

REVIEW ESSAY

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ON MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. AND THE LANDSCAPE  
OF CIVIL RIGHTS RHETORIC

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*Behind the Dream: The Making of the Speech That Transformed a Nation.* By Clarence Jones and Stuart Connelly. New York: Palgrave, 2011; pp. 224. \$22.00 cloth; \$14.00 paper.

*King's Dream: The Legacy of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" Speech.* By Eric Sundquist. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009; pp. viii + 295. \$14.00 paper.

*"Making a Way out of No Way": Martin Luther King's Proverbial Rhetoric.* By Wolfgang Mieder. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010; pp. xiv + 551. \$169.95 cloth.

*Martin Luther King and the Rhetoric of Freedom: The Exodus Narrative in America's Struggle for Civil Rights.* By Gary Selby. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008; pp. xii + 217. \$34.95 paper.

*The Word of the Lord Is Upon Me: The Righteous Performance of Martin Luther King, Jr.* By Jonathan Rieder. Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2008; pp. xi + 394. \$18.95 paper.

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For several decades after the death of Martin Luther King Jr., surprisingly few scholars have carefully examined the rhetoric of King and other figures of the civil rights movement. Fortunately, over approximately the last five years, that situation has been changing, as this group of books suggests.<sup>1</sup>

Here, I review the books listed—all of which treat King's oratory. Then, I analyze the rapidly expanding scholarship about the racial struggle of the 1950s and 1960s. Strenuously challenging the national memory of King as the only notable leader of racial agitation, this research charts a constellation of important strategists and orators—virtually all of whom warrant attention from those who seek to understand the politics and rhetoric of the largest mass movement for human rights in American history.

One task of rhetorical scholars is to fathom how civil rights advocates managed to seize and reinvigorate commonplaces. Wolfgang Mieder, a professor of German and folklore, has spent his career contemplating proverbs, including those favored by Abraham Lincoln, Harry Truman, and Barack Obama. Here, he examines King's use of proverbs from the Bible, literature, and folk culture. Mieder devotes more than half of this volume to indexing King's huge number of proverbs, quoting a chunk of a King text that revolves around each familiar expression. Mieder contends that King's rhetoric succeeded, to a large degree, because he stockpiled sayings and adages to hurl at the racial status quo. Using proverbs, Mieder argues, enabled King to wrap himself in Christianity, Shakespeare, Langston Hughes, American "folk wisdom," and everyday "common sense," and thereby to seem much more palatable (especially to whites) than he would otherwise have appeared. In this argument, King's ability to rechristen proverbs helped him become, to use the phrase of August Meier, a "conservative militant" as he promoted radical notions about racial equality, non-violence, and the end of poverty. Mieder's argument is strong, largely because he thoroughly documents King's use of proverbs.

In an examination of King's "I Have a Dream," Eric Sundquist, a professor of literature and humanities, joins Mieder in thoughtfully pursuing antecedent meanings of King's phrases. Throughout this book, Sundquist illuminates "I Have a Dream" by unpacking trainloads of associations that King's words summon for his listeners. For example, Sundquist discusses previous, approximately similar (or, in one case, opposite), culturally rich uses of dream motifs in the biblical book of Daniel and among such

important American writers as Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, and white Southerner Lillian Smith. Sundquist also concentrates on uses of dream imagery in 1962 that apparently impacted either King or his listeners, imagery from an African American woman speaking at a church service in Georgia, a white woman conversing in Georgia, and the Temptations crooning for Motown Records. Sundquist explains that, near the end of "I Have a Dream," King quotes from "America" ("My country 'tis of thee"), an anthem that inspired Union soldiers during the Civil War and became an evergreen of American song. As Sundquist shows, King's metaphor of bells pealing freedom appeared not only in "America" but also in an antislavery pamphlet, an abolitionist poem, a slave spiritual, James Weldon Johnson's "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (known as the "Negro National Anthem"), and Pete Seeger's "If I Had a Hammer." Even though King sounded learned in "I Have a Dream," he apparently selected dream imagery for his famous speech for the same reason that he chose proverbs, to reinvigorate commonplaces that his listeners already understood.

