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ROSCOE CONKLING SIMMONS AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ORATORY*

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ABSTRACT. *The black journalist and politician, Roscoe Simmons, was best known for his ability as an orator. Simmons's lecturing activities reveal the networks underlying a black public sphere upon which ambitious black leaders relied to publicize their political agendas. Those networks expanded in the first half of the twentieth century as blacks exploited the press, radio, and other technologies, and as blacks migrated in numbers from the Southern states. Meetings of African Americans served several functions: as opportunities to debate the race's prospects; to voice political concerns; and as sources of entertainment. Simmons incorporated all these principles in his platform performances, as he worked to secure valuable connections with organizations ranging from churches and fraternal bodies to Republican clubs and urban machines. Beginning with his family connection to Booker T. Washington, Simmons cultivated friendships with influential blacks and whites over a period of fifty years. His conservative ideology, however, did not suit all tastes.*

Yo' should hab been out tah de meetin'
Tah hyeah oah cullad our-riterr!
Tell whad yo' aint, an' jes what yo' are,
Suh, he sho did tell us de truff
Shoe fit all ub us undah dat roof
He spoked on de 'Merican white man
Tol' how he axed roun' de sons ub Ham …
Bettah go an' hyeah 'im nex' time Dan,
Cause he can make yo' ah bettah man.
Edna Jeanette Grant,
'Effects of Mr. Simmons's Lecture', 1922.

I don't suppose there is a State in the Union … in which I have not spoken.
Roscoe Simmons, 1951.[1]

Roscoe Conkling Simmons (1881–1951) was the greatest black orator of his day, blessed with the ability to electrify audiences for hour after hour. At a

* My thanks to Scott Ashley for his helpful comments.

[1] Edna Jeanette Grant to Roscoe Conkling Simmons (hereafter RCS), 14 Apr. 1922, HUM2.12, box 5/8, folder 'Loose before', Roscoe Conkling Simmons papers, University Archives, Harvard University. All sources with a HUM prefix are from the Simmons papers. *Maryland senatorial election of 1950: hearings before the subcommittee on privileges and elections of the committee on rules and administration*, United States Senate, 82nd Congress (Washington, 1951), p. 449.

typical appearance in eastern Texas in 1918, one spectator was captivated as 'Volley after volley of applause and high, shrill shrieks rocked the auditorium … Gazing down into the upturned faces of his people, their eyes glistening with tears, and his own voice tremulous with sympathy and understanding, [Simmons] purged their souls of bitter revengeful thoughts and transfigured their faces with the glory of a new born hope.'Americans nationwide knew of him through his electioneering for the Republican party and his lecture tours. Blacks, meanwhile, read his column in the *Chicago Defender*, the nation's most popular black newspaper. Simmons was an experienced political player, and functioned as an unofficial adviser to Presidents Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover. Through his pack of associates – black America's most powerful businessmen and editors, entertainers and racketeers – he forged close links with key black organizations, participating in the affairs of fraternities, churches, and educational institutions. Therefore, when white Republicans needed help in rallying Northern black voters, Simmons was the fixer they summoned. In turn, he would call on friends like Senator Robert Taft or *Chicago Tribune* editor, Robert McCormick, to use their influence on his behalf.[2]

Yet the Colonel – as Simmons liked to be known – is now almost entirely forgotten. On the one hand, his proximity to the doyens of federal patronage never resulted in an appointment, nor a more senior role in the Grand Old Party (GOP), than head of the ephemeral Coloured Speakers Bureau. His campaigns for elected office, most notably his challenge for Oscar DePriest's Illinois congressional seat in 1930, all foundered. Attempts to establish himself as a newspaper proprietor met with negligible success. But Simmons has also been a casualty of the changing fashions of historical writing. In seeking the deeper roots of the black freedom struggle, historians have placed greater emphasis on more obvious ancestors of the movement, such figures as A. Philip Randolph and Walter White. Roscoe Simmons – a conservative and sometimes disreputable leader – offers less in the way of commendable deeds or compelling philosophies. Simmons stayed resolutely Republican while the overwhelming majority of blacks abandoned the party during the New Deal. Where mentioned at all, he has been quickly dismissed as some dubious throwback – 'a one-man rotten borough' with a 'marvellously baroque name' – or worse, as an Uncle Tom.[3]

Nevertheless, the Colonel's experiences reveal the under-appreciated world of black oratory, and thereby offer a varied insight into black institutions and networks of communication. His exploits shed light on black leadership in the period before the Second World War, particularly its reliance upon and exploitation of particular linkages and bases of support. In Simmons, oratory,

[2] *Progressive Citizen* (Texarkana, Arkansas), undated issue, 1918, HUM2.75, box 1.

[3] Quote is from Richard Norton Smith, *The colonel: the life and legend of Robert R. McCormick, 1880–1955* (Boston, 1997), p. 503.

journalism, and politics merged to produce an early exponent of what we might now refer to as 'public relations'. Unattached to an educational establishment or business concern, he conducted his affairs through several channels. Through Simmons's singular and peripatetic career, we can observe a black leader who transcended regional boundaries, drawing on local networks of black support from Los Angeles to New York, and from Chicago to New Orleans. Moreover, in his ceaseless touring of the United States as an orator, Simmons exposed the activism of the black communities through which he passed. On each trip, he reaffirmed friendships and alliances both with town notables and the regular folk who flocked to his appearances.[4]

The propagation of associational activities among blacks undergirded the expansion of a national black public sphere in the first half of the twentieth century. Some black fraternities and religious denominations trace their origins to the late eighteenth century. In the nineteenth, the black public sphere enjoyed another period of growth after the Civil War through the black convention movement, the maturation of the black church, and the gradual dispersal of African Americans across the country. Most significantly in Simmons's era, migration lay behind the extension of kinship, social, religious, and political networks. Black leaders benefited from the broader geographical scope of these networks. Simmons was able to reach a large audience by addressing meetings of nation- and state-wide bodies, as well as maintaining contacts with ward organizations and churches. Indeed, Roscoe kept his deepest affiliations private so as not to rule out participation in any organization or denomination.[5]

Simmons's diary of engagements illustrates not only the breadth of his

[4] The literature on black oratory is relatively sparse besides collections of speeches. The most interesting anthologies are as follows: Alice Moore Dunbar, *Masterpieces of Negro eloquence: the best speeches delivered by the Negro from the days of slavery to the present time* (1914; New York, 1970); Carter G. Woodson, *Negro orators and their orations* (1925; New York, 1969); Philip S. Foner and Robert James Branham, eds., *Lift every voice: African American oratory, 1787–1900* (Tuscaloosa, 1998); Philip S. Foner, *The voice of America: major speeches by Negroes in the United States* (New York, 1972); Richard W. Leeman, *African-American orators: a bio-critical sourcebook* (Westport, 1996); Winfield DeWitt Bennett, 'A survey of American Negro oratory, 1619–1900' (MA thesis, George Washington University, 1935). An analysis of various orators can be found in Marcus H. Boulware, *The oratory of Negro leaders, 1900–1968* (Westport, 1969). By far the best discussion of black oratory can be found in Richard Lischer, *The preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the word that moved America* (New York, 1995), especially ch. 5. Also useful is Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: the words that remade America* (New York, 1992). In black autobiography, there are many examples of authors discussing the influence of oratory upon them and their training in public speaking. See below. In black fiction, see, for example, James Weldon Johnson's fictional *The autobiography of an ex-colored man* (1927), contained in *Three Negro classics* (New York, 1965), pp. 416–17, and the opening scene in Ralph Ellison, *Invisible man* (New York, 1952).

[5] John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr, *From slavery to freedom: a history of African Americans*, 7th edn (New York, 1994), pp. 101–4; Nick Salvatore, *We all got history: the memory books of Amos Webber* (New York, 1997); Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: women and the policies of white supremacy in North Carolina, 1896–1920* (Chapel Hill, 1996); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous discontent: the women's movement in the black Baptist church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, 1993) pp. 10–11; the Black Public Sphere Collective, ed., *The black public sphere* (Chicago, 1995).

appeal but the interconnectedness of African Americans. The arrangement of speaking tours demonstrates how networks of African Americans functioned across the US. Moreover, the fact that churches and clubs in Utah, Idaho, and Wyoming would hire him to speak suggests that even small and remote black communities were not isolated from currents in black society. In fact, blacks were prepared to travel considerable distances – sometimes across state lines – to listen to someone of the calibre of Simmons. The extent of Simmons's wanderings highlights the degree to which blacks could share a common discourse of ideas and participate in similar social activities, whether residing in the Southern black belt or the Northern snow belt.

