

## **Lost in Citation: Afterlives of the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike**

CLARE O’CONNOR  
University of Southern California, USA

Activists often use historical citations to help stimulate action in the present. In 2018, factions of the U.S. labor movement commemorated the 50th anniversary of the 1968 Memphis sanitation strike by citing its famous slogan: “I AM A MAN.” Through this case, I show how such citations allow us to evaluate the character and potential of present actions. Specifically, because the process of citation invites us to consider the past with which contemporary actions become constellated, I argue that this process also alerts us both to the animating promise of the past and to the limitations of our current conceptions of the political. Approaching my case study in this way reveals that while the 2018 campaigns foregrounded the need for political recognition, the 1968 campaign to which they superficially referred pointed toward something like sovereignty. Following Walter Benjamin, I argue that, through analysis, this difference and its political implications can be brought into view through the citation itself.

*Keywords: citation, commemorative media, labor movement, performatives, politics of recognition, racism, sovereignty*

*The materialist presentation of history leads the past to bring the present into a critical state.*  
—Walter Benjamin (1999, p. 471)

How do images and slogans from the past inform struggles in the present? In this article, I consider recent mobilizations of the famous “I AM A MAN” placards that were used during the 1968 Memphis sanitation strike to show how historical citations have been used to help stimulate action in the present. It is important to note, however, that such citations also allow us to evaluate the political character and social promise of present actions by referring them to the past with which they become constellated through the process of citation itself. In the case of the recent “I AM A MAN” deployments, which arose in conjunction with civil rights and labor struggles in 2018 and which were scheduled to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the Memphis sanitation strike, I argue that the invocations alert us both to the animating promise of the past and to the limitations of our current conceptions of the political. Specifically, I argue that, while the 2018 campaigns foregrounded the need for political recognition, the 1968 campaign to which they superficially referred pointed toward something like sovereignty. Through analysis, this difference and its political implications can be brought into view through the citation itself. Indeed, through their invocations

---

Clare O’Connor: cnoconno@usc.edu  
Date submitted: 2021-09-14

Copyright © 2022 (Clare O’Connor). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

of 1968, the 2018 campaigns prompt us to consider how the past might help to bring the present into a critical state as Walter Benjamin (1968) once proposed.

In recent years, arguments regarding the political promise of citation and repetition have been indebted to the insights of Judith Butler (1988), who argued that the inevitable corruptions that arise in the compulsory citation of inapproximable norms might enable a subversion of identity. Although I am sympathetic to this position, I argue here that the power of citations ultimately derives from the fact that they can alert us to our ongoing and historical desire for a one-to-one correspondence between being and doing. Significantly, this position, which is indebted to the insights of Walter Benjamin, can also help to clarify the political importance of J. L. Austin's (1962) conception of the performative on which Butler's (1988) analysis depends.

### **The Past, Citable in All Its Moments**

On February 12, 1968, the predominantly African American sanitation workforce in Memphis went on strike. Earlier that month, two Black sanitation workers, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, had been killed when an outmoded city waste truck malfunctioned and crushed them as they took shelter from a rainstorm during their shift. Standing in opposition to Henry Loeb, the city's segregationist and anti-union mayor who had been reelected in 1967 on a wave of White backlash, what began as a local labor dispute over fair pay, safe working conditions, and union recognition, quickly became a front line in the broader Black Freedom movement. For Martin Luther King Jr., the strike would become a central battleground in the nascent Poor People's Campaign. King's nonviolence, however, was at odds with the inclinations of some of the workers and their supporters, who had already faced severe police repression by the time he arrived in Memphis. A protest march on March 28 quickly turned into a riot and, for the first time, King's advisors escorted him away from action. Loeb declared a state of emergency and called in the Tennessee National Guard. Sixty-two people were injured, and one person was killed.

The FBI's Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) used the opportunity to undermine King, citing "a breakdown of the non-violence in Memphis" in a memo to news editorial offices across the country (Hampton & Fayer, 2011, p. 461). King was assassinated one week later, the evening after delivering his "Mountaintop" address at Memphis' Mason Temple. Contemplating his own mortality and urging for unity, he described the strike as a culmination of the freedom struggle in its entirety: "That's all this whole thing is about. . . We are saying that we are determined to be men. We are determined to be people" (King, 2003, p. 280). With these words, he invoked the striking workers' powerful placards, which read: "I AM A MAN."

Today, these placards have come to symbolize the civil rights era as a whole. They appear routinely in popular culture, often in reproductions of Memphis picket lines and mass-action photographs. Capturing the severity of state repression, these images show workers picketing single-file between bayonet-wielding National Guard troops and rows of armored vehicles. Perhaps it was Memphis civil-rights photographer

Ernest Withers who captured the strike's large marches most memorably<sup>1</sup> (Figure 1). Along with the placards themselves, Withers' photographs have been inducted into museum collections and continue to circulate as posters, art prints, and t-shirts and in street murals and contemporary visual art.



