

6 ALL NATIONS, ONE BLOOD, THREE HUNDRED YEARS: MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., FANNIE LOU HAMER, AND CIVIL RIGHTS RHETORIC AS TRANSATLANTIC ABOLITIONISM

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In his germinal *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy critiques long-entrenched paradigms that insulate the study of British history, culture, and rhetoric from the study of American history, culture, and rhetoric. He proposes to replace these paradigms with a Transatlantic framework capable of encompassing the hybrid culture and politics of the many black people who crisscrossed the Atlantic. In this essay, I claim that Gilroy's Transatlantic framework proves helpful in understanding an important strand of rhetoric that leading British abolitionists and American abolitionists developed and that Martin Luther King, Jr., Fannie Lou Hamer, and others extended throughout the civil rights era. Gilroy's framework proves useful when enlarged to include a diachronic dimension that can account for a continuous fabric of discourse that, over a period of literally three hundred years, radicals used to dispute white supremacy.

Civil rights orators repeated a number of elements of anti-slavery rhetoric. For example, as scholars note, American slaves, abolitionist orators, King, and Hamer alike produced songs and oratory that equated African Americans with Biblical Hebrews toiling under the lash of the Egyptian Pharaoh.¹ Researchers, however, ignore radical orators' strong reliance on a very different portion of the Bible—a single sentence contained in *Acts* 17:26 ("God hath made of one blood all the nations for to dwell on all the face of the earth").²

To investigate the many Transatlantic iterations of this appeal-by-citation between 1676 and 1976 is to notice a significant pattern of interargumentation that would escape any scholar attempting to analyze any single rhetor in isolation from her predecessors and descendants or even any scholar attempting to analyze an entire century of rhetors in isolation from those who came before and later. Here I use the term *interargumentation* to designate a specific system of argument developed by a group of anti-slavery rhetors that operated diachronically when later generations of anti-slavery and civil rights orators addressed later generations of audiences. Below I, first, sketch the history of this *interargumentation* and, second, analyze reasons for its attraction to those who relayed it to one generation, then another, then another.

Rhetors apparently began tying *Acts* 17:26 to race relations when they offered distinctly religious (and more-or-less apolitical) appeals for recognizing the humanity of diverse people. In 1676 George Fox, the British Quaker, quoted *Acts* 17:26 while urging Christians to recognize Africans as human beings. In 1700, again in England, Bishop Morgan Godwyn quoted *Acts* 17:26 as a means of asserting the humanity of Native Americans (18). By the beginning of the eighteenth century, *Acts* 17:26 was leaping back and forth across the Atlantic. In 1700 Samuel Sewall, an American Puritan, cited *Acts* 17:26 while appealing for the humanity of American slaves (7).

During the second half of the eighteenth century, as the horrors of slavery became more and more apparent, abolitionism gained momentum, particularly in Britain, but also in the US. On both sides of the Atlantic, passionate opponents of slavery seized *Acts* 17:26, treating it as the revelation of an authoritative Biblical principle that self-evidently militated against slavery. In 1754 John Woolman, a Quaker from Philadelphia, quoted *Acts* 17:26 as he criticized slavery (274). In 1762, Anthony Benezet, another American Quaker, argued for abolition by quoting the same Biblical verse on the title page of his book about Africa. In his popular autobiography of 1789, former slave Olaudah Equiano, who was living in England, copied Benezet by quoting *Acts* 17:26 in order to assail slavery and assert racial equality (31).³ In 1786, Thomas Clarkson, an eminent anti-slavery crusader in Britain, cited the same verse while making the same argument (132-33).

After Britain emancipated its slaves, anti-slavery American orators continued to brandish *Acts* 17:26 as they assaulted bondage. In 1836, Sarah Grimke, a well-known American abolitionist, repudiated slavery while quoting *Acts* 17:26 (105). In 1853, Wendell Phillips, another renowned American abolitionist, urged the repeal of slavery while citing the same passage even as he treated this argument-by-citation as a commonplace of anti-slavery discourse (346). One can readily surmise that he did so because, among the many thousands of American anti-slavery speeches and sermons that were never published, a large number featured the same argument-by-citation from *Acts* 17:26.