Richard King, in his study of the civil rights movement, has demonstrated the psychological benefits of collective gatherings. If the mass meetings of the 1950s and 1960s turned discontent and aspirations for freedom into definite action, this cannot normally be said of the earlier period. Still, a sense of catharsis might emerge from hearing Simmons, as he communicated his message in familiar language and a familiar setting, most often the black church. In full flow, this incomparable 'wizard of words' implored listeners in a high-pitched voice, flitted around the platform, addressed his personal acquaintances by name, and worked them into a fevered excitement for hours on end. The 'Cackler', as his detractors loved to call him, set alight churches, chautauquas (educational lecture series), and city auditoria. Blacks especially could depart from these occasions with a modicum of optimism and resolve.[6]

Indeed, the enjoyment evident on these occasions reinforces the point that blacks were not so obsessed with their status vis-à-vis whites that their own public events remained focused entirely on the state of race relations. Civic meetings were an opportunity for pleasure. Nevertheless, in some of the rural backwaters that Simmons visited, even his brand of conservatism could sound radical. Before an interracial audience – whites were equally starved of entertainment and as interested in the race question – his discussion of matters of social responsibility between blacks and whites was almost as dramatic as his style. Here, the basis for a plural public sphere seems to have existed, where a Simmons engagement represented the opportunity for blacks and whites to attend a discussion on communal relations together.[7]

[6] *Ebony*, Aug. 1951, p. 102 (quote); Richard King, *Civil rights and the idea of freedom* (Athens, 1996), esp. ch. 2. See also Rhys Isaac, 'Preachers and patriots: popular culture and the revolution in Virginia', in Alfred Young, ed., *The American revolution* (Dekalb, 1976), pp. 125–56.

[7] Recent African American scholarship is beginning to focus more closely on entertainment as a feature of black life, and to emphasize that not all black behaviour was symptomatic of survival under oppressive conditions. See Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race rebels: culture, politics, and the black working class* (New York, 1994), and Kelley, *Yo' mama's disfunktional: fighting the culture wars in urban America* (Boston, 1997); Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin': African American expressive culture from its beginnings to the zoot suit* (Ithaca, 1998).

I

Simmons was possibly born on 21 June 1881 in Macon, Mississippi. In the absence of reliable evidence, and in the face of other deliberate misinformation, this date – found in his passport – is as good as any. There is no doubt that Simmons went to some lengths to conceal his true background. Such vital facts as his place of birth and the people responsible for raising him were subject to change. One purpose served by his malleable origins was that Simmons, unlike his peers, defied the normal ageing process – miraculously growing younger each year. A flexible age allowed Simmons to appear as a young and gifted upstart, or mature enough to claim familiarity with revered figures like Frederick Douglass. A variable birthplace made it possible for the Colonel to share common roots with different audiences. To be a son of Alabama while speaking in Birmingham, or a loyal scion of the 'Bluegrass State' when addressing a crowd in Louisville, struck an intimate chord, and made his message more credible. When Simmons stumped Kentucky in 1943, the GOP publicized that he had been 'reared on the farm of Gen. Simon Bolivar Buckner', a military leader during the Civil War who faced Ulysses S. Grant in battle. This might seem a strange association to trumpet. Nevertheless, Simmons wanted to be seen as a living advertisement for harmony between blacks and whites, in effect a bi-racial product of the American South.[8]

The adoption of a supple public persona served Simmons well. He was at home among the black elite, yet respected among the African American masses as a leader sporting honorary law degrees, fraternal insignia, and a pseudo-military title. Working men around the South welcomed this convivial raconteur, who was proud of his 'down-home' Mississippi roots. The Republican Simmons, an expert on the life of Abraham Lincoln, was comfortable in the company of white philanthropists and industrialists, mayors, and ward heelers, who admired his political convictions and, more so, his connections. Lastly, this handsome, light-skinned, and rust-haired rake, dressed in a frock-coat and carrying a gold-tipped cane, appealed to women.

He was christened for the Radical Republican senator from New York, Roscoe Conkling (1829–85), an appropriate name, and one which he shared with many black boys from this period. Conkling was a rousing speaker famed for his ability to 'wave the bloody shirt' in the faces of his Southern opponents. Simmons's parents settled in Hollondale, a small community in the Mississippi Delta during the early 1890s, where they ran a public school until the late 1940s. Roscoe's maternal aunt was Margaret James Murray, a renowned educator and president of the National Association of Coloured Women's Clubs, who became Booker T. Washington's third wife. Thanks to this connection, Roscoe moved in 1895 to Washington's Tuskegee Institute in

[8] Passport in HUM2.35, box 1. In Mississippi, birth records were not kept before 1911; *Chicago Defender*, 13 Mar. 1943, HUM2.75, box 1; *Dictionary of American biography*, III (New York, 1929), pp. 234–6.

Alabama. There, he began an ambiguous and sometimes testy relationship with his new uncle. Until Washington died in November 1915, Simmons was employed, schooled, and sometimes trapped by the Tuskegee machine. Yet perhaps a measure of the promise which Washington saw in his young charge is the fact that he sent Simmons as a teenager to work as a house boy for Mark Hanna, the powerful senator from Ohio and confidant to President McKinley. Living on Pennsylvania Avenue was a remarkable and formative adventure for Roscoe.

During Simmons's childhood and in the early decades of his working life, oratory was a key form of popular entertainment. Speakers bureaux were profitable ventures, meeting the demand from summer chautauquas and lyceum clubs. Yet, oratory had a particular significance in black life. Under Jim Crow and firm exclusion from the white public sphere, black institutions, as educator Benjamin Mays explains, became 'the Negro's Democratic and Republican Conventions, his Legislature and his Senate and House of Representatives'. Oratory, argues the scholar, Bell Hooks, was a crucial step in black self-assertion and self-realization, one which affected both speaker and audience: 'Coming to voice is an act of resistance. Speaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject.'[9]

While American schools lauded their class speakers and valedictorians, other settings for public speaking abounded in black communities. The Elks, for example, held oratorical contests for black youths which brought state winners together in a national final. The goal behind the tournaments was for 'a force [to] be put in motion that will result in directing the minds of all America to the injustice of … discrimination'. Or, as the Grand Exalted Ruler, J. Finley Wilson, put it, the race needed 'another Frederick Douglass of this century'. Martin Luther King, Jr, civil rights leader James Farmer, and novelist Maya Angelou all participated in Elks speaking contests. Later on, Simmons was an occasional judge of these competitions. Equally, he received many letters from aspiring orators, who sought his advice on improving their skills.[10]

The origins of Simmons's own oratorical interest, and the extent of his training, are hard to determine. He told his son Thomas that he was always being asked to stand up and speak from a young age. According to a colleague at the *Chicago Defender*, Lucius Harper,

> It was no second choice on [Simmons's] part that he took to the platform: he prepared himself as a 'boy orator' in the Sunday schools, class-rooms and

[9] William Norwood Brigance, *A history and criticism of American public address*, 1 (New York, 1943), pp. 120–9. Foner and Branham, eds., *Lift every voice*, pp. 2–10 (Mays quote on p. 10; Hooks on p. 6).

[10] On Elks oratory contests, see H. Councill Trenholm papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Centre, Howard University, box 36; Charles H. Wesley, *History of the Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the World, 1898–1954* (Washington, 1955), pp. 208, 279; David M. Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street* (Nashville, 1971), p. 206; Maya Angelou, *Gather together in my name* (1974; New York, 1975), p. 113; Lischer, *Preacher King*, pp. 40–5.

camp-meetings in the little Mississippi town in which he was born, for his larger work. As a youth, he was an inveterate reader; he loved the poets, and could recite Shakespeare. His parents were educators and there he found much encouragement for his genius and talent.[11]

'Rhetoricals' was part of the curriculum that Simmons likely undertook in his final year at Tuskegee, where he may have studied under Charles Winter Wood, a recognized orator in his own right. In addition, Tuskegee had three debating societies in which Roscoe could have honed his talent, and he also had the model of Booker T. Washington to emulate, a pioneer of a more conversational form of oratory. Roscoe once claimed that Washington had rehearsed his famous Atlanta Address of 1895 (advocating the social separation of the races in pursuit of economic co-operation) with his nephew as a sounding board.[12]