**Figure 1. Striking sanitation workers march in Memphis, 1968. Photograph by Ernest Withers (Ferris, 2021, p. 91).**

Given the enduring resonance of these images and the slogan to which they are bound, it was not surprising that various segments of the U.S. labor movement chose to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the 1968 strike by invoking the placards. The Fight for \$15 campaign (an initiative of the Service Employees International Union) partnered with the 2018 Poor People's Campaign revival (led by cochairs Rev. Dr. William Barber and Rev. Liz Theoharis) and invited workers to fill in the blank on a template that read "I AM \_\_\_\_." Compiled through an online portal, these personalized slogans were featured in outreach material for a National Day of Action, which would see fast-food workers walk off the job in dozens of cities. Memphis organizer and McDonald's worker Latierika Blair reported live:

We're carrying your signs—signs submitted by thousands of people from across the country. Signs declaring, I AM A MAN. I am a woman. I am non-binary. I am tired of waiting. I am a fast-food worker. I am your neighbor. Yo soy un hombre. I am a patriot. I am worth every penny. (L. Blair, campaign email, February 12, 2018)

<sup>1</sup> Withers became a controversial historical figure with the publication of Preston Lauterbach's (2019) exposé of the photographer's secret life, particularly his collaboration with the FBI.

Concurrently, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)—the union representing Memphis sanitation workers' Local 1733—partnered with the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) to launch the "I AM 2018 movement," a voter mobilization campaign that began with a commemorative "Mountaintop Conference" on the anniversary of King's assassination. The conference featured popular entertainers as well as church and labor leaders. These included AFSCME's Bill Lucy and Reverend James Lawson, prominent organizers during the 1968 strike who have both been credited with devising its slogan. Trading in the red of the original placard for a vernal green, the "I AM 2018" campaign's new shortened slogan filled the streets of Memphis on April 4, 2018, as workers, organizers, and politicians from across the country gathered for the large commemorative events. Some of these green signs also appear in the reels of a formal "recreation" of Withers' famous Beale Street photographs, coordinated by the Ernest Withers Museum of Memphis (Chaney, 2018).

### From Citation to Constellation

The 2018 campaigns that invoked the Memphis sanitation strike through the redeployment of its famous placards mobilized people around urgent political objectives. Yet, neither campaign reproduced the scale, intensity, or impact of the 1968 strike or achieved the broad vision of racial and economic justice it set forth. To be sure, Fight for \$15 and the revived Poor People's Campaign exhibited many of the best aspects of contemporary activism. They put forward expansive platforms, remained committed to building power among the poor and working class, and they rejected an electoral system that, as Barber once pointed out, was "not even having the conversation" about poverty (Woodruff, 2018, 5:14). Still, union busting, voter suppression, gerrymandering, tax cuts for the wealthy, and ruinous student and household debt have all continued apace. Meanwhile, the minimum wage in Tennessee—as at the federal level—remains a pittance of \$7.25.

After nearly half a century of neoliberal onslaught, today's political landscape is undeniably different from the one that movement organizers confronted 50 years ago. But if the changed context explains why the 2018 invocations failed to generate political outcomes comparable to those of 1968, we must still ask: How could organizers have used the lessons of the 1968 strike to work toward such effects today? By constellating the contemporary placard citations with their prior iterations, we can begin answering this question. Immediately, it becomes evident that the 2018 citations *modified* the material they invoked. And while the 2018 placards appeared to remain true to their source material, the modifications they introduced nevertheless disclosed an important shift with respect to the concept of the politics underlying the contemporary campaigns. What might we gain, then, by analyzing the modifications that arise within the citations themselves?

For Walter Benjamin (1999), "paying heed over many years to every casual citation" provided a means of "telescoping . . . the past through the present" (pp. 470–471). By attending to both the citation and the cited content, one might therefore evaluate contemporary iterations against those premises animating their past expression. In this way, contemporary citations are more than recollections of a past promise that has either waned or gone unfulfilled; they are also opportunities to consider how we have failed to rise to the demands of our own political aspirations. Noting the importance of such opportunities, Leigh Raiford and Renee C. Romano (2006) observe that "struggles over the memory of the civil rights

movement are not a diversion from the real political work of fighting for racial equality and equal rights in the United States; they are key sites of that struggle" (p. xxi).

Following Benjamin (1986), I propose that the 2018 "I AM A MAN" citations operated primarily as what he called "wish images": visual cues that arise when material conditions prompt people to recall elements from history and myth that approximate a possible future utopia (p. 149). Considered in this way, it is easier to grasp why the 2018 citations ended up functioning primarily as an aesthetic and affective ornamentation, despite intentions for their more forceful effect. A wish, after all, is not yet a strategy. Only through an *analysis* of our citational habits—in this case, by constellating the two citations with their historical referent—can wishful identification with the past be made strategically consequential. By focusing less on superficial continuities and more on the corruptions that arise within the repetition itself, we can foreground the unexamined assumptions underlying contemporary struggle and contend with their strategic implications. For Benjamin (1968), this methodological approach transforms the wish image and makes it dialectical. In this way, it helps to reveal how we might harness the past to bring the present into a critical state—to produce "a real state of emergency" capable of disrupting the catastrophic status quo (p. 257).