While generating their rhetorical and political struggle against slavery, African American leaders joined white abolitionists in gravitating to *Acts* 17:26. Absalom Jones inserted that verse into an 1808 sermon that celebrated a new national law designed to outlaw the further importation of slaves (74). In 1852 Frederick Douglass wielded the same quotation in his most luminous oration—"What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" (126). Like Benezet, Clarkson, Equiano, Sewell, Woolman, Sarah Grimke, and Jones, Douglass spotlighted the claim of *Acts* 17:26—"God hath made of one blood all the nations. . ."—as he lambasted slavery. Douglass's ability to locate that Biblical passage helped prompt him to tell a Scottish audience, "The slaveholders hate the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ" ("Speech" 173).

Long after emancipation, white racist oppression still blighted millions of lives. For that reason, well into the early and middle twentieth century, rhetors continued to harness the same verse from *Acts* as a Biblical proof-text against resurgent white supremacy. In 1925 the brilliant Vernon Johns, who preceded Martin Luther King, Jr., as pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church of Montgomery, Alabama, affirmed racial equality by quoting *Acts* 17:26 (410). During the 1960s, William Holmes Borders, a prominent African American preacher in Atlanta, paraphrased the same verse while making the same argument ("The Way Out" 106). In another sermon titled "All Blood Is Red," Borders emphasized interdependence and racial equality.⁴ In 1954, speaking at a gathering of the World Council of Churches, Benjamin Mays, president of Morehouse College and mentor to the undergraduate King, denounced racial segregation by plucking *Acts* 17:26 ("The Church" 217).⁵

In 1956, delivering a sermon titled "Paul's Letter to American Christians," King himself followed Johns, Borders, and Mays by quoting *Acts* 17:26 as he scorned racism (343). King did so again in two homilies from 1957 ("For All" 124; "Look" 274). He also included "Paul's Letter to American Christians"—and the same sentence from *Acts*—in his homiletic collection, *Strength to Love*, which appeared in 1963 (142). Further, while responding to

a letter from someone who wondered what the Bible said about segregation, King replied that *Acts* 17:26 militated against segregation ("To Wilbert").

As Maegan Parker Brooks cogently explains, Hamer, a school dropout and sharecropper, championed racial equality in stellar speeches composed in her own version of the African American Vernacular English that flourished among the small towns and cotton plantations of the Mississippi Delta (*A Voice*). In many ways, the oratory of Hamer—a rural, impoverished, oppressed, and relatively unlettered woman—contrasts with that of King, an urban, middle-class, relatively privileged male who received a PhD at Boston University. Yet, between 1963 and 1976, Hamer, like King, repeatedly embraced *Acts* 17:26 as a Biblical proof-text against white supremacy.⁶ Hamer's daughter, Vergie Faulkner, explains the religious roots of Hamer's passionate rhetoric by discussing her reliance on the Bible. Although Hamer quoted different Biblical passages, Faulkner only mentions Hamer's use of a single Biblical text—*Acts* 17:26—thereby emphasizing its importance in Hamer's addresses (Brooks, "Interview" 202). One can easily imagine that many other African American orators from the civil rights era joined Johns, Borders, Mays, King, and Hamer in citing the same Biblical text while delivering addresses that were neither recorded nor published.

What advantages did rhetors gain by avidly replaying this specific Biblical appeal that ties centuries of Transatlantic oratory into a large fabric of interargumentation? Of course, many speakers routinely referred to the Bible while arguing for abolition and, later, for African American equality. Angelina Grimke, an important American abolitionist, noted: ". . . our [anti-slavery] books and papers are mostly commentaries on the Bible, and the Declaration [of Independence]" (55). But why did rhetors favor this particular passage?

Investigating the appeal of *Acts* 17:26—"God hath made of one blood all the nations. . ."—for those who read *Acts* as a sacralized Biblical text is helpful to understanding the advantages that the passage supplied to radical orators.

The author of *Acts* presents the assertion as a line from a speech that Paul delivered on Mars Hill in Greece. Failing to supply reasons or evidence for this assertion, both Paul and the author of the *Acts* treat the assertion as apodictic. And it does appear to validate itself. To the naked eye, skin colors differ but all blood looks identical, all blood looks to be one. Further, for readers of *Acts*, the phrase "one blood" serves as a vivid and powerful synecdoche that presents a concrete image of a portion of the body that is common to all humanity while also suggesting other portions of a body—for example, one brain, one nose, two legs, two arms, two eyes, and ten fingers—that are shared by either all or most people of all races. The assertion serves as a lively

synecdoche not only for physical congruence, but also for a broadly shared, underlying commonality.