In 2003, Drew Hansen, a former Rhodes Scholar and now a lawyer and state legislator, carefully explored the evolution of "I Have a Dream."<sup>2</sup> Aware that King often repeated and adapted material from his own earlier addresses—in effect, treating each speech as a possible draft for a future speech—Hansen traced the dream motif that King refined at a massive rally in Detroit two months before delivering "I Have a Dream." Hansen also supplied ample quotations of various written drafts of "I Have a Dream," allowing readers to track, in some detail, the evolution of the words that came to comprise that speech.

With such notable exceptions as Coretta Scott King, Martin Luther King, Sr., Ralph Abernathy, and Andrew Young, many of those closest to King failed to write either an autobiography or a memoir. Thankfully, Clarence Jones has now joined the circle of memoirists, generating an informative and decidedly valuable account of his entire relationship with King. Jones explains that, in his role as King's lawyer, he visited King in a Birmingham jail and assisted with the composition of the civil rights leader's exceedingly influential "Letter from Birmingham Jail." He relates that he smuggled out King's initial notes for "Letter" by hiding them inside his waistband, where the Alabama jailers did not bother to look.

In addition to his legal work for King, Jones sometimes teamed with Stanley Levison, a friend of both Jones and King, to draft speeches for the

always busy civil rights orator, speeches that included "I Have a Dream." Jones becomes the only King speechwriter or confidant to provide a detailed first-hand account of the composition of any of King's major addresses. In his extremely significant report of the composition of "I Have a Dream," which should be read alongside Hansen's excellent scholarship, Jones carefully explains the final process of crafting the speech, including King's lively brainstorming sessions with Jones and other talkative advisers in the lobby of the Willard Hotel the night before King delivered the speech. Jones also relates his own earlier work with Levison to generate a draft of "I Have a Dream" that includes the significant metaphor of a "promissory note" that became a "bad check." Extended over several sentences, this metaphor enlivens the early portion of King's best-known oration and contributes importantly to his overall effort to link his demand for racial equality to the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

In an almost comical account, Jones relates that he decided to try to copyright "I Have a Dream" only at the very last second on the day of the massive protest, when reporters were about to pounce on printed drafts of the speech that King's aides were making available. Jones explains that he managed to penetrate a crowd in a sudden effort to get a circled "C" marked on each page of each copy of the speech draft before the journalists could read it. The legal-minded Jones thought that adding the circled "C" might ensure success in copyrighting the speech in King's name. In subsequent years, the King estate has apparently garnered a large sum of money from Jones's impromptu copyright of "I Have a Dream" as a species of King's "intellectual property."

Given Jones's huge contributions to King and the civil rights movement, one certainly hesitates to criticize him. But, unfortunately, in addition to his important I-was-there account, Jones makes a dubious claim. Noticing that King abandoned his written text halfway through the speech, Jones wrongly asserts that King delivered the second half of "I Have a Dream" in an "extemporaneous" fashion (115).<sup>3</sup> Despite Jones's statement, very little of the second half of "I Have a Dream" is extemporaneous. As Hansen and Sundquist explain, King was remembering and refining the "I have a dream" section of the speech from his own earlier addresses. Also, consider Archibald Carey, a prominent African Methodist Episcopal minister in Chicago and friend of King. In "I Have a Dream," King reused and adapted the "Let freedom ring" conclusion of a remarkable speech that Carey delivered

at the Republican National Convention of 1952. King's repetition and adjustment of Carey's conclusion is entirely consistent with King's regular practice of borrowing material from other preachers.<sup>4</sup> His echo of Carey in "I Have a Dream" was initially revealed in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* in 1989.<sup>5</sup> Both Hansen and Sundquist reflect on King's reuse of Carey's "Let freedom ring" peroration; as Hansen explains, King first borrowed Carey's ending during the late 1950s.<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Rieder also accepts the attribution of King's "Let freedom ring" anaphora to Carey. Writing in 1994, Garry Wills, a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian, reiterated this attribution, as did Michael Eric Dyson, a prominent public intellectual, in 2001. Writing in 1991, David Garrow, another Pulitzer Prize winner and author of the best biography of King, emphasizes King's regular practice of recycling and reconfiguring others' material.<sup>7</sup> As far as I can tell, no one anywhere has ever challenged the attribution of King's conclusion to Carey.