### **Performative Acts and Plantation Mentality**

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler (1988) offered a structural analysis of how even the most diligent citations are prone to corruption. Arising from the compulsory citation of the inapproximable, it is these corruptions, Butler insisted, that produce opportunities for change. "If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity," they explained, "then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style" (Butler, 1988, p. 520). The 2018 modifications of the "I AM A MAN" slogan would seem to affirm Butler's (1988) analysis: although they are faithful in their invocation, both citations dispense with the slogan's "man," suggesting a challenge to its hetero-patriarchal usage as a universal synonym for "people" (an outdated equivalence that was reiterated by King during his "Mountaintop" speech). For their part, the Fight for \$15 campaign democratized the slogan by inviting people to replace "man" with the identity of their choice. Meanwhile, the "I AM" campaign did away with the word "man" altogether, thus rendering the slogan biblical and invoking not only 1968 but Exodus: "I AM THAT I AM," replied God to Moses when asked for his name.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever their intention had been, these modifications produce a political opportunity in that they alert us to the past and prompt us to contemplate the substance of the corruption. Without losing sight of its political limitations, we must begin by recognizing that the category "man" was a finite expression of people's vision of freedom at the moment of enunciation. As Benjamin (1968) explains, our conception of freedom is "thoroughly colored by the time to which the course of our own existence has assigned us" (p. 254). During the 1968 strike, the slogan was a direct challenge to White supremacist paternalism, which emboldened White people's common use of the racist pejorative "boy" when addressing Black men. As

---

<sup>2</sup> This modification evokes the rhetorical strategy of King, who, Malinda Snow (1985) argues, "used the scriptures as a quarry for proofs, examples, and phraseology" to great effect because of the resonant homiletic traditions of Black American Protestantism (p. 324).

historian Laurie B. Green (2004) explains, this paternalism attested to a “plantation mentality” that endured in the South despite the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act.<sup>3</sup> In Memphis, a transportation hub on the Mississippi River that developed in proximity to the Delta cotton economy, this mentality originated under slavery and persisted in racial segregation policies designed to maintain control over labor and keep wages low (Honey, 2008, p. 55). “As suggested by the workers, most of them migrants from the cotton region surrounding Memphis,” Green (2004) writes, “‘I AM A MAN’ articulated a critique of urban labor shaped by historical memories of the plantation—both recent recollections of sharecropping and older, cultural memories of slavery” (p. 466). Describing the strike as “both the last hurrah for the old plantation rhetoric and the trumpeting of a new and bolder era for Memphis blacks,” Michael Osborn and John Bakke (1998) explain that the placards were “[t]he one piece of rhetoric in the entire controversy that revealed most clearly this deeper issue . . .”

To those who were still clinging to the old ways in Memphis, that sign was at worst an absurd falsehood and at best a metaphor. But to the men, that sign was a living refutation. As they demonstrated that the statement was both literally and morally true, they repudiated the grand narrative that had denied their humanity and predicted their ongoing subservience. (p. 230)

These conditions meant that the reliance on “manhood” as a category of liberation had complicated implications. “In one sense, the ‘I AM a Man!’ placards worn by the sanitation workers represented a demand for recognition of the dignity and humanity of all African Americans in Memphis,” writes historian Steve Estes (2005, p. 153). At the same time, however, “the slogan and the sanitation strike represented a dispute over what it meant to be a man” (Estes, 2005, pp. 131–132). For Estes, the slogan demonstrated that conventions of masculinity were a primary animating force within Black political mobilization and organization at the time—conventions that corresponded both to a tactical emphasis on rejecting emasculation and to sexist practices with destructive long-term implications. Endorsing Estes’ (2005) “general proposition about gender as a modality through which social and economic struggles have been waged,” however, Green (2004) argues that focusing on tensions regarding masculinity can obscure important dimensions of the strike and its slogan. The meanings of “manhood” in the context of 20th century Black movements, she contends, most crucially correspond to the conception of “freedom as an unresolved problem” (Green, 2004, p. 468).

To be sure, understandings of freedom differ based on lived experiences, including those arising from gender. Thus, Green (2004) draws from testimonies of working-class Black women activists—many of whom were themselves unionists in the city’s manufacturing plants and laundries—to show that the slogan resonated less for its implicit gender ideals than because it emboldened “self-definitions that valorized individual assertiveness and collective protest in workplaces and other public spheres” (p. 468). Sometimes switching its final word to “woman,” women identified with the slogan because it took plantation mentality

---

<sup>3</sup> The Title VII provision of the Civil Rights Act designated discrimination “on the grounds of race, color, religion, sex or national origin” an “unlawful employment practice,” but this law was largely unenforced: “In Memphis, Black workers filed more than 400 complaints in the law’s first two years against the city’s major manufacturing employers and unions” (Reich, 2009, p. 68).

as its primary enemy and “allowed them to assert their own courage, claim equality, and even challenge men,” including their husbands (Green, 2004, p. 474).<sup>4</sup> Michael K. Honey (2008) emphasizes a similar interpretation: “Practically every male spokesman for the black freedom struggle, and many women, had equated ‘manhood’ with standing up for your rights, come what may, either through self-defense or nonviolent methods” (p. 283).