Private study also nurtured Simmons's interest and expanded the range of sources upon which he drew, as he accumulated an impressive library of collected speeches and addresses by some of America's leading orators. He possessed a multi-volume series on Robert Ingersoll (1833–99), a hugely popular post-bellum itinerant speaker, a champion of the Republicans and the freedmen – and one of Simmons's greatest influences. A young Simmons may well have read Ingersoll's advice to budding orators, urging them to 'know the deeper meaning of words … the vigour and velocity of verbs and the colour of adjectives'. His admiration for such men was evident in his books: in works that were important to him, Simmons penned dedications to his sons, William and Thomas, explaining their significance. In a collection of speeches by Wendell Phillips, he wrote on the title page, 'Between these covers are the thoughts of the greatest orator who ever lived. He spoke a nation from darkness to light. He spoke [and] unloosed the shackles of bondage.' On the backs of letters, on scraps of paper, and in notebooks, Simmons jotted down phrases and quotations which provoked him or might be effective in upcoming platform appearances.[13]

In the fifteen years following Simmons's graduation from Tuskegee in 1899, his career was characterized by instability. More often than not, he serviced the machine operated from his alma mater, going wherever Washington needed a reporter-cum-informer. While Simmons sometimes resented his lowly status in the machine and the supervision of his journalistic copy from Tuskegee, he managed to raise his profile and supplement his income by freelancing for other papers. He also roamed the black conference circuit as the official reporter for gatherings ranging from church and supreme lodge fraternal meetings to

[11] Interview with Thomas Simmons, 10 Oct. 1998, Roxbury, Massachusetts; *Chicago Defender*, 12 May 1951, p. 7. [12] 'The week', *Chicago Defender*, 22 July 1922, HUM2.75, box 5.

[13] Brigance, *History of American public address*, I, ch. 11 (quotation, p. 373); C. P. Farrell, *The works of Robert G. Ingersoll* (12 vols., New York, 1900); and Wendell Phillips, *Speeches, lectures and letters* (Boston, 1884), Roscoe Conkling Simmons Library, Randall Burkett Private Collection, Worcester, Massachusetts.

conventions of the National Negro Business League. This work provided him with countless contacts and associations on which he drew throughout his life. A huge number of African American publications existed at this time, connected in a largely informal network. Someone like Simmons both extended the workings of that network and profited from the opportunities it presented.[14]

With Washington's death in 1915, Simmons recreated himself, projecting a personal bond with Washington intimate enough to warrant his depiction as the new leader of the race. Though few people ultimately took Simmons seriously in this respect, his efforts during the next couple of years to exploit the power vacuum created by Washington's departure were impressive. While the Wizard of Tuskegee had created enemies among sections of the black elite, his ideology persisted for decades to come as a compelling model for black advancement, especially in the South. Projecting an image as personal disciple to Washington and rushing to be the new torch-bearer for his programme were uppermost in Simmons's mind. Another indication of the status that Simmons sought in the black community was his adoption of the title 'Colonel'. While Simmons was normally evasive about the origins of this station, it was most likely a term of respect granted by black folk to eminent leaders. Many African Americans had genuine ranks, but others with no record of military service were referred to in the press with honorary titles, some of which may have derived from roles in fraternal organizations. In the case of Simmons, it seems that he encouraged the use of the term as much as it was bestowed upon him.[15]

Simmons's reputation as an orator was partially established in his Tuskegee years, when he would declaim on industrial education or the achievements of his uncle. In 1909, a New Orleans paper referred to Roscoe as 'an orator of national fame'. In 1912, Simmons reminded Washington's secretary, Emmett Scott, that he was visiting Virginia on his 'annual lecture tour', suggesting that, by this time, he could draw a crowd in his own right. After 1915, he was invited to fill some of his uncle's engagements. As the *Birmingham Herald* advertised Simmons's upcoming appearance at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in June 1918, 'Since the death of Dr. Washington, with whom Dr. Simmons [sic] was always a favourite nephew, the nephew has become the

[14] The Tuskegee machine was started by Washington in the late 1890s, as he built upon the fame garnered at the Atlanta Exposition. Overseen by his conscientious secretary, Emmett Scott, its standing was significantly bolstered once Theodore Roosevelt employed Washington as an adviser on Southern patronage. With the ability to recommend moderate whites for federal appointments, who in turn could offer jobs or protection to black Southerners, Washington became an influential figure in the politics of the region and gradually the country as a whole. As his power increased, so did his network of placemen, who monitored the black communities in which they resided. See Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: the making of a black leader, 1856–1901* (New York, 1972), and *Booker T. Washington: the Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901–1915* (New York, 1983).

[15] James Weldon Johnson describes how he was appointed as a Colonel for Theodore Roosevelt's inaugural parade in 1905 in recognition of services rendered to the campaign of the previous year. Something similar may have happened with Simmons. See Johnson, *Along this way: the autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* (1933; reprint New York, 1968), p. 207. On the use of the title 'Colonel', see also Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, p. 29.

spokesman for his race on the American platform.' Simmons's standing was recognized in other ways. In anticipation of the 1916 presidential election, the Coloured Advisory Committee included Simmons in its list of the 'most prominent speakers of the race'. In fact, Simmons was already on the payroll of the Western Headquarters of the Republican National Committee (RNC), earning $100 plus expenses each week for stumping the major cities in the region.[16]

The Colonel's main opportunity to establish himself as a prominent African American personality came when he joined Robert Abbott's *Chicago Defender*, the largest black newspaper in the US. Between 1916 and 1918, the Colonel toured the South as its publicity agent. In return for his roving field work, the paper temporarily made Simmons into something of a phenomenon, heralding him as 'the most brilliant orator the race has ever known'. However, this was a gruelling regime, speaking six nights a week and always in a different town. He covered all the Southern states, adding the message of Negro patriotism to his routine once America entered the First World War. So widely did he travel that Simmons became responsible, in the absence of local stringers, for filing his own copy for the paper, providing him with a ready licence to exaggerate his impact.[17]

During this period, the *Defender* was central in urging black Southerners to take up industrial jobs in Northern cities. The Great Migration was of tremendous significance to the development of national African American life. The concentration of blacks in New York, Chicago, Cleveland, and elsewhere meant that new political constituencies were created outside the South, able to exercize the vote. From Simmons's point of view, the Migration represented the physical extension of the black public sphere and its social networks of fraternities, women's clubs, and church conventions. Simmons was present at the genesis of this movement – closely identified with the *Defender*, the organ most blacks associated with this demographic shift – and was able to establish contact with migrants. Links between former and current residents of Southern states were among the strongest bonds that emerged, and Mississippians who knew the Colonel back home were glad of a familiar face as they settled on the South Side of Chicago.[18]

[16] RCS to Booker T. Washington, 17 May 1901, and RCS to Emmett Scott, 12 Jan. 1904, Washington papers, reel 3; *New Orleans States*, 18 July 1909, Hampton University Newspaper Clipping File, fiche 290; RCS to Scott, 6 Dec. 1912, Washington papers, reel 3; *Birmingham Herald*, 4 June 1918, Hampton Clipping File, fiche 96; letter to Herbert Parsons, Republican National Committee, 7 Oct. 1916, James Adlai Cobb papers, series C, scrapbook 1, Moorland-Spingarn Research Centre, Howard University; Fletcher Maddox to RCS, 29 Sept. 1916, HUM2.12, box 7/11, folder M.

[17] *Chicago Defender*, 6 Oct. 1917, p. 1; Andrew Kaye, 'Roscoe Conkling Simmons and the mechanics of black leadership, 1899–1951' (Ph.D. dissertation, Cambridge, 2001), ch. 3.

[18] James R. Grossman, 'Blowing the trumpet: the *Chicago Defender* and black migration during World War I', *Illinois Historical Journal*, 78 (1985), pp. 82–96; Joe William Trotter, Jr, ed., *The Great Migration in historical perspective: new dimensions of race, class and gender* (Bloomington, 1991); Grossman, *Land of hope: Chicago, black southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago, 1989); Robert

In 1919, Robert Abbott sent Simmons to France to report on the Peace Conference and the experiences of black soldiers. He also became president of the Lincoln League of America, a vehicle for the political clique he shared with leading Southern black Republicans: Bob Church, Henry Lincoln Johnson, Perry Howard, and Walter Cohen. Each of them would periodically call on Simmons to assist in rear-guard actions against lily-white (white only) challenges to their control of state and local Republican organizations. Building on this source of influence, the Colonel acted as director of the Western Coloured Speakers Bureau for the 1924, 1928, and 1932 campaigns, overseeing a cadre of orators. Simmons also attempted to build a solid following in Chicago's South Side, where he lived, until his death, on Indiana Avenue. At one time, he was president of the Second Ward Republican Committee, America's most influential black district. This period of self-aggrandisement following Washington's death set the pattern for the remainder of Simmons's career, in which he fixed his allegiances to a traditional black Republican faction and remained at the whim of the party's patronage and vulnerable to changes in its fortunes.