However, in a work that trumpets the importance of copyrighting "I Have a Dream," Jones neglects to mention King's decision to repeat and adapt Carey's conclusion. Like the actual Jones-King copyright of "I Have a Dream," Jones's book entirely ignores Carey. Despite Jones's claim to the contrary, *no one* can spontaneously invent and extemporize lines that *someone else* delivered 11 years earlier. Jones also does not explain how copyright law can protect as original a conclusion that was unoriginal.

Carey was not unique either. Rather, his speech reflects a long tradition of African American jeremiads that started in the 18th century and that include Frederick Douglass's most famous speech, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" from 1852 and many of Douglass's other addresses, both antebellum and postbellum.<sup>8</sup> Carey's conclusion closely resembles the final segment of Ida B. Wells's well-known African American jeremiad, "Lynch Law in All Its Phases" from 1893. King himself delivered many variations of the jeremiad before "I Have a Dream," which itself is a classic jeremiad replete with time-honored exceedingly customary appeals to the Declaration of Independence, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Bible.<sup>9</sup> Whatever one thinks about copyright law, Douglass, Wells, Carey, William Croghan, Benjamin Mays, and a very long line of other gifted African American orators deserve recognition for crafting, honing, and sustaining the jeremiad, which for well over a century contributed mightily to creating, empowering, and nurturing an African American community that proved strong enough to survive many decades of auction blocks, whippings, rapes,

lynching, torture, severe exploitation, wrongful and cruel imprisonment, extreme poverty, disfranchisement, and segregation.

King's ability to deliver a single African American jeremiad via television helped reach a gigantic national audience that included millions of whites, an audience that many earlier jeremiad orators could hardly have imagined. But the content and structure of "I Have a Dream" stem directly from many generations of African American speakers. Why does all this matter? Because it is absolutely demonstrable and undeniable that no single orator and no single oration "transformed a nation," as Jones's subtitle wrongly claims. Instead, huge numbers of African Americans created themselves, bonded together, and repealed legalized segregation through many, many decades of arduous struggle, lofty songs, and equally lofty oratory. Without these exceedingly robust political, musical, and oratorical traditions, no one would have appeared at the March on Washington to hear any speaker say anything. One does not honor or illuminate King's magnificent rhetoric by ignoring the majestic orators who devised the jeremiad structure of "I Have a Dream." Nor does anyone honor or illuminate King by ignoring his reiteration and adaptation of the elevated conclusion of Wells and Carey.

Unlike the other authors under review, Rieder, a professor of sociology, does not concentrate on a particular speech, rhetorical subset, or theme of King's rhetoric. Instead, Rieder dedicated almost two decades to researching and writing about King's discourse in general, with much of that time spent combing through literally thousands of speeches, sermons, interviews, and other texts by King, many of them still unpublished. Perhaps only 12 or 15 other scholars have ever attempted to scale this particular mountain of discourse. While reflecting thoughtfully on a large body of King's orations (plus "Letter from Birmingham Jail"), Rieder enriches his study by quoting from his interviews with J. T. Johnson, Tom Houck, Andrew Marrissett, Willie Bolden, and others who knew King but who have seldom been interviewed before. Instead of hammering a thesis, the knowledgeable Rieder produces a variety of ideas that percolate throughout his chapters. Perhaps his main concern is to pinpoint King's ability to juggle high-cultural and vernacular oratorical styles while addressing African American and white listeners with what Rieder calls his "crossover rhetoric" (30) and "hybrid talk" (152), which advanced his "boundary-spanning role" (89).

Rieder wisely notices the important but little-studied topic of King's relationship to Judaism. King and other civil rights agitators claimed that biblical antecedents—including many from the Hebrew Bible—undergirded their campaign for civil rights. As Rieder explains, Abraham Heschel, a well-regarded theologian who fled Poland to escape the Nazis, rejoiced that King and other African Americans often used their pulpits and songfests to use the civil rights struggle as a new chapter of the Exodus, which biblical scholars identify as the core narrative of Hebrew scripture. Heschel and other Jewish leaders also favored King's evocation of the blissful visions of Hebrew prophets for the purpose of sketching the end of racism. As Rieder explains, Heschel regarded the African American crusade so highly that he thought it might help rejuvenate Judaism. The two men treasured their friendship, which they nurtured when Heschel joined King on the Selma-to-Montgomery March. In private, Rieder comments, King affectionately called Heschel "my rabbi" (284).