The paternalism that defined plantation mentality, which led White employers and politicians to treat Memphis’ urban labor force like a domestic hierarchy, can be traced through the provenance of the 1968 slogan itself, which bears important resemblance to the eighteenth-century abolitionist motto “Am I not a man and a brother?” This question appeared on the official seal of the British Society for the Abolition of Slavery, a woodcut depicting a kneeling, shackled enslaved African. “As the woodcut reveals,” Estes (2005) writes, “many white Americans, even abolitionists, expected African Americans to adopt a submissive posture of supplication when seeking emancipation” (p. 2). While embracing the association between manhood and political subjectivity—a conceptual connection legally enshrined in the U.S. Declaration of Independence: “we hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal”—the 1968 workers in Memphis rejected the expectation of subservience. Indeed, Green’s (2004) analysis that the 1968 slogan prompted “assertions of autonomy” by men and women alike suggests that it is perhaps best understood as an expression of how Memphis workers pushed beyond making demands—which are predicated on the constraining logic of *recognition*—to assert their political *sovereignty* instead (p. 474).

Considering the historical context surrounding the 1968 placards (Figure 2), the part of the slogan that the 2018 citations rejected is no more consequential than the part they retained: “I AM.” Although these words have thus far remained largely unexamined in scholarly analyses of the placards, they are crucial when developing an understanding of the political force to which they gave expression. Honey (2008) mentions them briefly to affirm their strategic significance:

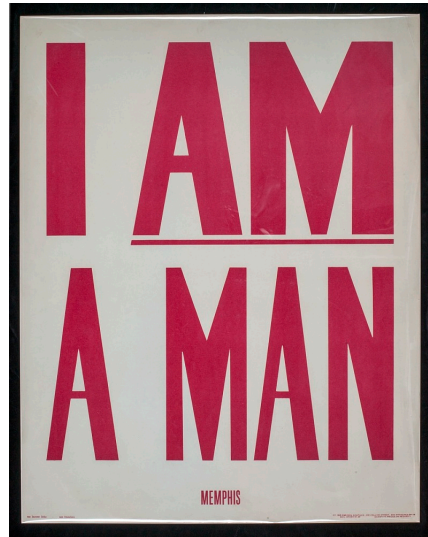
By using the first-person pronoun “I,” the sanitation workers constructed themselves as the authors of their own liberation. . . . For emphasis, workers underscored the verb: “I Am A Man.” Everyone got the message. Put in more prosaic terms by striker [James] Robinson, “I Am A Man” simply meant, “We ain’t gonna take that shit no more.” (p. 283)

By underlining the verb—a peculiar decision from a graphic-design standpoint—the placards ultimately placed emphasis on the question of being itself.

---

<sup>4</sup> This dynamic had precedent on Memphis’ Beale Street, home of the Delta blues:

Sanitation worker Furry Lewis heard Muddy Waters sing about manhood in his 1955 hit single, “Mannish Boy.” Declaring, “I’m a MAN, spelled M-A-N,” Waters, himself a refugee from Mississippi plantations, tied manhood to sexual prowess and personal independence. Blueswomen did, too, singing, “I’m a WOMAN, W-O-M-A-N.” (Honey, 2008, p. 282)



**Figure 2. Image of an original placard used during 1968 Memphis sanitation strike. (Poster, "I Am A Man," n.d.)**

Through their practical efforts, the 1968 strikers combined the placard's two elements to write themselves into the category of citizenship. In this way, the placards became what J. L. Austin (1962) called *a performative*, a speech act in which a sentence is uttered "not to *describe* my doing . . . or to state that I am doing it" but rather "to do it." Butler (1988) famously draws on Austin in their analysis of gender, formalizing the relationship between performativity and the promise of citational corruptions. What becomes clear in the case of the placards, however, is that the promise of transformation that Butler (1988) aims to uncover might correspond to a characteristic of the performative that both they and Austin (1962) overlook.

### **The Sovereignty Inherent in the Performative**

Through an analysis of the strikers' performative act, I show how performatives themselves are manifestations of *sovereignty*. Further, I argue that the transformative power of the performative owes ultimately not to the inevitable corruptions that arise through the process of citation as Butler (1988) proposes, but to the sovereignty inherent in the speech act itself.

Whether or not it was a conscious strategy, the placard's graphic oddness (the underscoring of "am," first person conjugation of the verb "to be") allows us to see how the placards themselves operated as a performative. It is worth noting at this point that I am not using this term as it is often used today: as an adjective denoting a superficial or insincere gesture. This current usage is regrettable given the usefulness of Austin's (1962) meaning, which he explains with the following illustrations: "'I do,' as uttered in a marriage ceremony; 'I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth,' as uttered when smashing a bottle against the stern; 'I bet you six pence it will rain tomorrow'" (p. 5). But while Austin (1962) examines the performative as a curiosity of language, such utterances also uncover a parallel curiosity arising from the political domain.



Although he never uses the term, Austin's (1962) criteria reveal that performatives are themselves manifestations of sovereign power. Performatives, he explains, are not *statements*. Instead, they are *productions* that "have on the face of them the look . . . of 'statements'; but nevertheless are . . . not utterances which could be 'true' or 'false'" (p. 12). Statements can be proven true or false; only performatives can *produce* truth through the act of enunciation itself. The political significance of the performative, then, is that it arises from and is indexed to *the power* to generate such a production. Invoking this productive capacity in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx (1969) explains: "Man must prove the truth—*i.e.*, the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice" (p. 13).

