

***The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To Tell It Like It Is.* Ed. Maegan Parker Brooks and Davis Houck. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011. 288 pages. \$30.00 paperback.**

Maegan Parker Brooks. *A Voice That Could Stir an Army: Fannie Lou Hamer and the Rhetoric of the Black Freedom Movement.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014. 336 pages. \$60.00 hardcover.

Roughly over the last twenty years or more, critical race theorists and whiteness theorists have magnetized considerable attention in the academy. Many scholars, including numerous critical race theorists and whiteness theorists themselves, have failed to notice that—long before Toni Morrison issued her stellar contribution to such theory—a large cohort of African-American orators and writers offered exceedingly sophisticated, cogent, and incisive critiques of race, class, and gender relations. These critiques anticipate—and often surpass—a vast percentage of insights supplied by recent academic theorists, who sometimes glaringly and inexplicably fail to engage or credit their African-American predecessors.

Prior to the Civil War, orators Maria Stewart, Frances E. W. Harper, and Sojourner Truth proffered analyses of the sometimes overlapping vectors of race, class, and gender that strikingly resemble views that reign in many academic circles today. In the early 1960s, when academics routinely equated the rise of European culture with the triumph of civilization, Malcolm X repeatedly unmasked whiteness and exposed whites' pretensions to democracy as a disguise for centuries of predatory behavior (Keith D. Miller, "'Plymouth Rock Landed on Us': Malcolm X's Whiteness Theory as a Basis for Alternative Literacy." *CCC* 56.2 [2004]: 199–222).

One of the more trenchant critics of the mutually reinforcing webs of racial oppression, patriarchal authority, poverty, and destructive class snobbery was Fannie Lou Hamer, who still has much to offer to critical race theory and whiteness theory. Americans' pervasive, yet ludicrous habit of reducing virtually the entire civil rights movement to the efforts of a single person—Martin Luther King Jr.—has left Hamer largely forgotten. Yet she sparked much of the African-American struggle in Mississippi, a state that served as a crucible for civil rights and one where King's role proved decidedly peripheral.

Born to a large family of impoverished laborers who harvested cotton sprouting from the rich loam of the Mississippi Delta, Hamer quickly dropped out of school, became a sharecropper, and married another sharecropper. In 1962 James Forman and James Bevel proselytized a congregation of poor blacks to register to

vote, and Hamer became an immediate convert. Soon she galvanized her peers, using her robust voice to speechify and sing in hamlets across the largely rural Delta, where she lived throughout her life. Thrilling audiences from California to Wisconsin to North Carolina to Harlem to Atlantic City, she emerged as one of the most important of all American orators. Really.

Yet, despite Hamer's vast significance, her magnificent speeches remained for decades largely out of print, undigitized, and unavailable. Resisting the pervasive, deplorable American custom of fetishizing King's "I Have a Dream" while somehow pretending that no one else ever gave a civil rights speech, Davis Houck and David Dixon recently edited three rich anthologies of largely unpublished addresses that helped dislodge legalized segregation (*Rhetoric, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954–1965*. Waco, TX: Baylor UP, 2006 and 2014; *Women and the Civil Rights Movement*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2011).

Continuing the laudable project of excavating superlative speeches that languish in dusty attics and archives, Maegan Parker Books teamed with Houck in assembling the first-ever collection of Hamer's scintillating oratory and congressional testimony. As this collection evinces, Hamer largely eschewed Standard American English (SAE) in favor of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), spicing her Delta-inflected expressions with quotations of antique British English that she plucked from the King James Bible. This powerful oratorical brew inspired many sharecroppers in the Delta to defy white supremacy, risking their lives as they lined up to register to vote. Leaping off these pages is Hamer's unrelenting passion for dramatic social change and her exceedingly intricate understanding of the weight of Southern history and of the complex dynamics of white supremacy, black subordination, patriarchal control, violence, agriculture, wealth, poverty, classism, and the family.

Terming her study of Hamer a "rhetorical biography," Brooks closely examines Hamer's life in relation to her bracing songleading and oratory. Writing with more thoroughness and accuracy than any other Hamer scholar, Brooks depicts a horrifying incident in which sadistic police in small-town Mississippi brutalized Hamer (and other organizers), injuring her for life. As Brooks explains, Hamer retaliated by repeatedly weaving the incident into her speeches, thereby risking her life yet again while exposing the raw violence that undergirded the frequently genteel surface of the white supremacist South.

