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THE “INTEGRATIVE” RHETORIC OF MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.’S “I HAVE A DREAM” SPEECH

MARK VAIL

Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech exhibits an “integrative” rhetorical style that mirrors and maintains King’s call for a racially integrated America. Employing the theoretical concepts of voice merging, dynamic spectacle, and the prophetic voice, this essay examines how text and context converge to form a rhetorical moment consonant with the goals of the speech, the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, and the nonviolent direct-action civil rights movement.

As he watched the great wave of humanity swell around the Mall’s reflecting pool on August 28, 1963, an NBC television reporter uttered one of the most prodigious understatements of the twentieth century when he remarked, “This is not a regular parade.”¹ The estimated 250,000 people gathered at the Washington Monument were headed for the Lincoln Memorial with the singular goal of securing basic civil rights for black Americans. Meanwhile, ten civil rights activists and supporters readied themselves to address the vast crowd assembling at the Great Emancipator’s feet. But only one of those speakers, Martin Luther King Jr., ultimately captured and ameliorated the collective conscience of the American people. The “I Have a Dream” speech was “magnificent, memorable, and soaring”; it “touched the hearts of millions” and “transformed a meandering march into one of America’s historic events.”² One participant in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom noted that “[w]hen King finished, grown men and women wept unashamedly.”³

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Given its political and cultural import, the “I Have a Dream” speech has been subjected to relatively limited scrutiny by rhetorical scholars. To date, rhetorical analyses of “I Have a Dream” have attended primarily to the speech text, focusing on its metaphoric, temporal, and oral dimensions.⁴ The broader contextual forces that both constrained and shaped the speech have only been addressed tangentially. This study seeks to augment the existing literature by examining how the interaction between text and context ultimately informed both the text and the rhetorical situation.

Examining the “I Have a Dream” speech with three distinct theoretical lenses provides some indication as to why the oration was so well suited for its rhetorical situation. First, King’s practice of voice merging complemented the rhetorical situation in that the nature of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom itself reflected many of the characteristics of voice merging.⁵ Second, King’s use of the prophetic voice served as the vehicle for integrating secular and sacred issues inherent in the struggle for civil rights.⁶ Third, the “dynamic spectacle” of the March allowed King to accomplish this merger successfully.⁷ Finally, owing to the confluence of the integrative nature of text and context, the “I Have a Dream” speech draws on an “integrative rhetoric” that was consonant with the integrationist aims of the non-violent direct-action civil rights movement and the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

One of the earliest rhetorical criticisms of the “I Have a Dream” speech, although brief, was produced by Edwin Black in 1970. Black’s essay dealt with King’s entire body of rhetoric as a “literature of revolt,” but his seminal comments concerning the “I Have a Dream” speech are especially salient. Black argued that while

King left a very considerable body of written work—speeches, articles and books—it was the extra-verbal dimension of his campaign—the images on the television screen—that we may best remember. Indeed, I shall go even further and suggest that by common, belletristic standards, Martin Luther King was often a clumsy and overblown stylist, that much of his writing though it was grandly ambitious, will not bear up under intense scrutiny.

Have a good look at the much admired “I have a dream” [*sic*] speech. Note the tendency to mix metaphors. Note the passé, the occasionally hackneyed character of some of the figures. Note, above all, the uneven quality of the composition, with the ingenious (the “heat” imagery, for example) heaped alongside the trite (the “sunlit path,” for example). And does it matter? No, of course not. It does not matter in the least. Show me a man who can *hear* that speech and not be stirred to his depths, and I’ll show you a man who has no depths to stir. . . . what affected his audiences was not just his prose (they could have heard its

equal from a hundred others), but the whole persona: the role that King was playing in an epic drama and the character that he explicated in that role.⁸

Black concludes that King's "influence on the character of public persuasion is by itself sufficient to regard King's rhetorical efforts as revolutionary."⁹ These early observations are noteworthy for two reasons. First, Black's positioning of King's rhetoric as the radical rhetoric of revolt links it to James Darsey's argument that "[r]hetorics of radical reform, in particular, exhibit similarities with the discursive tradition of the Old Testament prophets."¹⁰ Consequently, the corpus of King's rhetoric reads prophetically. Second, Black taps into a vital aspect of King's speech that has been largely ignored, namely, "the role that King was playing in an epic drama." King and his speech are but an isolated moment in a sweeping civil right saga. Civil rights activist Cornel West reminds us that there was a "context that produced [King]. . . . There is no King without a movement, [but] there is a movement without King. King is part of a tradition."¹¹

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The many scholarly approaches used to explicate "I Have a Dream" signal the speech's rhetorical density. Because no single theoretical lens can fully explicate such an abundant text, this study draws on three theoretical concepts—voice merging, the prophetic voice, and the dynamic spectacle—to advance another way of explaining the text's rhetorical power.