Similarly, for Austin (1962), performatives require "appropriate circumstances." To wit:

(A.1) There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances, and further, (A.2) the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked. (Austin, 1962, pp. 14–15)<sup>5</sup>

These characteristics clarify why the citation of a performative is subject to corruption, as Butler (1988) maintains. They also reveal, however, that the sovereignty of the performative corresponds both to the production of the enunciated reality and to the production of those conditions that would make the performative felicitous. In all other cases, some other sovereignty authorizes the enunciation (e.g., the pope entrusts the power to declare a marriage).

Considered from this vantage, the power of "I AM A MAN" comes more clearly into view. Through their performative, the strikers were not merely seeking recognition but striving through their speech act to concretely manifest the truth of their utterance. It was the *saying*, rather than the trace of the said (the placard) that was the performative. But this is precisely what makes the placards so seductive: We are drawn to them as the signifying trace of the production of truth. Conversely, because they operated primarily at the level of recognition rather than at that of the production of sovereignty, it was the lack of such a trace that made the 2018 citations and reenactments feel so flat.

The 1968 strikers' performative was radical because it corrupted the legal convention man = citizen so that the latter concept might logically be expanded to include previously excluded Black people. By focusing instead on the sovereignty expressed through the performative, however, an alternate analysis suggests itself: the strikers' repetition of this bourgeois legal convention entailed the production of a new truth. Indeed, Austin (1962) is clear that, while an utterance is usually the leading incident of the performative, it is rarely, if ever, "the sole thing necessary" (p. 8).

To grasp this political dynamic more precisely, we can draw from Benjamin's (1986) analysis of the correspondence between sovereign speech acts and the power to *name*. He establishes this connection by

---

<sup>5</sup> Austin (1962) identifies additional circumstances, but those highlighted here are most relevant to the present study.

invoking the absolute sovereignty of God in the story of Genesis: "The proper name is the communion of man with the *creative* word of God . . . Things have no proper names except in God. For in his creative word, God called them into being, calling them by their proper names" (Benjamin, 1986, p. 330). In Genesis 2:19, this power is transferred to man when God has Adam name the animals. "And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought *them* unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that *was* the name thereof."

When we consider the "I AM A MAN" slogan, therefore, we find that the power of the performative owes primarily to the bid for sovereignty inherent in the speech act and not to the corruption arising from the placards' citation and repetition. *Sovereignty, we discover, is in fact the hidden player in the performative*; it either makes the performative felicitous, or it authorizes the performative speech acts of others. The chance for freedom arises not from citational corruption, as Butler (1988) contends, but rather from the connection between the performative and sovereignty.

As wielded by the Memphis sanitation workers, the original placard met Austin's criteria: the saying was the same as the doing. The workers' assertion of citizenship rights (their acting "as if") was the precondition for attaining those rights. The strike yielded wage increases and union recognition (granted, the latter required subsequent labor action) and bolstered a wave of Black labor organizing and militance. The "I AM A MAN" slogan was adopted by other unions in Memphis and in many other cities. When Coretta Scott King led the Poor People's Campaign to Washington, DC, that summer, marchers carried placards bearing the slogan. Estes (2005) writes:

the strike, according to [AFSCME] union official Bill Lucy, won "a new kind of respect and a new kind of recognition" for sanitation workers across the country. In short, the strikers gained pride and dignity—for themselves, for their families, and for working-class black men and women in Memphis and the rest of the nation. (p. 150, emphasis added)

Although Lucy's description of the victory affirms that recognition by the state was always a goal of the mobilization, the strikers' performative reveals a simultaneous tendency to point beyond recognition as a political paradigm. Insofar as the placard's underlined "AM" articulated an injunction to forge a perfect correspondence between being and doing, the strikers' bid for recognition came into generative tension with the assumption that, to be recognized, one must act accordingly ("nonviolence").

The category of being cannot be defined through state rights, and King grappled with this problem in the final years of his life as he turned his attention toward questions of economic justice and international solidarity. As Black Studies scholar Charisse Burden-Stelly (2018) recalls:

As early as 1964, King was aware that the civil rights movement was an incomplete insurgency, and that its bourgeois liberal specifications had not improved the plight of the overwhelming majority of Black people, especially those warehoused and contained in dispossessed urban enclaves. (para. 3)

Indeed, around this time, amid White backlash against the passing of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts, King's rhetoric shifted away from the themes of "recognition and affirmation" and a culturally agreeable conception of equality (that projected "sameness" as a virtue and possibility) as he instead began to emphasize direct critique of the "white power structure" (Johnson, 2022; Johnson & Stone, 2018, p. 10; Sunnemark, 2003, p. 227). For the 1968 sanitation workers and their supporters, who were struggling under the conditions of this structure, in which recognition could not be presupposed, the emphasis on being was also an injunction to sovereign action.

### **Sovereignty or Recognition**

The 1968 workers made their performative felicitous through the preparatory work that went into the strike. Offering a corrective to historical accounts that suggest the strike was primarily spontaneous (or the result of outside agitators disrupting the city's social harmony, a corollary myth promoted by politicians at the time), Green explains that the workers' courage owed to a long period of escalating local activism. "Historians have not generally recognized that the sanitation workers began organizing as early as 1959 and 1960, the same period in which black students launched the Memphis sit-in movement," Green (2004) recounts (p. 472). Only by analyzing its relationship to mid-sixties activism and to preceding labor and civil rights agitation in Memphis, she contends, can we explain how the strike emerged and gained its force.