In addition, *Acts* 17:26 touched and reinforced the religious sensibilities of many readers. The line refers directly to God, who, this passage asserts, "made of one blood all the nations." Obviously, devoted readers regard God as the highest possible authority and the Bible as a divinely inspired text. Credited as the author of no fewer than thirteen Biblical books, Paul also appears as a major character in *Acts* and is known as the evangelist who initially spread Christianity around the Mediterranean Rim. His sermon on Mars Hill is certainly well-known. Believers would, therefore, incline to accept the sentiment of *Acts* 17:26 as authoritative not only because it is biblical but also because Paul utters it in a noteworthy address.⁷

Further, for many believers, these words from Paul recall the well-remembered story in *Genesis* about Adam and Eve. A clear implication of the *Genesis* narrative is that Adam and Eve serve as common ancestors for all humanity and that, therefore, all people share blood relayed to them by Adam and Eve. Because many who read Paul's sermon in *Acts* were already acquainted with the story of Adam and Eve in *Genesis*, *Acts* 17:26 served as a forceful reminder of a conclusion that they already understood.⁸

For rhetors wielding *Acts* 17:26 as a biblical witness against slavery centuries after *Acts* was written, the passage still functioned as a clear, self-validating affirmation of humanity that God authorized and conveyed through a striking synecdoche spoken by a great Christian evangelist and recorded in a sacralized text.

Over several long centuries, several types of pro-slavery and anti-slavery rhetoric circulated widely, sometimes mixed together: fervent appeals to the Bible, fierce disputes about constitutional government, heated disagreements about the principles of the Enlightenment, and elaborate debates about biological evidence pertaining to racial origins. To investigate these arguments religious, constitutional, rationalist, and scientific is to uncover a rhetorical web almost unimaginably vast and intricate.

In part, radical orators plucked *Acts* 17:26 because it could be readily accepted as an aphorism whose simplicity flattens entire mountain ranges of pro-slavery and anti-slavery appeals that arose from the time of the Renaissance until the end of the American Civil War. With a single stroke, *Acts* 17:26 seemed to slice through massive debates with a biblical principle that overruled all other considerations. To reiterate this verse was to articulate what Charles Sellers calls "the uncompromisingly egalitarian credo that abolitionists regularly laid down . . . as their fundamental premise" (xi).

Because *Acts* 17:26 seems to directly affirm the precept of racial equality, abolitionists' reliance on it challenged attempts to moderate slavery through

gradual emancipation, a process that the British implemented in the Caribbean. The repetition of *Acts* 17:26 also undermined the proposal to define American slaves as undesirables and to ship them overseas—a notion seriously advocated, at one point or another, by such prominent figures as Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe, James Madison, John Marshall, Henry Clay, and Abraham Lincoln. As Sellers explains, “The African-American community found its united voice in denouncing the inherent racism of the movement to colonize American blacks in Africa” (xi). The frequent repetition of *Acts* 17:26 aided and amplified that united African American voice.

In order to grasp the clarity afforded by *Acts* 17:26, consider one of the many thousands of pro-slavery and anti-slavery sermons, speeches, newspaper editorials, and treatises—Angelina Grimke’s “Appeal to the Christian Women of the South” from 1836. While avoiding *Acts* 17:26, the abolitionist Grimke displays an impressive and thorough grasp of many portions of the Bible. She explicitly refers to twenty Biblical characters: Adam, Moses, Solomon, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, Daniel, Moses, Miriam, Aaron, Deborah, Esther, Huldah, Mordecai, John the Baptist, Jesus, Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and Paul. While doing so, she quotes twenty-two biblical books: *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Leviticus*, *Deuteronomy*, *Judges*, *II Chronicles*, *I Kings*, *II Kings*, *Psalms*, *Proverbs*, *Isaiah*, *Esther*, *Daniel*, *Matthew*, *Luke*, *John*, *Acts*, *Ephesians*, *Colossians*, *Galatians*, *Philemon*, and *I Timothy*. Included in her learned analysis is a very detailed contention that slaves during the Biblical era received unimaginably better treatment than did slaves in the American South.