Voice Merging

Keith D. Miller defines voice merging as a practice whereby African American preachers "create their own identities not through original language but through identifying themselves with a hallowed tradition . . . [and] borrow homiletic material from many sources, including the sermons of their predecessors and peers."¹² Miller documents a handful of instances of voice merging in the "I Have a Dream" speech. For example, King's peroration, a set piece based on the secular hymn *America*, was borrowed from an address delivered by Archibald Carey at the 1952 Republican National Convention.¹³ King travels further back in time as he merges his voice with the Old Testament prophets Amos ("We will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream") and Isaiah ("I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together").¹⁴

Furthermore, King constructs a prophetic persona for himself through his use of personal pronouns. Through voice merging, the black preacher's "identity converges with those of others."¹⁵ King's use of voice merging supports Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp's claim that "King saw himself as a medium for the communication of God's dream to God's people."¹⁶ In other words, King "assumed the mantle of a Biblical prophet . . . [h]is expert application of Biblical prophecy through folk preachers' techniques signified that God spoke through him."¹⁷ Thus, through voice merging, the preacher King becomes integrated with the prophet.

The Prophetic Voice

Drew D. Hansen's analysis of the "I Have a Dream" speech examines King's use of biblical metaphors, contrasts a previous draft of the speech with the written version, compares King's scripted version to the performed version, traces the speech's political impact in the years that followed, and explores King's role as a prophetic preacher. Hansen's work is painstakingly thorough and highly illuminative, but he falls short in his consideration of King as prophet, merely concentrating on King's apparent ability to envision a racially integrated future for America. As a "seer," Hansen writes, "King seemed to be able to see what no one else could."¹⁸ However admirable Hansen's attempt at explicating King's prophetic voice, his consideration of what constitutes a prophetic voice is rather prosaic. As Darsey has skillfully pointed out, the true prophet is much more than a glorified fortuneteller.

Darsey argues that radical rhetoric does not fit the pattern of traditional Greco-Roman rhetorical epistemological assumptions. Looking to the Hebraic tradition, Darsey believes that "the primitive source for much of the rhetoric of reform in America has been the prophetic books of the Old Testament," and he outlines several characteristics that signify the prophetic voice in the rhetoric of reform. Radical rhetoric and Old Testament prophecy "[b]oth have in common a sense of mission, a desire to bring the practice of the people into accord with a sacred principle, and an uncompromising, often excoriating stance toward a reluctant audience." The prophet "speaks as a divine messenger" who "speaks for another." The prophet is called "to reassert the terms of the covenant to a people who had fallen away, to restore a sense of duty and virtue amidst the decay of venality." The truth of the covenant "is self-evident, clear upon viewing" and "cannot be compromised." The prophetic voice "achieves identification only when the holy remnant has joined him. . . . the people must come to God; He cannot come to them." The prophetic voice is marked by crisis, and "[c]ommon to these critical times is a sense of overwhelming threat, a sense that, in its intensity, achieves psychotic proportions,

a threat to the self-definition of a people." The prophet is "reluctant" in his calling and is "burdened" by his role. The prophet is charismatic, and his charisma "is only validated when recognized; it is a social phenomenon."¹⁹ In sum, the Old Testament prophet is a reluctant messenger sent by God to bring back to the fold His people who have strayed from a divinely ordained, self-evident covenant. The prophet's voice is marked by a sense of urgency and crisis, and is socially recognized as charismatic. Adamant and uncompromising, the prophet succeeds only when those who have strayed are returned to the covenant. Later, we will see how these traits are manifested in the "I Have a Dream" speech.

Dynamic Spectacle

Thomas B. Farrell describes "spectacle" contemporarily as a socially constructed event, with its origins grounded in the Aristotelian definition of the term as "a weak hybrid form of drama, a theatrical concoction that relied upon external factors (shock, sensation, and the passionate release) as a substitute for intrinsic aesthetic integrity"; it includes (but is not limited to) events "such as the televised rituals of conflict and social control."²⁰ On these counts alone, the totality of the civil rights movement qualifies as a spectacle, especially in view of the graphic visual accounts of human brutality delivered through the agency of nightsticks, police dogs, and fire hoses. In the same way, the March on Washington qualifies as a spectacle given the context of drama and tension in which it was situated. However, there is a quality about the March that is indicative of what David E. Procter calls "the dynamic spectacle."