The strike's force is also owed to dynamics then unfolding at the national and international levels. It was not only in Memphis, after all, that Black Freedom struggles were shifting away from demanding rights and toward asserting sovereignty and territorial control. As Gerald Horne (2020) explains, the strike fell within "a rippling effect of civil unrest" (18:20) that had already transformed Los Angeles with the Watts Riots in 1965, and Detroit and Newark in 1967—a pattern that reached "a fever pitch in April 1968 with the assassination of Martin Luther King in Memphis" (18:37). These broader conditions help to account for the strike's militancy, and its impact. In the years preceding King's assassination, Henry Louis Gates (2021) recounts:

young people had begun to split off from church-led activism, preferring organizations inspired by secular calls for a far more militant movement, most dramatically the Black Panther Party (BPP) for Self-Defense, founded in October 1966 in Oakland, California, by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale. The Panthers criticized racial and economic injustice and embraced an aggressive form of self-defense and socialism. They emerged precisely as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) began to distance itself from the nonviolent tactics that had defined much of the southern civil rights movement to that point. SNCC was the first Black political organization formally to embrace Black Power. (p. 150)

Black Power, Lisa Corrigan (2020) explains, corresponded to important affective transformations within the 1960s political landscape. Feelings of alienation and frustration "propelled a new reservoir of stances, tones, arguments, metaphors, feelings, and futures for black citizens that demanded white accountability and black liberation" and "troubled liberalism's tropes of progress, equality, exceptionalism, perfection, and colorblindness" (Corrigan, 2020, p. xix).

Following Dr. King's assassination and the ensuing riots—to which some Memphis strikers attributed the employer's eventual concessions—this political reorientation gained additional traction and found clear expression at the Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention (RPCC), organized by the BPP in 1970. Held in Philadelphia, the convention aimed to accomplish nothing less than drafting a new version of the U.S. Constitution, an elaboration of the sovereign orientation that Black Power adherents had been advocating and building across the country.<sup>6</sup> Although they were unevenly pursued, these politics entailed a disavowal of *recognition*—here conceptualized following Frantz Fanon (1986), for whom the pursuit of recognition (for better standing as “an object in the midst of other objects”) could lead only to psychological damage for colonized people and therefore needed to be rejected in favor of “a restructuring of the world” (p. 82).<sup>7</sup>

Despite having won major concessions including federal civil rights legislation, by the late 1960s, many movement leaders had come to see that appeals for recognition had often ended by affirming constituted power. As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2016) recounts:

Black people were not freed into an American dream, but into what Malcolm X described as an “American nightmare” of economic inequality and unchecked injustice. The full extent of this inequality was masked by racial terrorism. One hundred years after Emancipation, African Americans dismantled the last vestiges of legal discrimination with the civil rights movement, but the excitement of the movement quickly faded as American cities combusted with Black people who were angry and disillusioned at being locked out of accessing the riches of American society. Hundreds of thousands of African Americans participated in the uprisings in search of resolutions to the problems of lead poisoning, rat infestations, hunger and malnutrition, under-employment, poor schools, and persisting poverty. The question remained: Could the machinery wielded in the oppression of Blacks now be retooled in the name of Black self-determination? (Taylor, 2016, pp. 192–193)

Even as his integration agenda relied on the premise of recognition, Dr. King revealed his own ambivalence when in 1967 he remarked to Harry Belafonte: “I fear I am integrating my people into a burning house” (as cited in Taylor, 2016, p. 193). This strategic tension (which, as Taylor explains, remains unresolved despite many measures of Black accomplishment over the last half-century) compelled Black Power advocates to pursue various models of community control and Black self-governance. Mainstream media portrayals of their efforts, meanwhile, further revealed the limits of recognition. Estes (2005) recounts:

---

<sup>6</sup> Although the most prominent Black Panther chapters were in Oakland, Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York, there were also active Panther chapters in the South, including in Houston, New Orleans, Winston-Salem, and Washington DC (Horne, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Fanon's (1986) conception of the problem of recognition has inspired an expansive body of literature, including the arena of philosophical scholarship that George Ciccariello-Maher designates “nonrecognition studies” (Ciccariello-Maher, 2017, p. 57). Within this arena, scholars bring Fanon's observations to bear on contemporary struggles for Black and Indigenous self-determination, reparations, and equality (see Coulthard & Alfred, 2014; Mbembe, 2017; Simpson, 2014). In this work, the tension between recognition and sovereignty leads scholars to varied and sometimes competing recommendations.

Even as the Panthers preached about revolutionary manhood, they also instituted Survival Programs that served as a new model of activism for thousands of black youths. Newspapers that printed photos of bold Panther men with guns rarely published images of these same Panthers in aprons serving eggs and bacon to hungry kids before school. When the mainstream white press did cover the breakfast programs, reporters often condemned them as indoctrination because the Panthers used the programs to teach children about collective community uplift and socialism. "What you call indoctrination," [Panther] David Hilliard replied to one such critic, "we call education." (Estes, 2005, p. 171)

The media fixation on Black militance attests not only to journalists' racism but also to the productive force of Black experiments with sovereignty.<sup>8</sup> And while the concurrent efforts to undermine Black organizing wreaked havoc on these emerging political currents, the tension to which they were responding—*demand recognition or assert sovereignty?*—remains unresolved. The performative act implicit in "I AM A MAN" both reflected and intensified this tension, clinging to the promise of recognition but also pointing to a horizon beyond it.