Like Theodore Weld and numerous other abolitionists, Angelina Grimke rejects slaveowners’ exceedingly illogical and self-serving claim, based on lines in *Genesis*, that, in response to a very vague offense committed by Noah’s son Ham, God cursed Noah’s grandson Canaan and, thereby, cursed every subsequent generation of African people. As David Goldenberg explains, the argument about this curse spread widely among slaveowners and grew deeply entrenched in slaveholding culture. Trying to refute this argument proved very difficult for two reasons. First, as David Brion Davis observes, the salient passage in *Genesis* is so inscrutable that no one anywhere can unravel its meaning. Second, as Davis contends, slaveowners’ argument about the passage is exceedingly tortured and convoluted (64-66). To dive into this argument—even to rebut it—is to leap into a complicated maze.

For that reason, abolitionists and later radicals who embraced *Acts* 17:26 often ignored slaveowners’ complex arguments about Noah, Ham, and Canaan. While sometimes supplying additional biblical references, many of these radicals eschewed the kind of intricately detailed biblical analysis that Grimke forwards in her tract and instead embraced beautiful simplicity merely by opening their Bibles to *Acts* 17:26. For many, to cite this passage

was to refute slavery while obviating the need to jump into other complicated religious, constitutional, political, philosophical, anthropological, and scientific arguments about bondage.

Segregationists did not usually repeat slaveowners' common interpretation of Noah, Ham, and Canaan. But, as Brooks explains, Hamer reached for *Acts* 17:26 in order to counter what Brooks calls "such widely circulating [white] supremacist claims as 'God was a segregationist'" (*A Voice* 32). Other civil rights orators harnessed *Acts* 17:26, in part, for the same reason.

King was able to fold the now-traditional argument of *Acts* 17:26 into his appeal, in part, because he argued that, while slavery had assumed a different form, it had never ended. Delivering his most heralded address, "I Have a Dream" in 1963, King contended that although Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation appeared as a "joyous daybreak" in 1863, blacks "one hundred years later" were still gripped by the "manacles of segregation" and the "chains of discrimination." In King's rhetorical universe, the argument of *Acts* 17:26 remained salient in 1963 because abolitionists' struggle against slavery had not ended.

Both anti-slavery and civil rights rhetors maintained that segregationists—like their slaveowning predecessors—suffered from what Kenneth Burke calls "trained incapacity" or "occupational psychosis" (*Permanence* 7-9, 40-43). In this argument, large numbers of whites also manifested what Burke terms "bureaucratization of the imaginative," which occurs whenever an institutional procedure becomes so routinized that, as Burke explains, it serves as a "cow-path" that is followed "in pious obedience to its secret grounding in the authority of custom" (*Attitudes* 225-29). For many Southern whites, the system of slavery and racism had become so normalized and so institutionalized that it bureaucratized their imaginations and anesthetized their minds. By citing *Acts* 17:26, radical orators supplied what Burke calls a "perspective by incongruity" designed to upset customary patterns of thought (*Attitudes* 308-14). By crashing a biblical principle against the institutions of slavery and segregation, social crusaders, over a period of three centuries, repeatedly offered a perspective by incongruity that assaulted and re-assaulted white racists' enormous psychological resistance to racial equality while also militating against any tendency toward African American self-effacement.

The sheer, unabated repetition of this citation generated an additional effect for later rhetors. By invoking the passage, speakers could reassure black audiences aligning themselves with the rhetorical tradition of predecessors like Equiano, Jones, Sarah Grimke, and Douglass. During the civil rights era, Johns, Borders, and Mays demonstrated their worthiness in part by composing texts through a process of diachronic collaboration with their

exemplars while passing the same rhetorical baton to their successors. Civil rights orators validated themselves as astute interpreters of the Bible and able opponents of segregation by reaffirming and extending the well-entrenched practice of asserting racial equality through a single, already prized sentence from their shared, sacralized text. They created themselves and their listeners by enlisting audiences into a sturdy—and seemingly irrefutable—tradition of religious protest. For that reason, even as the language of this specific argument-by-citation remained largely unchanged, the argument itself gained the additional impact of ratifying a speaker or writer as a capable biblical interpreter and an able torchbearer of a treasured rhetorical tradition that stoutly resisted white supremacy. Grasping the formidable intertext created by this argument-by-citation means defying not only nationalist categories of analysis but also the longstanding and largely unquestioned practice of dividing British and American culture and history into distinct conceptual and chronological units, such as the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, British Romanticism, the American Revolutionary Period, Jacksonian America, Transcendentalism, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and post-World War I Modernity. Such an intertext prompts startling questions: Why does this argument keep replicating itself without regard to these familiar conceptual and chronological categories? How do the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and Reconstruction actually differ from post-World War I Modernity? Or do they? Does the unspeakable tragedy and catastrophe of weed-choked centuries of slavery and segregation problematize such designations and categories? Were Lincoln and the Civil War useless? Is it even possible to understand the texts of Fox in England in 1676 and Hamer in Mississippi in 1976 as separate from each other? Perhaps they were living in the same place and in the same time period attacking the same problem—white supremacy. Do such categories as the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, Romanticism, Transcendentalism, and post-World War I Modernity only matter to those who ignore black people?