II

Given the distances between engagements, the speed and cost of transportation, and other demands on his time, it made sense for Simmons to work through a region in one burst, rather than return home after each event. These speaking tours were proposed by friends and entrepreneurs alike. W. C. Hueston, a Midwestern lawyer and national officer of the Elks, stumped Kansas with Simmons in June 1918, reporting on their experiences for the *Chicago Defender*. When Jesse O. Thomas, the National Urban League's fieldworker in Atlanta, suggested a Simmons 'Goodwill Tour' of South Carolina in 1923, his plan was to corral black leaders in the state capital, Columbia, in order to co-ordinate it collectively. The Colonel's itineraries embraced both major cities and more remote towns. In the summer of 1918, for instance, Simmons undertook a twelve date swing through Texas and Louisiana, including San Antonio, Houston, and Shreveport, but he also made speeches in Honey Grove, Paris, and Lake Charles. Estimates as to the total attendance of this particular tour ranged between 150,000 and 1 million. Even the lower tally suggests that substantial crowds gravitated from the hinterlands beyond these towns to hear the Colonel.[19]

Simmons also received more speculative offers. H. M. Collins of Hutchinson, Kansas, had in mind a six week jaunt in the West for 1918, covering Colorado,

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Gregg, *Sparks from the anvil of oppression: Philadelphia's African Methodists and Southern migrants, 1890–1940* (Philadelphia, 1993).

[19] *Chicago Defender*, 1 June 1918, p. 1; Jesse O. Thomas to RCS, 23 Feb. 1923 and accompanying correspondence, HUM2.12, box 2/2, folder T; *Indianapolis Freeman*, 6 July 1918; *The* (*Omaha*) *Monitor*, 6 July 1918, HUM2.75, box 6.

Utah, Wyoming, Montana, Washington, Oregon, California, and Arizona. In such cases, organizers would offer character references from the Colonel's close associates, demonstrating the extension of black networks across the country. This expansion can be illustrated through the example of J. B. Grigsby, president of the American Mutual Benefit Association in Houston and Simmons's childhood friend from Mississippi. Grigsby personally arranged tours of Texas in which he and Matthew Dogan, president of Wiley College, accompanied the Colonel throughout. But Grigsby facilitated other plans. His nephew in Los Angeles, James McGregor, suggested a Californian trip for Simmons in the summer of 1923, while other interested parties used Grigsby as their means of reaching Simmons. Through such linkages between Texas, Mississippi, and California, many invitations came Simmons's way. African Americans were widely dispersed yet remarkably intimate, with both kin and organizational networks preserving long-distance relationships. With his innumerable contacts, Simmons scarcely required the services of a speakers bureau, which arranged talks for African Americans like Mary Church Terrell and William Pickens.[20]

That Simmons was accompanied and accommodated by influential local leaders reinforced the status of all concerned. The power of mutual connections was evident, helping Simmons in his quest for contacts in each black community. At the same time, town notables proved that their relationships extended beyond parochial limits. At the conclusion of an appearance, a meal or banquet was often held in Colonel Simmons's honour. In January, 1922, he was treated to a smoker in Muskogee, Oklahoma, while on tour of the state. In Shreveport, Louisiana, the Colonel was once entertained at the Rooster Restaurant, where the fare included smoked calf's tongue and crab. On these occasions, Simmons could reinforce the notion that he was an approachable leader. Simmons had 'come to his people', not vice versa. These social duties were not to everybody's taste. James Weldon Johnson sympathized with one speaker who 'was said to have included in his printed terms: "One hundred dollars a lecture. One hundred and fifty dollars if entertained."'[21]

The diversity of organizations interested in hosting Simmons is remarkable. From the Benevolent Association of the Sons and Daughters of Douglas, meeting in Attalla, Alabama, to the Mahoning Valley Uplift and Protective Association created in East Youngstown, Ohio, the black public sphere took on many different guises. These initiatives flourished in the years before the

[20] H. M. Collins to RCS, 12 Dec. 1917 and 27 Feb. 1918, HUM2.12, box 8/12, folder C; M. W. Dogan to J. B. Grigsby, 25 May 1919, HUM2.8, box 4; James McGregor to RCS, 9 Mar. 1923, HUM2.12, box 2/2, folder Mc; N. Dudley, Jr, to RCS, 16 Feb. 1927, HUM2.12, box 2/3, folder D; J. A. Tyler to RCS, 15 Sept. 1923, HUM2.12, box 4/6, folder T. Mary Church Terrell, *A coloured woman in a white world* (1940; New York, 1980), p. 159; Sheldon Avery, *Up from Washington: William Pickens and the Negro struggle for equality, 1900–1954* (Newark, 1989), p. 24; Boulware, *Oratory of Negro leaders*, ch. 19.

[21] *Chicago Defender*, 14 Jan. 1922, p. 6; *The* (*Shreveport*) *News-Enterprise*, 6 July 1918, HUM2.80, box 4; Johnson, *Along this way*, pp. 339–40.

Depression. Colleges such as Tuskegee and Rust had alumni chapters in major cities bringing together different generations and occupations, in much the same way as state clubs for Mississippi and Georgia fostered and preserved relationships in Northern communities after the Great Migration. If hopeful correspondents did not know the Colonel's address, they would contact him via the *Defender* or Claude Barnett's Associated Negro Press. Indeed, Simmons's own parents often kept track of his whereabouts via black publications.[22]

Lectures were requested by both blacks and whites: Kiwanis and Lions; the American Legion; high schools and colleges; state fairs; the YMCA and YWCA; and church conferences from the National Baptist Convention to state meetings of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. Both men and women contacted Simmons in support of their projects and clubs, from the nationally known Mary McLeod Bethune to more humble community leaders. Moreover, the attitudes of central organisations towards the Colonel's politics did not stop local chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association from extending invitations. Branches far from central offices in Manhattan were less hostile to Simmons's right wing agenda, deemed too accommodationist by the likes of W. E. B. Du Bois and Garvey.

Beyond school commencements and summer chautauquas, Simmons was approached to participate in fundraisers for orphanages, to entertain vacationers at the Pythian baths complex in Hot Springs, Arkansas, or to lay the cornerstone of a new fraternal building. Black entrepreneurs hired Simmons to open the plot for a future black suburb in Ocala, Florida, or to publicize a Buffalo firm offering mortgages to black customers. Equally, there were requests from citizens concerned about race relations in their towns. In 1938, Simmons was invited to address a mass meeting protesting a case of police brutality on the West Side of Chicago, which resulted in the death of a black man. The Colonel was also a regular in Memphis, where his friends, Robert Church and George Washington Lee, periodically launched voter education and registration drives to increase their leverage with the city machine.[23]

Through Simmons's correspondence and newspaper clippings of his speeches, there is evidence that he spoke – or was invited to speak – in all forty-eight states bar seven. Those seven – the New England states of Maine,

[22] F. L. Rogers to RCS, 22 Feb. 1925, HUM2.12, box 1/1, folder R; C. H. Lyles to RCS, 1 May 1925, HUM2.12, box 1/1, folder KL; E. T. Swift to RCS, 11 May 1926, HUM2.12, box 6/9, folder S; George Bertie Riley to RCS, 4 May 1919 HUM2.12, box 7/11, folder 'Loose before, 2 of 2'; James Le May to RCS, 13 Oct. 1924, HUM2.12, box 5/7, folder KL; Oliver Woods to RCS, 27 Nov. 1923, HUM2.12, box 4/6, folder W; Willie Murray Simmons to RCS, 5 Dec. 1923, HUM2.12, box 4/6, folder S.

[23] McDuffy Park Estates Improvement Company to RCS, 20 Mar. 1926, HUM2.12, box 6/9, folder M; Central Sales Agency, Ellicott Realty Corporation to RCS, 6 Mar. 1946, HUM2.10, box 1; West Side Citizens Organization to RCS, 10 Aug. 1938, HUM2.10, box 7; Thomas W. Burtin to RCS, 10 Oct. 1922, HUM2.12, box 1/2, folder B; W. S. Williamson to RCS, 22 Feb. 1923, HUM2.12, box 2/2, folder W. George Washington Lee to RCS, 12 July 1927, HUM2.12, box 3/4, folder KL.