Gary Selby, a professor of communication studies, devotes an entire book to King's revival of the biblical Exodus. Selby begins by carefully tracing a very long tradition in which slaves and subsequent African Americans used the Exodus to frame their own condition while providing hope for eventual liberation. As Selby remarks, King's application of the Exodus extends and reconfigures many African American accounts, in sermon and song, of Egyptian slavery, Pharaoh, Moses, the Red Sea, the wilderness, and the Promised Land. Selby notes that King sometimes hangs an entire sermon on the scaffolding of the Exodus while, on other occasions, very briefly but suggestively narrates the civil rights movement as a new manifestation of the ancient Hebrew saga. Selby wisely devotes an entire chapter to King's fascinating Exodus sermon about a trip to Ghana that allowed him to witness the ceremony that officially switched Ghana from British colony to independent nation. Especially helpful is Selby's use of Roy Rappaport, Paul Ricoeur, and other rhetorical theorists to explain King's extraordinary capacity not only to revive the Exodus story but also to place his listeners *inside* it. For King, one advantage of using the civil rights struggle as another Exodus was to promise emancipation from segregation while conceding that, like the ancient Hebrews, oppressed African Americans would wander for years "through the wilderness" before they would ever reach the "Promised Land." As Selby explains, King never tired of

updating the Exodus motif, using it as a trademark appeal over his whole career.

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Mesmerized by King's oratory, the reporters who followed him sometimes inscribed and telecast a King-centered version of the civil rights movement, a storyline that has since become enshrined in national memory. This often-recited narrative locates the start of the racial struggle in 1955, when Rosa Parks's arrest in Montgomery launched King onto the national stage. Next, the narrative relates several largely non-King protests. Then, it reaches three peaks: the King-identified demonstrations and jailings in Birmingham in 1963; the King-identified March on Washington later in 1963, capped by his "I Have a Dream," speech; and the King-identified Selma-to-Montgomery March in 1965. Finally, the narrative proclaims the movement died in Memphis at the exact moment when King fell to an assassin's bullet in 1968.

Beginning in the 1980s, a large number of extremely capable historians have placed regional, state, and local Southern agitation under their microscopes. Together, their findings destabilize the King-dominated narrative. In 1981, William Chafe authored a pioneering book about lunch counter sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina; in 1985, Robert Norrell provided a book-length examination of a racial campaign in Tuskegee, Alabama.<sup>10</sup> In the following year, Clayborne Carson lauded the research of Chafe, Norrell, and Aldon Morris while criticizing their scholarly predecessors and emphasizing the importance and the diversity of effervescence during the 1950s and 1960s, noting that:

the [older scholarly] literature fails, for the most part, to explain what occurred at the core of the black struggle where deeply committed activists sustained local movements and acquired distinctive tactics, strategies, leadership styles, and ideologies. It was among activists at the core of the struggle that new radical conceptions of American society and black identity emerged.<sup>11</sup>

Published in 1995, John Dittmer's analysis of civil rights demonstrations in Mississippi helped inaugurate a cavalcade of historical books that largely bypass the King-centered plotline. Among the most notable entries in this scholarly parade are Elizabeth Jacoway's exploration of the Little Rock Nine



and the Arkansas school crisis of 1957; Raymond Arsenault's treatment of the Freedom Rides of 1961; Charles Eagles's investigation of the tumult surrounding James Meredith's integration of the University of Mississippi in 1962; and Charles Payne's research about nonviolent ferment among sharecroppers and others in the Mississippi Delta during the early 1960s—all of which are so thoroughly and meticulously researched and so cogently written that they can only be called magisterial.<sup>12</sup> Significantly, Chafe, Norrell, Dittmer, Jacoway, Arsenault, Payne, and Eagles all grant King merely a cameo role in their histories because King was quite obviously not an important player in the protests that they study. However, white racists created extremely disturbing incidents surrounding the Little Rock Nine, the Freedom Rides, James Meredith, and the Mississippi Freedom Summer. *All* these incidents generated gargantuan national and international news reports that dramatized nonviolent activism, riveted the attention of Americans, and embarrassed the United States abroad by refuting the claim that America represented democracy during the Cold War.