Procter defines the dynamic spectacle as a "touchstone for community-building" that "requires a fusion of material event with the symbolic construction of that event and with audience needs." It is a "coalescing event" that encapsulates "a constant flow of arguments . . . for a brief moment" and exemplifies "the way rhetors in a community transform some event into enactment of their social order." The dynamic spectacle has an integrative quality to it as "[r]hetors with different ideologies step forward to provide interpretations of the event. Their interpretations or accounts of the event are the spectacles and within these spectacles exist the dynamic rhetoric of community, those symbolic forms which interpenetrate the social form."²¹ The March on Washington, as a dynamic spectacle, was most certainly a "coalescing event" that "for a brief moment" brought together rhetors holding different ideological interpretations of the civil rights movement. The spirit of building a racially integrated American community is quite apparent within the development of the March given that racial separatist leaders like Malcolm X distanced themselves from the event.²² Thus, the integrative nature of the dynamic spectacle

that was the March on Washington echoed the integrative rhetoric of King's "I Have a Dream" speech.

THE INTEGRATIVE CONTEXT

Thoroughly appreciating the rhetorical impact of "I Have a Dream" requires a careful consideration of the contextual conditions and constraints that helped produce the speech. Examination of the rhetorical situation strongly suggests that some of the speech's success can be attributed to two antecedent events. The interrelatedness of these rhetorical and historical precedents created an "integrative context" for the speech that was consonant with the aims of the speech and helped pave the way for its popular approval.

Perhaps King's speech is so fondly remembered because it so accurately reflected the mood generated by the March. In stark contrast to the protests that preceded it, the March on Washington unfolded without incident. Many newspaper and magazine reports compared the event to a Sunday service or a church picnic.²³ While King's rhetoric may have molded media perceptions of the March, the fact was that King, a preacher, and his message, a sermon promoting nonviolence, complemented the event's emergent tone and tenor. King brought a sense of the sacred to what was originally conceived as a politically secular and economically motivated protest. While it is not my intention to diminish the inestimable cultural impact of what is likely the most significant speech of twentieth-century America, I do suggest that two pivotal rhetorical events in the months preceding the March primed the public for the reception of this type of rhetoric, that the speech's rhetorical force is due as much to the shifting goals and the dynamic spectacle of the event as to the speech itself, and that the oration's success can be explained in part by the convergence of antecedent events and dynamic spectacle. To fully appreciate the contextual complexity that helped produce the "I Have a Dream" speech, one must first know something of the planning surrounding the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and how the changing purpose of the event fostered an environment that complemented King's rhetoric.

A March Is Born

The proposal for a "March on Washington" to end discrimination against blacks was not a new idea. Civil rights pioneer A. Philip Randolph attempted to organize such an event in 1941 to protest the government's discriminatory practices against blacks employed by the defense industries and the U.S. government. When President Roosevelt's issuance of Executive Order 8802 made such practices illegal, the situation was diffused and the march shelved. The

idea of a massive march on Washington was revived during the winter of 1962–63. Initially, Randolph tapped three organizations to plan the march: the War Resisters' League, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Young People's Socialist League. The organizers chose to emphasize economic and social issues as they believed that "second-class citizenship could only be eliminated through changes in the economy and social structure."²⁴ As plans for the March matured, Randolph sought and gained the cooperation and participation of a vast array of civil rights groups with varying agendas and perspectives on how to secure civil rights for blacks. As the March grew, its leaders sought to integrate disparate factions of the movement into a unified coalition. Soon the NAACP, King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) joined in the planning. As organizational support for the March spread, the event's emphasis shifted from economic issues to civil rights concerns due in large part to the influence of the three aforementioned groups and the Kennedy administration's reluctant move to advance civil rights legislation. By the summer of 1963, the March's agenda had changed so that "civil rights demands were given precedence over economic demands."²⁵ This shift in the March's ideological nature exacerbated tensions and jealousies between some of the participating organizations. Despite these difficulties, the disparate factions formed a fragile alliance, and, in the end, "diverse groups" of "some one hundred civil, labor, and religious organizations . . . [voiced] agreement to support the march."²⁶ But in spite of its title, the "March on Washington" now concentrated as much on "Freedom" as on "Jobs," indicating a successful integration of the two issues into the one event. Two crucial antecedent incidents contributed to the March's evolution: King's successful move on Birmingham, Alabama, in the spring of 1963, and the Kennedy administration's response to Birmingham and its fallout.