Vermont, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island, plus the Dakotas and Nevada – contained 0.21 per cent of the country's black population in 1960. Of these states, only Nevada and Rhode Island were inhabited by more than 10,000 African Americans, while less than 1,000 resided in North Dakota and Vermont. Nevertheless, Simmons spoke in other states with a negligible black presence, such as Montana, Utah, and Wyoming, as well as crossing the border into Canada to address audiences in Toronto and Winnipeg. The face-to-face contact that the Colonel offered as a leader was arguably unrivalled in the first half of the twentieth century.[24]

Blacks made corresponding efforts to hear him, crossing state lines to attend an address, and occasionally organizing private transport to reach a venue. When Simmons travelled from Houston to Galveston to fulfil an engagement, Houstonians hired a railroad car to make the journey with him. If he spoke in Gary, Indiana, many Chicagoans would follow him around the edge of Lake Michigan to attend his lecture. In Oklahoma City, when he fronted a meeting for the Knights of Pythias, the local paper reported that facilities would 'be taxed to care for the enormous throngs who have indicated that they are coming from all corners of the state to hear Colonel Simmons'. Another event organizer from El Dorado, Arkansas, was confident of pulling in spectators from towns within a 100 mile radius.[25]

The entertainment preceding a Simmons lecture, such as a town parade or picnic, served as an additional incentive to make the journey from outlying areas. The promise of a spectacle lured whites as well, who were either curious to witness a black event, or were deliberately courted in advertisements. White chambers of commerce could help to cover the Colonel's fee, and white clubs could offer venues large enough to seat the anticipated crowd, segregated or otherwise. In September 1917, Simmons shared the billing in Whitehall, Illinois, with William Jennings Bryan before a crowd of 6,000. A fanfare met the Colonel's arrival at the city's fairgrounds when, according to the *Chicago Defender*, 'a thousand horns on a thousand automobiles let loose'. Both races could enjoy the 50-, or sometimes 100-voice choirs which sang in advance of the main event. The largest recorded choir, comprising 300 voices, was present when Simmons addressed his home crowd in Chicago on his exploits at the Paris Peace Conference.[26]

Well-organized committees, formed to oversee the original invitation and subsequent planning, received publicity cuts to distribute to local newspapers and to place around town. Simmons would forward photographs of himself and suitable copy describing his achievements and reputation. With this material,

[24] Population figures from John P. Davis, ed., *The American Negro reference book* (Englewood Cliffs, 1966), pp. 106–7.

[25] *Houston Observer*, 29 June 1918, HUM2.75, box 6; *Chicago Defender*, 24 Apr. 1920, p. 3; *Black Dispatch*, 11 June 1919, HUM2.75, box 6; J. L. Crossly to RCS, 3 May 1924, HUM2.12, box 6/10, folder CD.

[26] *Chicago Defender*, 3 Sept. 1917, HUM2.75, box 8; *Chicago Defender*, 3 May 1919, pp. 1, 10; *Pine Bluff Commercial*, 27 Mar. 1918, HUM2.75, box 6.

Steve Anderson of Osceola, Arkansas, made up banners, placards, handbills, and streamers for Simmons's 1925 visit. Yet, the negotiations prior to fixing an acceptable date highlight some of the tensions which existed in communities among black leaders. C. R. Goggin, a Methodist minister in Braddock, Pennsylvania, was furious that Simmons had agreed to two engagements in his town within eight days of each other. 'Dr. Wall has tried to slip one over on me', he complained. To avoid such clashes, other cities made it clear that the Colonel could undertake no other appearances during his visit. As organizers of the fair in Perry, Iowa, advised him: 'The Committee has elected to engage you … with the understanding that you are not to speak in the city of Des Moines or elsewhere in this part of the state, while on your journey to or from the city of Perry.' Yet, for every incidence of strife among town leaders, there were examples of co-operation. In Paducah and Madisonville, Kentucky, a state where the Colonel was tremendously popular, invitations came explicitly from all citizens, black and white.[27]

One regular source of speaking requests among blacks came from the Independent Benevolent Protective Order of Elks of the World. Under the leadership of the charismatic J. Finley Wilson, the Elks and its female auxiliary became, after the 1920s, the largest of the black fraternities. Wilson travelled endlessly in search of new members, attracting interest from both middle- and working-class communities. From a membership of 36,606 in 1922, the Elks had grown to 73,362 by 1929, including the likes of Jesse Owens and Jackie Robinson. Between 1926 and 1952, the Elks gave out more than $800,000 in scholarships to black students, including one to Simmons's son, William. Roscoe and Finley were old friends, and like-minded in terms of platform pizzazz. Simmons chaired the resolutions committee at national conventions and served as one of Finley's assistants. James Cameron was the fraternity's Director for Civil Liberties in Indiana in the mid-1940s. As part of Finley's entourage, he heard the 'golden voice' of Simmons on several occasions, in the latter's capacity as the Grand Exalted Ruler's speaking representative.[28]

[27] Publishers Engraving Company file, HUM2.10, box 5; Steve Anderson to RCS, 25 Nov. 1925, HUM2.12, box 7/11, folder 'Loose before, 1 of 2'; C. R. Goggin to RCS, 18 Aug. 1924, HUM2·8, box 5; H. A. Lett to RCS, 23 May 1919, in correspondence of the Association of Free and Accepted Masons, HUM2.10, box 1; Coloured Men's Civic League (Perry, Iowa) correspondence with RCS, 5 Mar. 1925, HUM2·10, box 2; E. Silas Garner to RCS, correspondence from 26 Apr. 1937 onwards, HUM2.8, box 5; A. W. White to RCS, 29 Aug. 1924, HUM2.12, box 5/7, folder B; L. P. Foster to RCS, 26 May 1919, HUM2.8, box 5; W. J. Weston to RCS, 8 Dec. 1924, HUM2.8, box 11; Nora B. Ross to RCS, 2 May 1924, HUM2.12, box 7/10, folder R.

[28] Wesley, *History of the Elks*, p. 25; editorial on J. Finley Wilson, *Negro History Bulletin*, May 1952, pp. 154, 174–5; *Minutes of the forty-eighth annual meeting of the Grand Lodge, Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the World … convened in Saint Charles Auditorium, Philadelphia, PA. August 26–30, 1947* (n.p., 1947), pp. 330, 386. Located among Simmons's books, Houghton Library, Harvard University; telephone interview with James Cameron, Milwaukee, 18 May 1999. In 1940, M. S. Stuart estimated Elks membership at 400,000: see *An economic detour: a history of insurance in the lives of American Negroes* (1940; College Park, 1969), p. 31. See also memorandum on membership from J. Finley Wilson, 8 June 1949, HUM2.8, box 12.

The national meetings of the Elks were vast operations, and, like the National Baptist Conventions which Simmons also addressed, they were events when the black public sphere was anything but invisible. When the extent of their networks of lodges was revealed at major gatherings, fraternal organizations demonstrated their significance in African American society. In 1927, New Yorkers observed as 30,000

> smiling and gaily clad Negro Elks marched, Charlestoned and cakewalked their way up Fifth Avenue from Sixty-First Street to Harlem … in the four hour parade …
>
> … members of 900 lodges from every state and many foreign countries fell into line with their twenty-five bands and passed 100,000 cheering onlookers, who lined the streets and crowded the windows of Harlem buildings, gay with bunting and banners of every description …
>
> … Feminine members, known as Does, were almost as numerous as marchers of the opposite sex, while the leaders of the women's band set the toes of the marchers and bystanders tickling with the notes of 'Charleston', 'Ain't She Cute', and 'Me and My Shadow.'[29]

Besides the pleasure and pride derived from parades, conference sessions gave delegates the opportunity to share ideas and to further linkages between communities.

When such a large black population flooded into a city for several days, municipal officials were keen to extend their welcome to this potential economic boon. At the fifty-first convention in Chicago in 1950, ancillary celebrations took place at Washington Park Races, the White Sox Ball Park, and the fairgrounds. Mayor Kennelly of Chicago welcomed the delegates and Simmons responded for the Elks. Such scenes were replicated elsewhere above the Mason–Dixon line, with mayors and state governors attending convention sessions and applauding the work of the fraternity. However insincere their expressions, they could not ignore such a sizeable constituency. Meanwhile, away from the glamour of conference halls, Simmons attended smaller meetings, speaking at individual lodges like his own, the Great Lakes Lodge No. 43 of Chicago.[30]

An important date in the black calendar, and one for which Simmons was greatly in demand, was Emancipation Day. Though held in June in Texas ('Juneteenth') and throughout the summer in some other states, the beginning of January was often the busiest part of the year for the Colonel. In his study of these celebrations, William Wiggins stresses their broader political content. Readings of the 1863 Proclamation could be combined with protest resolutions and demands for black enfranchisement in the South. Organizations such as the NAACP used these events to recruit members, and the Republican party

[29] *New York Times*, quoted in Wesley, *History of the Elks*, p. 211.