While recognizing that Hamer never radically shifted her persona, Brooks divides her career into three phases: "plainspoken sharecropper," "warrior," and "truth-telling prophet." As one would expect, Brooks carefully explores Hamer's eloquence during a well-publicized rhetorical and political brouhaha involving her organization, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and President Lyndon Johnson at the Democratic National Convention. In her distinctive way, Hamer

presaged some of Judith Herman's insights about what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder (*Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terrorism*. New York: Basic, 1997). When certain radical white feminists began to shun men as political allies, Hamer recognized the trauma that African-American men suffered during decades of Jim Crow. Recognizing sexism, yet refusing to stigmatize or reject black men, she championed the beleaguered but resilient African-American family as an invaluable source of resistance to white supremacy and its ever-present potential to extinguish the spark of human personality. While carefully investigating Hamer's conception of African-American families, Brooks explains Hamer's concomitant decision to adopt children as an instantiation of her expansive definition of family.

Brooks's most important contribution may lie in her examination of Hamer's final years. As Brooks astutely explains, Hamer spent her last decade battling persistent, invidious racism; the indifference of the news media; and the decline of her own health, a decline occasioned in part by injuries sustained from police torture in 1962. Ignoring her own travails, Hamer repeatedly jetted to Berkeley, California; Madison, Wisconsin; and elsewhere in order to denounce American war-making in Vietnam. She also tapped distant audiences—especially her many sympathizers in Madison—for donations to support her cooperative farming enterprises and low-income housing project in the Delta.

For all her devotion to voter registration campaigns and her attempts to gain political office, Hamer's antipoverty struggles were among her most cherished endeavors. Brooks remarks that, despite local corruption related to food and medical aid to the Delta, Hamer continued to insist on a multiracial coalition in which poor whites and blacks alike could avail themselves of much-needed resources. As someone consigned to poverty for most her life, Hamer thoroughly understood that economic hardship and hunger did not respect racial barriers and that progress hinged on an engaged, interracial alliance.

Realizing that Hamer's eloquence defies many conventions of rhetorical analysis, Brooks analyzes Hamer's reliance on AAVE and her reconfiguration of a traditional African-American biblical hermeneutic. As Brooks notes, these linguistic and rhetorical choices enabled Hamer to spur laborers in the Delta to enlist in a massive, nonviolent uprising capable of uprooting legalized segregation. Brooks also notices the impact of Hamer's embrace of AAVE in offending not only President Johnson and Roy Wilkins, head of the national NAACP, but also prominent middle-class black activists in the Delta, such as pharmacist Aaron Henry. As Brooks explains, Hamer thoroughly understood that middle-class blacks' desire to legitimize themselves by adopting SAE severely hindered their ability to communicate with the very people whose activism proved necessary to overthrow Jim Crow.

We hope that this collection of Hamer's orations and Brooks's incisively written account will prod critical race theorists and whiteness theorists to discover Hamer for the first time. We also hope that these two books will propel conscientious high school and college faculty to reform their pedagogy by showcasing Hamer and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in their curricula. Inspired and informed by Hamer, our students might then increase their capacity to grasp the unfortunate state of race relations in Ferguson, Missouri, and elsewhere and to contemplate solutions.

KEITH D. MILLER
Arizona State University

KRYSTAL DOWNIE
Independent Scholar

Leslie Dorrough Smith. *Righteous Rhetoric: Sex, Speech, and the Politics of Concerned Women for America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 231 pages. \$35.00 hardcover.

As Beverly LaHaye tells it, Concerned Women for America (CWA) was born during the evening news. The year was 1978, and LaHaye was sitting in her San Diego living room with her husband, the conservative author and activist Tim LaHaye. On television Barbara Walters was interviewing Betty Friedan, whose prominence in feminist circles had afforded her the role of de facto spokeswoman on American women's issues. Listening to Friedan speak, LaHaye became enraged. Particularly galling was Friedan's presumption to "speak for the women of America" (115). A few months later, LaHaye founded CWA as a conservative foil to Friedan's National Organization for Women (NOW). Over the more than three decades that followed, CWA became America's largest conservative women's organization, claiming half a million members—each deeply skeptical of feminism and its ability to speak for her.

Leslie Durrough Smith's *Righteous Rhetoric: Sex, Speech, and the Politics of Concerned Women for America* offers the first book-length rhetorical analysis of CWA discourse. Through a scene-setting introduction and five focused chapters, Smith examines the group's effective rhetorical deployment of conservative concern. Situating this rhetoric within a larger tradition of sexual anxiety, she chronicles the array of materials CWA draws upon to craft social urgency, and