Other scholars have escorted extremely significant female leaders out of the long shadow of King's reputation, showering them with the attention that they richly deserve. David Garrow edits the memoir of Joann Robinson, an English teacher whose organizing skills and mimeograph machine helped prompt the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Catherine Fosl generates a finely detailed biography of Anne Braden, a civil rights dynamo in Louisville. Cynthia Fleming examines Ruby Doris Robinson, a crucial behind-the-scenes planner for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Kay Mills, Chana Kai Lee, and Charles Marsh limn the career of Fannie Lou Hamer, a sharecropper-turned-orator in the Mississippi Delta.<sup>13</sup> Barbara Ransby supplies a lengthy study of Ella Baker, a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) veteran and "mother" of both King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and SNCC. Wesley Logan crafts a significant book-length study of interactions among the men and women of SNCC.<sup>14</sup> Together, Fleming, Mills, Lee, Ransby, and Logan illuminate Hamer, Baker, and a large body of vibrant younger activists who resisted King's plea to join SCLC and instead heeded Baker's call to form SNCC, which historians generally recognize as the most significant civil rights organization in the South.

Moreover, other researchers detail the difficult, often dangerous, work of activists in local settings before and after King arrived there. Laurie Green

analyzes waves of protests in Memphis during the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s that crested during the garbage workers' strike of 1968. Glen Eskew, Andrew Manis, and Diane McWhorter investigate the Birmingham crusade of 1963, which McWhorter calls "the climax of the civil rights movement."<sup>15</sup> Eskew contends that Birmingham was less than a strictly noble triumph. Manis and McWhorter painstakingly buttress their argument that the indispensable spark plug in Birmingham was not King himself, but Fred Shuttlesworth, the excitable and tireless local minister who worked closely with King. In yet another magisterial book, J. Mills Thornton joins the effort of Manis and McWhorter to move King off center stage in Birmingham.<sup>16</sup> Supplying a thoroughly researched and intricate analysis of municipal politics in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma, Thornton strongly maintains that King's leadership was not the linchpin of civil rights campaigns in any of these cities. Instead, he claims, very specific local situations and personalities shaped the outcome in each of these nationally publicized flashpoints.

In addition to those historians who provide, if you will, a synchronic critique of the standard King-centered narrative, other researchers present a diachronic critique of the same narrative. Glenda Gilmore and others anatomize many important episodes in the African American struggle one or more decades before the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Gilmore explains:

There was never a time when black Southerners gave up their political aspirations, and increasing numbers voted in urban areas throughout the 1930s and 1940s. The legal campaign to desegregate education began in 1933. These issues . . . were part of a much larger push for economic justice and a broad vision of human rights that made up what historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall has called "the long Civil Rights Movement."<sup>17</sup>

Autobiographies by many agitators support the efforts of Gilmore and Hall to frame the movement as stretching decades before 1955 and decades after 1968. Pauli Murray and Dorothy Height underscore the seamlessness of their protests, which, as they explain, started in the 1930s and continued long after King's assassination.<sup>18</sup> Using the authorial name "Mrs. Medgar Evers," Myrlie Evers produced one autobiography about her very shy and anxious years as a traditional homemaker before her husband's assassination in 1963. Using the authorial name "Myrlie Evers-Williams," she gen-

erated another autobiography that tracks her metamorphosis into a trailblazing feminist and national NAACP leader long after the “civil rights era” allegedly concluded.<sup>19</sup> Other autobiographers, including a significant number of SNCC women, interpret their own activism during the 1970s, 1980s, and (in some cases) into the 2010s as the continued pursuit of the same racial and gender equality that they sought during the years of King’s public career, albeit this time outside the notice of national news media.<sup>20</sup> For Braden, Height, Murray, Evers-Williams, and many in SNCC, the “civil rights era” literally has never ended.

Some rhetorical scholars join historians in looking beyond King. Freddie Colston edited a valuable collection of speeches by Benjamin Mays, President of Morehouse College, who, before and during the 1950s and 1960s, decried segregation in prominent national and international Christian conclaves and at university forums.<sup>21</sup> Uncovering little-known but electrifying civil rights speeches hidden in the dusty corners of archives, Davis Houck and his co-editors amassed three important volumes: a collection of 130 civil rights orations by more than 100 activists; an anthology of 39 speeches by Height, Murray, Baker, Diane Nash, Daisy Bates, and other stellar female leaders; and a collection of Hamer’s addresses.<sup>22</sup> This final volume is a particular godsend because—despite the indomitable Hamer’s ability to surmount torture by white supremacists, rouse sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta, and rattle an American president—her speeches have, unaccountably, never before been placed within the covers of a book. If I were in charge of awards, Meagan Brooks and Houck would receive both a Pulitzer Prize and a MacArthur “Genius” Grant for their role as the first editors to assemble the addresses of one of the most sterling and important orators in all of American history. Brooks’s very rare interview with Hamer’s daughter (now living in Memphis) is a special highlight of this breakthrough volume.