[30] Wesley, *History of the Elks*, pp. 363, 366; see also flyers and programmes on the Elks in HUM2.80, boxes 1–3, and proceedings of Elks conventions in HUM2.95, box 5. The Whites discuss the significance of black parades and use of public space in *Stylin'*, ch. 5 and p. 191.

made capital out of their historic links to the freedmen, until Democrats attempted to steal some of their thunder in the 1930s.[31]

Wiggins also shows how the words of a pre-eminent emancipation speaker like Simmons carried beyond the immediate audience. In addition to press reports, lesser performers would copy and convey the thoughts of the Colonel. Mrs Leila Blakey of Monticello, Georgia, explains:

> [Simmons] was the man of his day … Now a small town like Monticello could not afford Mr. Simmons. He would more likely go to Atlanta, Macon, or … Savannah … But our little town would have to take who had heard him … And in their speeches [they] could say, I quote from Roscoe Conkling Simmons thus and so. And of course, that got everybody's attention who wanted to hear what Simmons had to say … I am sure I never saw him personally … But we just heard so much about him and always at these celebrations.

This transmission of Simmons's message via word of mouth occurred throughout his career. Itinerant blacks would write back to their local newspapers describing speeches they had witnessed. A Denver resident contributed an article to the *Colorado Statesman* in 1918 after watching Simmons in Marshall, Texas. Orations recorded in newspapers were discussed and no doubt plagiarized by young pretenders to the Colonel. As Blakey's statement confirms, a Simmons spectacle could last long in the memory, even of those who never saw it.[32]

Another scenario in which Simmons excelled could be termed the 'rescue act'. As a public advocate, Simmons was used as the trump card by politicians and campaigners alike. In 1923, Simmons played a vital role in scuppering proposals to reduce Southern representation among delegates to Republican National Conventions, which would have undermined what little influence black Republicans then enjoyed. At National Conventions themselves, Simmons was often on hand to uphold the legitimacy of black-and-tan delegates in committee hearings. In 1926, the Colonel had another triumphant solo effort, this time seeking an appropriation for the Kentucky Normal and Industrial Institute before the state legislature. From both houses – the Senate was so impressed that he repeated it before the lower assembly – Simmons secured a $300,000 grant for the school.[33]

Radio represented an increasingly important part of the black public sphere and a medium through which Simmons could reach African Americans. From 1924, Simmons's oratory was heard on local stations in such places as Jefferson City, Missouri, and Youngstown, Ohio. But it was programmes carried nationally which reached the widest audience and generated the sense of a

[31] William H. Wiggins, Jr, *O freedom!: Afro-American emancipation celebrations* (Knoxville, 1987), ch. 5.

[32] Leila Blakey quoted in Wiggins, *O Freedom!*, p. 128; *Colorado Statesman*, 19 Jan. 1918, HUM2.75, box 8.

[33] *Heebie Jeebies*, 13 Feb. 1926, HUM2.75, box 6; G. P. Russell to RCS, 14 Mar. 1926, HUM2.12, box 6/9, folder R.

national black constituency. These broadcasts were invariably arranged through the Republican party, mainly at election time, but also to commemorate anniversaries, like the nomination of Lincoln for the presidency. In celebration of the latter in 1939, Simmons was the final speaker on a prestigious roster of Republicans. When Simmons had the honour of featuring on such shows, blacks arranged both formally and informally to hear his speeches collectively. The Frederick Douglass Republican League of Gary, Indiana, for instance, posted flyers announcing 'Radio Party! Tonight, National Broadcasting Co., 7:00 to 7:15 O'clock Sharp! America's Greatest Orator, Roscoe Conkling Simmons', and advised people to tune in at home or at various listed locations airing the talk. In 1936, Simmons addressed the nation twice in the run-up to the election, sharing the airwaves with candidates Landon and Knox. In addition to opening up another medium for black dialogue, however, radio, in the long term, had the effect of reducing the demand for stump speakers like Simmons. It was more cost effective to transmit political messages by this means than to send men and women into the field.[34]

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the physical and mental toll that the constant regime of speaking and travelling exerted on Simmons. In the late 1940s, he continued to maintain a full diary. Over twenty years before, some had expressed concern that the Colonel was on the road too often. His friend, A. W. Fite, wrote as much in 1921: 'I know how you feel about your speaking career but I want you to live a long time. You can't do it sleeping on Pullmans [with] so many different cooks.' In addition to the discomforts of touring the country, there must also have been some wear on his voice due to the frequency of events, especially on the Republican campaign trail. Simmons was not unused to giving three or more speeches each day in the run-up to elections, although his ready familiarity with orations on Lincoln or the prospects for racial harmony allowed him to perform instinctively. There must have been some personal reward – as well as pecuniary – from continuing to grace the platform. Public speaking and the socializing which accompanied it became something of a drug for Roscoe, far more addictive than journalism. As James Weldon Johnson expressed the elation that he could feel on the podium: 'As I talked, I was lifted up and swept along by that sense of demi-omnipotence which comes to a speaker at those moments when he realises that by an

[34] J. G. Washington to RCS, 3 June 1924, HUM2.12, box 7/10, folder WXYZ-Special; A. J. Wood to RCS, 6 Nov. 1946, HUM2.10, box 4, folder for Jerusalem Baptist Church; Wigwam Day programme, 18 May 1939, HUM2.80, box 2; Frederick Douglas Republican League Campaign Service flyer, n.d., HUM2.80, box 1; *Wisconsin Enterprise-Blade*, 31 Oct. 1936, and *Chicago Tribune*, 3 Nov. 1936, both HUM2.75, box 1; NBC radio address, 2 Nov. 1936, HUM2.50, box 1; C. W. Ramseyer to Ernest M. Martins, 16 Aug. 1932, HUM2.10, box 6, folder for Republican National Committee, Speakers Bureau. On black radio, see, for example, Barbara Dianne Savage, *Broadcasting freedom: radio, war, and the politics of race, 1938–1948* (Chapel Hill, 1999); Brian Ward and Jenny Walker, 'Bringing the races closer?: black-oriented radio in the South and the civil rights movement', in Richard King and H. Taylor, eds., *Dixie debates: perspectives on Southern cultures* (London, 1996).

inflection of the voice or a gesture by the hand, he is able to sway a mass of people.'[35]

III

Simmons's talents were substantive in other senses. In addition to possessing the right credentials in a given state, his memory allowed him to prove it. Throughout his lengthy speeches, he would talk directly to individuals, whom he knew personally or recalled from prior engagements. When Simmons would coach a young Bazy Tankersley, daughter of former Illinois congresswoman Ruth Hanna McCormick, as they campaigned together for the GOP in the 1940s, he specifically encouraged her to employ an *ad hominem* style and to make eye contact with her crowd. Meanwhile, his close friend, Wendell Phillips Dabney, observed the impression that Simmons's approach made on a certain section of an audience. Dabney thanked him for 'instruction in the art of love making', as he admired Simmons's 'pleading to the many members of the fair sex who fell beneath your magic spell'. One woman from Ypsilanti, Michigan, described Simmons's effect on her along similar lines: 'I must have drawn from you as you were talking, something like or very near, the virtue the sick woman drew from Christ as she touched the hem of his garment.'[36]

Bazy Tankersley came to appreciate other aspects of Roscoe's showmanship. 'He would insist on talking to the organists', she recalls, 'and he would always have them play the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" as he walked in; he wouldn't come in from a side door, he would walk down the aisle, and he always carried a black walking stick with a gold handle on it.' The cane also featured in newspaper editor Peter Miller's recollections of a Baltimore speech in 1950. Miller noted how he 'played the crowd like a guitar; it was a beautiful job … he had them all eating out of his hand'. Simmons's dress and poise also impressed. Roy Dorsey from Kansas City, Missouri, copied his standard outfit of cutaway coat and striped trousers: 'I wore it in the fashion show at the Convention Hall … and believe me Colonel I was hot as a burnt boot. I was so hot my pant legs was scorching.'[37]

Movement was a deliberate part of a Simmons performance. He would free-wheel about the stage, waving his hands and fluttering his fingers. This form of communication gave him the added presence denied him in radio transmissions or in large venues, where a microphone was necessary. According to his son, Thomas, Roscoe was never keen on artificial amplification of his voice and the way it forced him to stand in one place. As J. B. Grigsby observed: 'You are

[35] A. W. Fite to RCS, 31 Dec. 1921, HUM2.12, box 5/8, folder F; Johnson, *Along this way*, p. 337.

