Those troubles and sorrows are amplified and multiplied for marginalized

[177] *Nothin' But Memphis*.
[178] Howard Thurman, *Howard Thurman: Essential Writings*, Modern Spiritual Masters (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2006).
[179] Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*.

communities such as Memphis's predominantly Black neighborhoods. However, this is where the value of care holds healing power. Seeing someone as valuable and completely human while acknowledging their experiences create a beautiful bond that benefits everyone. The general non-individualist and non-elitist mindset of Memphis culture made room for all of the gems that came from this city. To reiterate some of the words Dr. King preached in his last sermon, I too am happy God has allowed me to be in Memphis, especially as I got the rare opportunity to write my M. Div thesis from home about my home during this Coronavirus (Covid 19) pandemic/virtual learning. I got to embody being a social witness through a womanist lens as I drafted this thesis in real-time. To add to Flora Wilson Bridges's public gratitude of thanking God for making her an African American woman[180], I thank God for being a Black Southern woman from Memphis of all places. Memphis, TN is a special place that is unapologetically Black and resilient, and I am appreciative for all I have witnessed and learned from by being a native Black Memphian.

[180] (Bridges 2001)

“Memphis is more than just a blues city to me. Memphis (Orange Mound) is where my mom chose to raise me and my sister. Growing up in Orange mound was a blessing for me. When I speak of Memphis/OM it makes me feel proud and full of pride. The feeling of knowing I am a product of Memphis/OM, and I have made it definitely brings me joy. I will forever be grateful to be a part of such great history”.

-Dorothy “Angie” Smith- (TT)

“Memphis is a vibrant city full of culture that cannot be imitated or duplicated. From the vernacular to the style, Memphis is one of a kind. Being a recent migrant from Birmingham, Alabama, the similarities of the two cities make it feel like home. And the differences make it feel like a new world entirely. Memphis has already stolen my heart”.

-Nick Hardy (My person)

“Well to me Memphis is a place where how you carry yourself and what you believe in and what you stand on will take you a long way here. And you can make it here in Memphis, not without its ups and downs and violence as anywhere else, but overall it's a nice city. You can make a lot of money here and with money here you can go a long way”.

– Lewis Gossett (Dad)

“The best thing about Memphis is we have our own style. We categorize ourselves as being a state within the state (Memphis State). People come here thinking we some country bumpkins but quickly realize that we some quick thinking, checking and hustling mofos. M.E.M.P.H.I.S. Once you know the meaning of every letter then you’ll understand Memphis 🏁”.

-Timothy Strickland (Uncle)

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[181] (Author in 2018) Photo credit: raeharmonmedia

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