In order to comprehend the discourse of these allegedly distinct periods, scholars need to confront and to conceptualize an often-repeated biblical argument-by-citation that formed a huge rhetorical intertext that stretched across the Atlantic and persisted literally three hundred years. Only by adding a diachronic dimension to a Transatlantic paradigm similar to Gilroy's can researchers be able to understand so many rhetors' continual reliance on *Acts* 17:26 and its effect of dissolving familiar conceptual and chronological categories. Just as *Acts* 17:26 straddled the Atlantic, so must scholars, who need to grasp the seamless fabric of interargumentation created by British and American abolitionists and reaffirmed and extended by King, Hamer, and other civil rights orators.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Levine; Genovese; Glaude; Miller, *Voice*; Miller, *Martin*; Brooks, *A Voice*; and Selby. Selby devotes his entire book to analyzing King's reconfiguration of African Americans' traditional equation of their struggle to that of the biblical Hebrews enslaved in Pharaoh's Egypt.

2. In the first translation of the Bible into English—completed in 1395—John Wyclif rendered *Acts* 17:26 as follows: “And [God] made of one all the kind of men to inhabit all the face of the earth . . .” Translating the Bible into English in 1525, William Tyndale presented *Acts* 17:26 as follows: “God made of one blood all nations. . .” Note that, by introducing the word “blood” into his translation of this passage, Tyndale diverged from Wyclif. Later translators copied Tyndale’s wording into the Coverdale Bible (1539), the Geneva Bible (1560), the Bishop’s Bible (1568), and the exceedingly popular King James Bible (1611). Like the Wyclif Bible, the Douay-Rheims Bible (1582) omits the word “blood” from this verse. So do several recent translations. For the purposes of radicals who favored this passage, Tyndale’s choice of the word “blood” for his translation proved pivotal. Without the word “blood,” *Acts* 17:26 sounds bland and less-than-quotable. As far as I can tell, no radical ever cited the Wyclif or Douay-Rheims translations or more recent translations that also lack the word “blood.” Borders, however, paraphrased the passage while managing to omit the word “blood.”

3. For Equiano’s reliance on Benezet, see Carretta 319 and Jackson 194.

4. Copies of Border’s two locally published, now rare books are in the author’s collection.

5. Inasmuch as Mays had earlier written about Equiano’s autobiography, Mays may have known that Equiano cited *Acts* 17:26 as a bulwark against slavery. See Mays, *The Negro’s God* 109–110.

6. See Hamer, “I Don’t Mind” 4; Hamer, “To Tell” 88; Hamer, “What” 82–83; and Hamer, “We’re” 49. Hamer also cited *Acts* 17:26 in her unpublished “It’s Later Than You Think.” See Brooks, *A Voice* 219, 292.

7. In both versions of “Paul’s Letter to American Christians,” King announces that Paul delivered the words of *Acts* 17:26 on Mars Hill (“Paul’s Letter,” *Papers* 343; “Paul’s Letter,” *Strength* 142). On another occasion, King proudly relates that, on a trip to Greece, he visited Mars Hill, which he identifies as the location of Paul’s sermon (“Palm Sunday” 147). Certainly he regarded Mars Hill as a significant Christian site. Although most of the radicals whom I discuss in this essay do not directly mention either Paul or Mars Hill, many of the biblically literate members of their audiences had read *Acts* and realized that this verse came from Paul on Mars Hill. Speakers and writers usually did not feel obliged to remind them.

8. This point is so obvious that most radicals who quote *Acts* 17:26 leave it implicit. Sewell (7) and Woolman (274), however, explicitly relate Paul’s statement to the story of Adam and Eve in *Genesis*.

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