[36] Telephone interview with Bazy Tankersley, 26 Mar. 1999, Tucson, Arizona; Wendell P. Dabney to RCS, 1 July 1926, HUM2.12, box 2/3, folder D; Johnella Williams to RCS, 19 Jan. 1950, HUM2.8, box 11. Richard Lischer also talks about the sexual arousal effected by King's sermons: Lischer, *Preacher King*, p. 140.

[37] Roy Dorsey to RCS, 29 June 1923, HUM2.12, box 1/2, folder D; interview with Maxwell Peter Miller, Jr, 12 Feb. 1999, kindly conducted by Kristie Miller, LaSalle, Illinois.

trained to walk-turn and fire back at your audience. *It is most effective* … your golden message does not get over when you turn from the mike.' The *Chicago Tribune* preferred to describe his energetic style in more essentialist terms. One of its reporters marvelled at how Simmons 'stood there shuffling and dangling his arms and singing out in the mellow voice of the singer of Negro spirituals … Not the tight muscled, hard bitten oratory of the white man, but the loose jointed, fluent, lilting chant of his race. The man spoke in blank verse and he tapped his foot.'[38]

Another factor which set him apart was the quality of his voice. Tom Simmons observes that his father possessed rather a high voice, which was well suited to reaching the recesses of spacious auditoria. Impersonation was another skill, the *Chattanooga Daily-Times* noting that Simmons gave an admirable rendering of Franklin Roosevelt while speaking there. Simmons's renown as an orator spread beyond the US. In 1935, Alistair Cooke arranged to make a BBC radio show on the Negro. His featured personalities included James Weldon Johnson, Duke Ellington, and Simmons. Cooke's inspiration for bringing Simmons to the attention of British listeners – apart from knowing of him through his coverage of American politics – was George Washington Lee's *Beale Street* (1934), a breezy pot pourri of life in Memphis and its famous black thoroughfare. The book described Roscoe as the Street's 'most romantic figure', and Cooke felt it offered 'a magnificent picture of Simmons.' He was most interested in the following passage by Lee: '[Simmons] not only speaks the language of the poor – he fairly sings it! And if [W.C.] Handy set the blues to music, Roscoe set the blues to oratory. The only difference is that Handy plays them while Roscoe talks them.' In fact, the musician, W. C. Handy, thanked Simmons in the acknowledgements to his autobiography, *Father of the Blues* (1942), for being 'the first to cite the significance of the blues in his addresses'.[39]

Yet there were criticisms of the Colonel's performances, as this verdict by A. Philip Randolph demonstrates: 'Simmons is reputed to be an orator. The truth, however, is that Simmons is an entertainer and a very poor entertainer at that. The substance of his speeches is usually nothing said in schoolboy florid rhetoric.' Enoch Waters concurs that Simmons would impress simply by littering his remarks with Latin and French phrases or by quoting philosophers. He heard of a man

[38] *Chicago Tribune*, 14 Mar. 1927, HUM2.75, box 1; *Masonic Chronicler*, [1937], in Charles A. Sweet correspondence, HUM2.8, box 10. On the significance of black bodily movement – or kinesics – see White and White, *Stylin'*, ch. 3.

[39] Interview with Tom Simmons, 18 Sept. 1998, Roxbury, Massachusetts; *Chattanooga Daily-Times*, 2 Nov. 1944, HUM2.75, box 1; George W. Lee, *Beale street: where the blues began* (New York, 1934), pp. 145–8; W. C. Handy, *Father of the blues: an autobiography* (New York, 1942), p. xiv. In the end, Cooke recalls, the 'American Half-Hour' series probably did not air at all, though the recording of Lee discussing Simmons was made. Instead, Cooke's impressions of Simmons and the Negro were printed in the *Listener*, 12 June 1935, pp. 1015–17 (author's correspondence with Alistair Cooke, 11 May 1998).

who had been emotionally moved by one of Simmons's addresses. 'It was the greatest speech I have ever heard', he told a friend.

'What did he say?' asked the other.

'I don't know what he said but he sure as hell can talk.'

It was not just mature leaders who had trouble with Simmons's message. Morehouse College students in Atlanta found the ethos of the 'self-styled foremost Negro orator and racial mediator' hard to stomach. Instead they found his words 'served well the dual capacity of the white man's jest and the Negroes' regret'. The *Morehouse Athenaeum* was blunt:

> What interest of the Negro could our noble 'racial mediator' have been fostering when he proudly asserted that 'the duty of the American Negro was that of keeping the American white man in the lead'? Since when has the Negro become desirous of falling in love with the white man to the extent of aiding him in a leadership that actually means the suppression of his progress?[40]

The editorial made a valid point: the themes likely to upset more radical blacks were precisely the ones to salve the fears of whites. Simmons trod a thin line in seeking to communicate to both races, whether separately or together. And he was not alone in recognizing the perils of attempting it. As the *Madisonville Hustler* (Kentucky) observed,

> The speaker had a dual duty to perform. He was a Negro who was addressing an audience that was composed of two races of this section of the state. How to please each and not offend the other, how to deal with questions that were delicate with each race, and yet do this in such a way as not to offend, but rather to please each, was his [duty], and nobly he performed that duty to the satisfaction of all.[41]

That Simmons and other blacks were able to achieve such an equilibrium relied on the selective deafness of their supporters. Moderate race leaders, entertainers, and sportsmen could succeed in garnering interracial support, since seemingly opposing constituencies were able to lift those elements of which they approved and overlook the parts not meant for them. After all, few observers were so seemingly unbiased as E. C. Lampson, a Republican in Jefferson, Ohio: 'I wanted local people to know what I know, that your race produces just as brilliant men as our own – and just as many damn fools proportionately.'[42]

In 1922, Simmons spoke at the South Texas state fair in Beaumont. His address, as reported by the local white paper, demonstrated his ability to be radical (for blacks) and comforting (for whites) simultaneously. As the journalist noted with approval: 'Simmons revels in the fact that he is a negro, but his culture, albeit … encompassed by every trait of the negro race, shines. Always does Simmons hold the white man up to the negro as his example.' Yet, the *Beaumont Enterprise* was honest enough to report that Simmons also chastised

[40] *Messenger*, Dec. 1919, pp. 25–6; Enoch Waters, *American diary: a personal history of the black press* (Chicago, 1987), p. 128; *Morehouse Athenaeum*, Oct. 1923, pp. 14–15.

[41] *Madisonville Hustler* cited in *Louisville News*, 30 June 1917, HUM2.75, box 8.

[42] E. C. Lampson to RCS, 19 Sept. 1932, HUM2.8, box 7.

whites with one of his familiar refrains: 'The negro has imitated all of the white man's vices but none of his virtues.' For black admirers of Simmons, this represented a bold, indeed immoderate, statement, which tested Southern limits of acceptability. As William A. Fountain, Jr, a pastor from Athens, Georgia, once put it: 'You not only write and stay on the other side of the line, but you are brave enough to come down below the line and "capture the lion in his den".'[43]

Blacks were fully aware of what was permissible in Southern settings. Moreover, the mode of delivery itself could radicalize the message. Blacks could appreciate the audacity of informing whites that they were failing in their self-proclaimed racial benevolence. As the *St. Luke Herald* observed, 'Mr. Simmons has a pleasing air and a happy jovial delivery: he gets out his jokes, but they carry a meaning, weighty with vital truths, not well of which to lose sight.' Simmons was a realist. As he reminded a crowd in Augusta, 'I am tired of running across the Ohio river to plead my case, while the jury remains in Georgia.' Only in the safety of a predominantly black audience of 7,000 in Chicago could he express his full disapproval of mob lynching: 'The great triumph of the American nation will be the end of lynching, I tremble to think of his humiliation if some member of the Peace Conference at Versailles should ask President Wilson for a schoolmaster's dissertation on the psychology of lynching … The American white man lynches the memory of George Washington.'[44]

IV

Simmons considered several of his speeches to be among the more important and gratifying of his career. In 1945, for example, he addressed a joint session of the Illinois legislature as they celebrated Lincoln's birthday. In 1948, Simmons spoke for the candidacy of Robert Taft at the Republican National Convention. But the most memorable occasion came on 16 June 1932, when the Colonel seconded the re-nomination of Herbert Hoover for President. The honour was not limited to Simmons – eight speakers seconded Hoover that evening in Chicago, and African Americans had been invited to perform this task in conventions stretching back to 1892. From the party's perspective, it was a simple gesture which might convince ambivalent voters, and the Republicans used these speaking slots to appease other minority groups as well. Nevertheless, many blacks were thrilled at the prospect of their most famous orator gracing the dais. As the *Nashville Independent* reported, 'When news broke that Simmons would be on [the] program to make one of the Hoover speeches,

[43] *Beaumont Enterprise*, 9 Nov. 1922, HUM2.75, box 6; William A. Fountain, Jr, to RCS, 18 June 1923, HUM2.12, box 1/2, folder F; interview with Harry Cooley, 16 July 1999, College Park, Maryland.

