

- [3] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Merredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).
- [4] William Butler Yeats, *A Vision* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1938); James Merrill, *The Changing Light at Sandover* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).

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Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon, eds, *Rhetoric, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement: 1954–1965* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), 1002 pp. US\$44.95 (paper).

Historians have focused enormous attention on the racial agitation of the 1950s and 1960s—the largest mass movement for human rights in U.S. history. The history department in most reputable universities now employs a specialist in the civil rights era. Essentially repeating the narrative that the white male reporters wove during that period, historians during the 1970s and 1980s often spotlighted the career of Martin Luther King, Jr., sometimes creating the impression that virtually every conflict revolved around a single “great man” of history. During the 1990s and 2000s, a much more variegated picture emerged as scholars broke down the movement state by state, city by city, and local leader by local leader. Autobiographies by aging protestors added color and definition to the picture. Suddenly, Rosa Parks seemed far less important to the Montgomery Bus Boycott than did Jo Ann Robinson, who, along with her Women’s Political Council, awaited another bus arrest so they could organize the initial bus boycott. Suddenly, Fannie Lou Hamer and Robert Moses seemed much more significant in Mississippi—a huge civil rights battleground—than did King. Suddenly, King’s cohort Fred Shuttlesworth emerged as indispensable in the crucible of Birmingham. Such luminaries as Hamer, Moses, Shuttlesworth, Ella Baker, Ruby Doris Robinson, Anne Braden, and Gloria Richardson now have slipped out from King’s shadow to receive thoroughly researched biographies. Folks in religious studies have contributed also to civil rights scholarship. Legal theorists have examined court cases related to the struggle, including *New York Times v. Sullivan* (1964) and—especially—*Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). And leading public intellectuals, such as Michael Eric Dyson, have weighed the era.

Unfortunately, rhetorical critics lag behind. They largely have failed to theorize the dynamics and strategies of social change embodied either in the nonviolence of the 1950s and early 1960s or in the Black Power phenomenon of the late 1960s and early 1970s. They also have largely failed in the less complex task of examining civil rights oratory. Only a small number of rhetorical critics, for example, have ever bothered to analyze King’s “I Have a Dream.” And, with the exceptions of King and Malcolm X, racial protestors from the 1950s through the 1970s are almost wholly invisible in rhetorical research. The absence of these activists in rhetorical studies implicitly, but strongly, reinforces the false, popular notion that King led all agitators and the equally false notion that none of those dissenters were noteworthy

orators. But, as historians have demonstrated, many orators contributed mightily to the civil rights struggle.

In a commendable effort to highlight the eloquence of overlooked advocates of black civil rights, Davis Houck and David Dixon have scoured archives to assemble an anthology of religious orations during the critical period 1954–1965. This huge, highly diverse collection features 129 sermons and speeches by no fewer than 93 orators. Represented are Jews, Catholics, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Disciples of Christ. Here national actors compete with obscure, workaday ministers. Detailed Biblical exegesis rubs against appeals that are barely religious at all. Enraged, passionate denunciations threaten to drown quiet voices. Solemnity shakes hands with outrageous nightclub humor. Some of the least-known of these speakers deliver some of the most riveting appeals. To open these pages is to encounter the incisive, mordant wit of surgeon T. R. M. Howard, the sly indirection of zany editor P. D. East, the fury of Dave Dennis, and the directness of local white ministers who were fired simply for espousing racial justice.

Embodying a long tradition of African American humor, comedian Dick Gregory uproariously and trenchantly mocks horrific and absurd white practices:

Never in the history of slavery had you had a white man that would go out in the barn and have a sex affair with all the slave women like this dog did. . . . The biggest fool in the world know if you wanna segregate me and keep me down you don't put me in the back [of the bus] where I can watch you for 200 years. The biggest fool in the world know if you wanna keep me down, you don't keep me under conditions where I can become stronger than you. (600)

And [a white man] even went so stone crazy he tear gassing our [kids]. But we raise his kids. (601)

Two of the most impressive speakers evoke thwarted dreams of motherhood. Mamie Till-Bradley provides the most electrifying oration in this entire volume—a detailed and exceedingly emotional, yet utterly cogent account of the torture, murder, and funeral of her innocent 14-year old son, Emmett Till, whose death helped ignite the Montgomery Bus Boycott and thousands of public protests over ensuing years. Marion King explains protests that led to the death of her unborn child. In her cautious yet endearing speech she recounts the “unadulterated hatred” she encountered during the previous summer (511). And, in a pivotal moment, she declares: “I wonder again and again what is the matter with the white people of Albany[, Georgia]” (512). Despite the violence she faced, the loss of her child, and time spent in jail, she turns to faith in “some master plan, some purpose for it all” and offers encouragement and a sense of solidarity: “I have had more moments of real hope than of despair. I see in some white Southerners of just and generous spirit ‘Signs of the coming of the Lord,’ and I know that ‘His truth is marching on’” (512).