We find something different, however, with the contemporary citations of the 1968 slogan. The Fight for \$15 modification retains the underlined "AM" but the fill-in-the-blank modification shifts the emphasis away from the category of being and onto the categories of identity inscribed in the blank space. Whereas *a performative* defies evaluation as a true or false "statement," this modification instead produced a catalog of identity claims. In keeping with the logic of neoliberal multiculturalism, the presumption is that these identity claims *would be recognized*—and, deeper still, that recognition would serve as the pathway to achieving political aims. Yet, under today's conditions, Herman Gray (2013) explains:

the recognition of social difference' allies with . . . practices of government where the free market reigns. . . . Rather than struggle to rearticulate and restructure the social, economic, and cultural basis of a collective disadvantage, the cultural politics of diversity seeks recognition and visibility as the end itself. (Gray, 2013, pp. 771–772)

If the 1968 placard reveals how Black workers wrote themselves into citizenship through a felicitous performative that pointed toward the promise of sovereignty even as it found expression through the framework of recognition, the 2018 modification shows that today, recognition is the presumed precondition for and the prevailing (if not the sole) conception of politics itself. If the original pointed beyond recognition, the contemporary modification presupposes state sovereignty as a given.

The value of Benjamin's (1968, 1999) method for social analysis and communication studies thus becomes clear: Through the work of historical constellation, the citation can be made to disclose its corruption. In this way, it reveals what was lost. By revisiting the source material activated by the citation, we come to see the inadequacy of the political conceptions that impelled it. Although the citation reveals

---

<sup>8</sup> Kristin Hoerl (2007) observes that these distortions persist in popular media to satisfy commercial priorities because efforts to portray the BPP accurately garner less industry and audience traction, and that this dynamic has shaped popular memories of the era.

our identification with the ongoing wish for sovereignty, the wish itself does not say anything about the means by which that sovereignty will be achieved. Consequently, the image (in this case the placard with its famous slogan) prompts a neurotic repetition in search of substance. "The tradition of all dead generations," Marx (1852) observed, "weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living":

And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language. (Marx, 1852, para. 2)

By following Benjamin (1968, 1999) and analyzing the constellation produced through the "I AM A MAN" citation, we produce a shock: Why *are* we not capable of performative enactment today? This method allows us to grasp just how far we are from the possibilities that animated the prior moment. And if we follow through with our analysis, we might contend with its implications for emancipatory strategy and the decision it demands.

### **Conclusion**

Recognition is the foundation of bourgeois politics, and it is precisely for this reason that Fanon, Butler, and others have sought to escape its grasp. But how is this achieved? In the 1968 strikers' slogan, the tension between recognition and sovereignty arises from its own oblique citation of The Declaration of Independence—itsself a performative arising from a contest over sovereignty. The Declaration was a sovereign assertion that produced sovereignty—or inaugurated the struggle to establish it. But if this is so, then why did it take the form of a declaration and presuppose an audience beyond the signatories? Why, in effect, did it take the form of a statement? Since its inaugural gesture, bourgeois politics operates under the cover of recognition.

Nevertheless, people still dream of sovereignty. One illustration of this dream can be found in the second 2018 modification of the 1968 placard, the COGIC and AFSCME "I AM 2018" campaign. Here "I AM" appears without the recognition qualifier. As noted previously, this shortened phrase renders the citation biblical, invoking God's sovereign power to name ("I AM THAT I AM") and the relationship between God, sovereignty, and performativity that is laid out in Genesis: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (King James Bible, 2008, John 1:1). God's performative sovereignty saturates religion and, of the two 2018 modifications, this one is closer to the spirit of 1968 because it illuminates the challenge we face with respect to sovereignty and the politics of recognition.

Granted, the "I AM" modification was arguably less politically effectual in the short run than the fill-in-the-blank modification (in part because the former had a more local/regional scope of intervention). Nevertheless, it remains more analytically significant because its religious connotation alerts us once more to both the problem and the promise of sovereignty.

To be sure, neither the 1968 strike nor its resonant slogan was adequate for the task of restructuring the world as Fanon proposed. Our current predicament is not that we have fallen somehow from the high-water mark left by an earlier effort. Refuting the notion that there were any periods of decline, Benjamin (1968) insisted instead that every moment might potentially be "the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter," and that it is this possibility to which we're alerted through remembrance and citation (p. 264). Our predicament, then, becomes this: We must save both past and present, both the cited and the citation. "I am a man," Fanon (1986) wrote, "and what I have to recapture is the whole past of the world" (p. 226). He grasped that the only real recognition arises through sovereign production, a hunch shared to some extent by the '68 strikers but lost in the 2018 citations. By forging illuminating constellations, we might discover how to make whole what has been smashed and make good on our debt to the past which, as Benjamin (1968) once reminded us, "cannot be settled cheaply" (p. 254).