[44] *St. Luke Herald*, 15 Dec. 1917, HUM2.75, box 8; *Chicago Defender*, 13 Jan. 1923, in Tuskegee Institute News Clippings File, reel 240, frame 88; '*And the Negro, for what did he fight?*': *celebrated speech delivered by Roscoe Conkling Simmons, America's famous orator at the Eighth Regiment Armoury, Chicago, Tuesday, November 26 1918* (Chicago, 1918), HUM2.50, box 1.

Roscoe Grant telegraphed word to Mr. A. W. Fite who passed the word around town.' Blacks nationwide awaited Simmons's words on the radio, and some fans, such as Fred H. Bunton from Rushville, Indiana, invited friends over to share the moment.[45]

In the same campaign, Robert Vann, editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, sensed 'millions of Negroes turning the picture of Abraham Lincoln to the wall'. Not so Roscoe. In the face of depression and despair, time would 'dip her pen in the dews of truth and beneath the story of the patience of Lincoln, which gave us the new nation, she will write of the endurance of Herbert Hoover, which offers us the new spirit of inward conquest'. His message to the convention was that Hoover could 'perform for the government as Lincoln performed for man'. But, to African Americans crowded around their radios, he reaffirmed the watchwords of Frederick Douglass that 'The Republican Party is the ship, all else is the sea.' Simmons brought that listing vessel to life; Hoover, its captain, had the power to 'smile the sea into ripples and the winds into zephyrs'. As he concluded, the Colonel told the rapt audience that he was a messenger sent by Lincoln, whose grave he had recently visited. He was to tell Hoover that Lincoln 'travelled the path now trod by him. Say to him that that path was cleared by time only for the few brave enough to walk alone towards these immortals' fields.'[46]

The effect was extraordinary, not least because of the drama which took place in the hall during the speech. A white reporter, Roger Dider, describes the scene: 'The star reporters of the Nation … and hundreds of others, united Thursday in declaring that a sorrel-headed Negro had delivered the best speech made in the Republican national convention.' Simmons relished the occasion and overran his allotted time. To Dider, the subsequent action on the platform constituted 'a miracle':

> Forward to the speaker strode the chairman, Bertrand H. Snell. He placed a warning finger upon the speaker's shoulder. 'One minute more', he said. The crowd thought he had told the Negro to stop. A wild howl went up from the centre of the hall. 'No, let him go on', they said. The speaker, aware of his victory over the audience, stepped back to let it protest for him … Then forward stepped Walter Newton, Hoover's secretary. 'Let him go on', he stated, and on Simmons continued amidst the cheering of 20,000 spectators … His exit from the platform was blocked by senators, committeemen, governors and others high in the public life who sought to touch 'the hem of his garment'.[47]

Simmons spoke for twice as long as anyone else and many black newspapers

[45] See HUM2.24, box 2, fragmentary notes, which contain a sheet listing what Simmons regarded as his greatest oratorical achievements; William F. Nowlin, *The Negro in American national politics* (Boston, 1931), pp. 67–8; *Nashville Independent*, 18 June 1932 and 25 June 1932 (quote), HUM2.75, box 1; Fred H. Bunton to RCS, 16 June 1932, HUM2.8, box 1.

[46] Andrew Buni, *Robert L. Vann of the Pittsburgh Courier: politics and black journalism* (Pittsburgh, 1974), p. 194; *Official report of the proceedings of the twentieth Republican national convention, held in Chicago, Illinois June 14, 15 and 16, 1932* (New York, 1932), pp. 189–92.

[47] Dider quoted in *Pittsburgh Courier*, 25 June 1932, HUM2.75, box 1.

related these events with tremendous pride. A friend in Los Angeles related that 'up and down the avenue in barbershops and hotels, the common voter was discussing "Roscoe". One of your admirers was having his hair cut; … he leaped out of the chair and exclaimed, "That's my boy Roscoe, whoever he nominates gits lected."' On his press releases, Simmons reminded editors of this achievement, noting that the speech 'is taught in colleges for its English and its eloquence'. The Republicans also took note and put Simmons in the forefront of their publicity efforts. The *Amsterdam News* was virtually a lone voice in expressing concern that 'Simmons uttered not one word against [the] hackneyed plank under which the Negro is being crushed by the Republican party.'[48]

Yet unglamorous Chicago ward meetings and small rural churches were the usual sites where Simmons applied his talents. On the South Side, he appeared in public debates held at Washington Park during the Depression. With many of his political duties, there was no payment to reward his efforts. Even when reimbursed for his appearances, his journeys could be uncomfortable and humiliating. It is no accident that Simmons targeted the Jim Crow railroad car as the epitome of the iniquities of segregation, since he so often encountered it. Hence some of his most impassioned rhetoric dwelt on the evils of separate and unequal facilities: 'This nation cannot exist with one race, paying an equal price, riding in filthy railway cars, while another race rides in clean railway cars. The railroads will not be broken up, but the "Jim Crow" must go.'[49]

It was on the back of his speaking career that Simmons based his claim for a relevant role in American public life; also, oratory constituted the grounds on which his most loyal supporters lauded his achievements. The message was precisely the same as that contained in his journalism, but the medium was far more his own. The *St. Louis American* felt Simmons's oratory made him a statesman and a figure above politics. But for those who attended his performances, it was his communion with his listeners – in addition to socializing at banquets and picnics – which counted. As V. L. Bishop wrote to his idol, after missing an engagement in Henderson, Kentucky, 'it marked the first time that you have spoke in the radious of fifty mile of me any wher that I fail to here you, so personally you know how I feel about you.' The emotional succour that many derived from watching and listening to Simmons, the strength and pleasure that it gave them, were arguably his most valuable contributions. It was his participation in a growing black public sphere that allowed him to reach so many African Americans and to further the contact points between the community's various elements.[50]

[48] *Houston Informer*, 25 June 1932; *Chicago Defender*, 18 June 1932; *Chicago World*, 18 June 1932, HUM2.75, box 1; A. J. Gary to RCS, 17 June 1932, HUM2.10, box 6, Republican National Committee folder; *New York Amsterdam News*, 22 June 1932, p. 8.

[49] Telephone interview with Leonard Evans, 15 Aug. 1999, Tucson, Arizona; speech fragment, n.d., HUM2.50, box 2.

[50] *St. Louis American*, n.d., HUM2.75, box 1; V. L. Bishop to RCS, 24 Apr. 1937, HUM2.10, box 1, American Legion folder.

Furthermore, Simmons's links with churches, colleges, and voluntary societies could revise our view of the level of politicization among blacks, especially the vast majority of Southerners who were denied the vote. At the very least, political issues were discussed by black Americans in the clubs and lodges serving all locales. Moreover, the multiple roles performed by local leaders – as ministers, writers, women's club leaders, and entrepreneurs – reinforced the connections between communities, institutions, and individuals. We may ultimately conclude that fraternities and women's clubs were not so politically inert, forced to air racial matters purely within the black world, if their concerns could be articulated more broadly through spokesmen like Simmons.

Celebrities like Simmons – personalities who earned the respect of Americans as a whole – were often cherished by the black community. The Colonel's popular support cannot, of course, compare with that of Jackie Robinson or Joe Louis, yet the admiration which he inspired was substantial. And his oratory, his performative talent, was crucial in this respect, similar to the sportsmen, singers, and musicians who filled African Americans with pride. In the historical novel, *A lesson before dying* (1993), Ernest Gaines captures precisely the awe and reverence which surrounded figures such as Louis, Marian Anderson, and Mary McLeod Bethune. Gaines's character, Grant Wiggins, overhears some men in a bar discussing black sporting greats: 'Then I began to listen closely to how they talked about their heroes, how they talked about the dead and about how great the dead had once been. I heard it everywhere.'[51]

[51] Ernest J. Gaines, *A lesson before dying* (New York, 1993), p. 90.