Within this patchwork quilt of a book, one can identify several general trends. Many addresses amount to variations of the classic African American jeremiad, which blends appeals to Christianity and to America’s founding documents, especially the Declaration of Independence. Eighteenth-century anti-slavery speakers began to

shape this sturdy, yet elastic oratorical form; nineteenth-century abolitionists, such as Frances Ellen Watkins and Frederick Douglass, perfected it; and Douglass and Ida B. Wells adjusted it well into the postbellum period.<sup>1</sup> In this book Martin Luther King, Jr.'s mentor Benjamin Mays supplies his version of this jeremiad, as do King, Hamer; Shuttlesworth, John Lewis, James Bevel, Mildred Bell Johnson, and many others.

Two white ministers, Eugene Carson Blake and Will Campbell, however, depart from this jeremiad. Blake cites Acts 5:29 in support of Christianity over law: "But Peter and the apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than men'" (567). In a quirky address Campbell urges listeners to rely on Christianity, not institutions or "cultural landmarks": "Our message is that these landmarks are irrelevant. Let 'em crumble. Quit trying to prop them up. The quicker they fall the sooner the Christian message might get a hearing" (387).

Speakers also repeatedly present another argument: racism undercuts the ability of American "democracy" to defeat international communism—a conviction that, as Mary Dudziak argues, was shared by political elites in Washington and significantly boosted support for the movement.<sup>2</sup>

During this era, liberal Protestant seminaries normally featured rationalist, "scientific" approaches to Biblical studies aimed to strip the Bible of its folklore and to uncover its more historically "authentic" elements. Ignoring these approaches, many orators in this anthology offer vague appeals to broad, "reasonable" principles of scripture—such as the "fatherhood of God"—that appear to dictate racial inclusion. Others—including Martin Luther King, Jr., Hamer, and Shuttlesworth—pointedly reject historical/rationalist approaches to the Bible and enliven current events by fitting them into the coordinates of Biblical narratives. Comparisons to Moses are popular: Dennis likens Robert Moses to the Biblical Moses; Shuttlesworth interprets Medgar Evers as a new Moses.

Crafting a related form of Biblical argument, Till-Bradley, Robert Spike, and Ed King seem to update Tertullian's famous claim—"The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church"—by proclaiming that God might turn evil into good by using the murders of civil rights martyrs to redeem a sinful nation. Perhaps Spike spoke for a number of Bible-centered orators when he announced: "The Bible can really only be read when it is read as a commentary on our times as well as ancient Judea" (673). Speeches by associates of Dr. King—Mays, Shuttlesworth, Bevel, and Wyatt Walker—include materials that overlap with passages in King's orations that are not included in this volume but that are gradually being published by the Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project of Stanford University.<sup>3</sup> One wonders whether these speakers were swapping riffs back and forth, a bit like jazz musicians.

Although Houck and Dixon include scintillating oratory by Hamer, Baker, Till-Bradley, Marion King, Mary McLeod Bethune, and other women, the editors admit that, despite their best efforts to locate speeches, "relatively few women are represented here" due to a relative "lack of primary source materials" (9). It may be the case that, despite the relative abundance of women's autobiographies about the movement, only a fairly small number of these women's orations were preserved.

In their otherwise strong Introduction, however, Houck and Dixon fail to note that certain female activists—most notably Pauli Murray, Casey Hayden, and Mary King—objected to patriarchal leadership and defined the entire movement differently than did King, Shuttlesworth, and other leading male orators. These women fused the struggle for racial equality with the struggle for gender equality. Murray and Anna Arnold Hedgeman, for example, strongly objected to the exclusion of female speakers at the massive March on Washington, which King capped with “I Have a Dream.” Perhaps these women did not give large numbers of long, well-preserved addresses, but their concern for gender equality and their general prominence in the civil rights movement means that that movement served as one of several sites for the birth of Second Wave American feminism. The civil rights movement was not simply about race.

Houck and Dixon deserve an award for publishing badly neglected speeches, thus making the task of rhetorical examination of the civil rights movement far easier than ever before. Now rhetorical critics can much more readily investigate the larger dynamics of social change propelled by many national, regional, and local speakers. Critics also can explore the achievements and limitations of Christian reconciliationist rhetoric, which is abundantly exemplified here. Finally, gazing at the pivotal year of 1965, researchers can investigate more handily many activists’ shift from Christian nonviolence to Black Power and Black Nationalism. While facilitating research, *Rhetoric, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement* also supplies a provocative and emotional journey through a tumultuous time.

## Notes

- [1] See Keith D. Miller, “Plymouth Rock Landed on Us: Malcolm X’s Whiteness Theory as a Basis for Alternative Literacy,” *College Composition and Communication* 56 (December 2004): 199–222.
- [2] See Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).
- [3] See Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson et al., vols. 1–6 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992–2006).

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Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny After Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), xxi + 388 pp. US\$59.95 (cloth), \$22.50 (paper).

In the Epilogue of her volume, Michele Mitchell expresses the central hope that, minimally, she has recast “late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century African American thought [to reveal] the centrality of gender, sexuality, and anxieties about collective reproduction” (247). *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* realizes Mitchell’s hope and achieves much more. An intellectual and social history, or, in her words, a “social history of