Yet, while many crucial actors certainly warrant the scholarly spotlight, King *did* display important leadership and often (and obviously) functioned, for a national audience, as the synecdoche and spokesperson for the cause. There remains much to say about King. As far as I can tell, only three scholars have written books about “I Have a Dream”—Hansen, Sundquist, and David Bobbitt (who provides a stimulating Burkean analysis).<sup>23</sup> Further, King delivered a number of sermons that, to this day, never have been published and that rarely—if ever—have been analyzed by anyone at all. King’s widow, Coretta Scott King, recorded a clutch of King’s sermons in

Montgomery that scholars never knew existed until 2007, when they were transcribed for volume six of *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project*, edited by Clayborne Carson and his team at Stanford University.<sup>24</sup> In his 2001 book about King's pulpit, Mervyn Warren included four of King's previously unpublished orations.<sup>25</sup> In 2011, Michael Honey, author of the most thorough treatment of King's final campaign in Memphis, transcribed and edited 16 previously unprinted speeches that King gave to various union gatherings.<sup>26</sup> Before his final address, "I've Been to the Mountain-top," King delivered one other oration to striking garbage workers and their supporters in Memphis. Fortunately, Honey includes this significant, but little-known, address, "All Labor Has Dignity," in his volume of the same title.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to King texts that remain to be studied, many theoretical frameworks and approaches to civil rights rhetoric remain to be pursued. A member of King's staff at Selma, Chuck Fager, observes that only King's close friend, Ralph Abernathy, not King himself, could evince "a droll, earthy humor in his speeches" while ridiculing the foibles of segregationists and sometimes leaving an African American audience "convulsed with laughter."<sup>28</sup> In a single night before the same crowd, Fager notes Abernathy and King would operate as a friendly "oratorical duo" who "worked together" and "played off each other," with Abernathy wielding his folksy approach and King speaking in his polished, philosophical manner.<sup>29</sup> Their contrasting styles created a highly sophisticated form of oratorical synergy, not only in Selma, where Fager heard them, but also, as Rieder notes, in mass meetings in Birmingham.<sup>30</sup> In addition to Abernathy, other orators, such as James Bevel, frequently joined King in addressing a single audience.

A Southern mass meeting rarely, if ever, consisted only of oratory. During the 1960s, Pat Watters, a skillful journalist, evocatively described these high-energy rallies, which amounted to a form of religious revival, in his indispensable first-hand account.<sup>31</sup> Wisely relying on Watters, Rieder astutely observes that

a King speech was part of a field of black sound constituted by speakers' words, opening and closing prayers, congregational singing, gospel choirs, solo song leaders, amen corners, audience validations of "amen" and "well," moaning, chanting, groaning, sighing, yelling. The density of sound reflected

the fluidity of boundaries between all the parties present. . . . This is why one can't really speak of King's rally talk as bounded bits of rhetoric (158).

As part of their participation in this "field of black sound" and words, King, Abernathy, and other speakers frequently blurred discourse boundaries by incorporating song lyrics into their oratory, often in their rousing conclusions. I suggest that, in response to the scholarship of Mieder, Hansen, Rieder, and Sundquist, rhetorical critics should now examine in detail how *all* the oratory and song lyrics of a specific civil rights rally functioned *together* to create patterns of argumentation as sophisticated as the weave of a Persian carpet.