### References

- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Benjamin, W. (1968). Theses on the philosophy of history. In H. Arendt (Ed.), *Illuminations* (pp. 253–264). New York, NY: Schocken Books.
- Benjamin, W. (1986). *Reflections: Essays, aphorisms, autobiographical writings*. New York, NY: Schocken Books.
- Benjamin, W. (1999). Convolute N: On the theory of knowledge, theory of progress. In *The arcades project* (H. Eiland, Trans., pp. 456–488). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Burden-Stelly, C. (2018, January 23). Martin Luther King Jr. and the tradition of radical Blackness. *Black Perspectives: Blog of the African American Intellectual History Society*. Retrieved from <https://www.aaihs.org/martin-luther-king-jr-and-the-tradition-of-radical-blackness/>
- Butler, J. (1988). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal*, 40(4), 519–531. doi:10.2307/3207893
- Chaney, K. (2018, April 6). MLK50: 'I Am A Man' photo recreated in honor of Dr. King & 1968 sanitation strike. *ABC Local 24*. Retrieved from <https://www.localmemphis.com/article/news/local/mlk50-i-am-a-man-photo-recreated-in-honor-of-dr-king-1968-sanitation-strike/522-c6184da9-fa99-41ed-b54c-b2ef2540c1c1>
- Ciccariello-Maher, G. (2017). *Decolonizing dialectics* (Reprint ed.). Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books.
- Corrigan, L. M. (2020). *Black feelings: Race and affect in the long sixties*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

- Coulthard, G. S., & Alfred, T. (2014). *Red skin, white masks: Rejecting the colonial politics of recognition* (1st ed.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Estes, S. (2005). *I Am a Man!: Race, manhood, and the civil rights movement* (New ed.). Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Fanon, F. (1986). *Black skin, white masks*. London, UK: Pluto Press.
- Ferris, R. (2021). *I AM A MAN: Photographs of the civil rights movement, 1960–1970*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Gates Jr., H. L. (2021). *The Black church: This is our story, this is our song*. New York, NY: Penguin Press.
- Gray, H. (2013). Subject(ed) to recognition. *American Quarterly*, 65(4), 771–798. doi:10.1353/aq.2013.0058
- Green, L. B. (2004). Race, gender, and labor in 1960s Memphis: “I am a Man” and the meaning of freedom. *Journal of Urban History*, 30(3), 465–489. doi:10.1177/0096144203262791
- Hampton, H., & Fayer, S. (2011). *Voices of freedom: An oral history of the civil rights movement from the 1950s through the 1980s*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Hoerl, K. (2007). Mario Van Peebles’s Panther and popular memories of the Black Panther Party. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 24(3), 206–227. doi:10.1080/07393180701520900
- Honey, M. K. (2008). *Going down Jericho Road: The Memphis strike, Martin Luther King’s last campaign* (Illustrated ed.). New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Horne, G. (2020, June 15). *Gerald Horne on the 1960s urban uprisings and their legacy* [Jacobin Magazine Video Lectures] [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/jacobinmag/videos/2336916426605514/>
- Johnson, A. (2022, January 17). *Beyond mountain top experiences: MLK and the rhetoric of race* [Blog post]. Uplift Memphis, Uplift the Nation: The Blog for Community Engagement. Retrieved from <https://blogs.memphis.edu/benhooksinstitute/tag/mlk/>
- Johnson, A., & Stone, A. (2018). “The most dangerous negro in America”: Rhetoric, race and the prophetic pessimism of Martin Luther King Jr. *Journal of Communication and Religion*, 41(1), 8–22.
- King, M. L. (2003). *A testament of hope: The essential writings and speeches* (J. M. Washington, Ed.; Reprint ed.). New York, NY: HarperOne.
- King James Bible. (2008). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1769).



- Lauterbach, P. (2019). *Bluff City: The secret life of photographer Ernest Withers*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Marx, K. (1852). *The eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Retrieved from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm>
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1969). *Marx/Engels selected works, volume one* (W. Lough, Trans.). Moscow, Russia: Progress Publishers.
- Mbembe, A. (2017). *Critique of Black reason*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Osborn, M., & Bakke, J. (1998). The melodramas of Memphis: Contending narratives during the sanitation strike of 1968. *Southern Communication Journal*, 63(3), 220–234. doi:10.1080/10417949809373095
- Poster, "I Am A Man." (n.d.). Washington, DC: National Museum of American History. Retrieved June 14, 2021, from [https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah\\_1461248](https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_1461248)
- Raiford, L., & Romano, R. (Eds.). (2006). *The civil rights movement in American memory* (Illustrated ed.). Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Reich, S. A. (2009). Organized labor and the Civil Rights Movement: Lessons from a troubled past. *New Labor Forum*, 18(3), 60–70. doi:10.2307/40342955
- Simpson, A. (2014). *Mohawk interruptus: Political life across the borders of settler states*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Snow, M. (1985). Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" as Pauline epistle. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 71(3), 318–334. doi:10.1080/00335638509383739
- Sunnemark, F. (2003). *Ring out freedom!: The voice of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the making of the civil rights movement*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Taylor, K.-Y. (2016). *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black liberation* (1st ed.). Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books.
- Woodruff, J. (2018). Poor People's Campaign asks America to face injustices (Season 2018) [Video]. In *PBS NewsHour*. Arlington, VA: PBS. Retrieved from <https://www.pbs.org/video/poor-people-s-campaign-1527711913/>