Nathaniel Rivers and Ryan Weber pose a tougher challenge. Analyzing appeals during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, they maintain that rhetorical scholars should create an "ecological" model that can take into account discursive relationships within the rhetoric of an entire campaign, such as the one in Montgomery.<sup>32</sup> This interconnected rhetoric includes speeches, sermons, newsletters, news releases, and press conferences; the music and lyrics of spirituals, hymns, gospel songs, and repurposed pop hits; and photographs and streaming television images conveyed on nightly newscasts.<sup>33</sup>

Here are two more challenges. First, literary critics and rhetorical scholars should address the extremely valuable autobiographies and memoirs of those involved in civil rights and Black Power protests of the 1950s and 1960s. By my count, activists and others have produced at least 70 first-hand accounts. Many literary critics have wisely researched and taught American slave narratives. But apart from attending to works by Maya Angelou and a few others, they have generally and foolishly ignored subsequent African American political autobiographies and memoirs, especially those written during the past 40 years. This bias against recent literature is illogical and unjustified, because many of these works deserve careful critical scrutiny and deserve to be taught.

Second, researchers should tackle segregationist rhetoric. As Charles Eagles observes, historians of civil rights "have tended to emphasize one side of the struggle, the movement side, and to neglect their professional obligation to understand the other side, the segregationist opposition."<sup>34</sup> He could have been writing about rhetorical critics as well, for careful analysis of 20th century white supremacist rhetoric is extremely difficult to locate. Among

many possible paradigms for studying segregationists' language is Patricia Roberts-Miller's provocative theory of cunning projection, which she uses to illuminate proslavery rhetoric during the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s.<sup>35</sup>

Addressing these challenges might help answer at least some of the following questions: how did the African American struggle, which surprised and confounded such large numbers of people (including many intellectuals), swell into an earthshaking movement? How did rhetors persuade some listeners to risk their lives for what could be seen as an abstract cause? Why did those rhetors constantly bandy "freedom" as their Burkean God-term, and what did that term signify in their discourse? How did the rhetorical interplay of Black Nationalism and Christian nonviolence foster sometimes shifting modes of identification and counteridentification? How did the struggle help inspire protests in South Africa, Poland, the Philippines, Russia, China, and elsewhere? How did it help prompt Black Nationalism, antiwar dissent, the second wave of American feminism, and other progressive causes in the United States? Which of its features are replicable and which are unique? And, most importantly, how could it possibly have persuaded so many Americans to decide that racial equality is a worthy ideal?

Jack Selzer once told me that the rhetoric of the civil rights movement is "almost infinite." I agree. Our work has barely begun. If you want a rewarding project, then try the rhetoric of the civil rights movement. You can start almost anywhere.

## NOTES

1. In addition to the works under review and mentioned in this essay, I heartily recommend a special issue on King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" published in *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 7.4 (2007).
2. Drew Hansen, *The Dream* (New York: Ecco 2003).
3. Unfortunately, many people probably believe this erroneous claim. In *Parting the Waters*, his very popular Pulitzer Prize-winning book of 1989, Taylor Branch inaccurately claimed that King extemporized the second half of "I Have a Dream." At the time that Branch was writing *Parting the Waters*, however, no one had stated in print that King borrowed and adjusted Carey's conclusion. Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1989).

4. Keith D. Miller, *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Its Sources* (New York: Free Press, 1992).
5. Keith D. Miller, "Voice Merging and Self-Making: The Epistemology of 'I Have a Dream,'" *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 19 (1989): 23–32.
6. Hansen, *The Dream*, 108–109.
7. Garry Wills, "Rhetorical: Martin Luther King, Jr." *Certain Trumpets: The Call of Leaders* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1994); Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not. Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Free Press, 2001); Michael Eric Dyson, *A Michael Eric Dyson Reader* (New York: Basic CIVITAS Books, 2004); David Garrow, "King's Plagiarism: Imitation, Insecurity, and Transformation," *Journal of American History* 27 (1991): 86–92.
8. David Howard-Pitney, *The Afro-American Jeremiad* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 2001); Elizabeth Vander Lei and Keith D. Miller, "Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' in Context: Ceremonial Protest and the African American Jeremiad," *College English* 62 (1999): 83–99.
9. Vander Lei and Miller, "Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' in Context."
10. William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press 1981); Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi* (New York: Knopf, 1985).
11. Clayborne Carson, "Civil Rights, Reform, and the Black Freedom Struggle," in *The Civil Rights Movement in America*, ed. Charles Eagles (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 19–32.
12. John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995); Elizabeth Jacoway, *Turn Away Thy Son: Little Rock, the Crisis That Shocked the Nation* (New York: Free Press, 2007); Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Charles Eagles, *The Price of Defiance: James Meredith and the Integration of Ole Miss* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
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