King's Birmingham "Bounce"

The spring and summer of 1963 was a highly eventful and successful, albeit bloody, time for the civil rights movement. Protests led by Fred Shuttlesworth and Martin Luther King Jr. in Birmingham during April and early May spawned a flurry of ensuing protests with "at least 758 demonstrations in 186 cities across the South in the ten weeks following the Birmingham confrontation."²⁷ Perhaps more significant for the movement was King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, a written response to eight Birmingham religious leaders who chastised King for bringing his nonviolent direct-action movement to their city. King's legendary essay addressed the immediate situation in Birmingham and laid out his philosophy that the issue of civil rights for blacks

was foremost a moral issue. The document's "reception was overwhelmingly positive, indeed it legitimated the direct-action movement as no other single piece of writing had done."²⁸ The publication of this manuscript, most notably a sizeable excerpt in the *New York Post*, was crucial for advancing King's brand of civil rights because it gave him widespread exposure in a document of popular record. Unlike the ephemeral nature of his speeches or the selective exposure of his books, popular publication of the *Letter* allowed for careful scrutiny of King's position by many in mainstream America. The public was given time to contemplate King's moral argument, warm to it, and, perhaps, gradually embrace it. Additionally, this document directed attention to King's previous successes (for example, the Montgomery bus boycott) and deflected attention away from his recent failure in Albany, Georgia. King's extensive use of biblical analogies and metaphors, appropriate for a letter ostensibly aimed at eight clergymen, reminded the general public that King was more than a civil rights advocate; he was a preacher cast in the likeness of "the eighth century prophets [who] left their villages and carried their 'thus saith the Lord' far beyond the boundaries of their home town."²⁹ King's prophetic persona emerges in the *Letter* when he explained that he "was suddenly catapulted into the leadership" of the Montgomery bus boycott.³⁰ King did not intentionally seek this job; it was instead thrust upon him. King expressed his great disappointment in the lack of support from many white southern ministers, priests, and rabbis, charging that "some have been outright opponents" of the movement.³¹ King continued his attempt to eradicate distinctions between the secular and the sacred regarding the issue of economic injustice as a moral cause: "In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard so many ministers say, 'Those are social issues with which the Gospel has no real concern,' and I have watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely other-worldly religion which made a strange distinction between body and soul, the sacred and the secular."³² For King, economic injustice was rooted in social injustice, and social injustice was rooted in moral injustice. King crystallized his philosophy when he concluded that lunch counter protestors were "standing up for the best in the American dream and the most sacred values in our Judaeo-Christian heritage, and thus carrying our whole nation back to great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in the formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence."³³ It is here that King explicated the logic that ultimately drove the "I Have a Dream" speech, delivered only a few months later; namely, that the civil rights issue was a moral imperative driven by a religio-political obligation spelled out in the covenantal documents of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. The nation had strayed from the sacred covenant of the Constitution and the

Declaration, and the clergy must fulfill its sacred obligation by returning America to those democratic wells. The theme of an America straying from this covenant would serve as the ideational heart of the "I Have a Dream" speech.³⁴ Most significantly, King addressed, then revisited and reframed, the dream that was to become the highlight of his August oration. Initially, the lack of pastoral support caused King to speak of his "shattered dreams" of unity and alliance, but by the end of the *Letter*, King had returned to what is "best in the American dream."³⁵

Through the practice of voice merging, King often recycled metaphors, figures, and themes in his sermons and speeches throughout his career as a preacher and civil rights leader. A comparison of *Letter from Birmingham Jail* and "I Have a Dream" reveals that the two artifacts share many stylistic devices and themes. While one might criticize King for lacking innovation, he is in fact quite ingeniously practicing voice merging. Drawing on a cache of stock figures and themes, King merges his past and present voices to create a recognizable repertoire. For example, "the lips of Governor Barnett dripped with words of interposition and nullification" in the *Letter*.³⁶ In the "Dream," the governor of Alabama, George Wallace, remains anonymous but his lips were still "dripping with the words of interposition and nullification" (81–82). This type of voice merging between the two texts takes place seven additional times.³⁷ In this case, familiarity hardly breeds contempt as "[p]astors profit from their audiences' familiarity with sermons, for familiarity enables churchgoers to participate more freely through speaking, clapping, gesturing or dancing."³⁸ In other words, the familiarity generated by voice merging allows the rhetor to integrate the audience into the speech. The audience becomes an active participant in the speechmaking process. Essentially, rhetor and audience become fully integrated and speak with one voice.

A comparison of the *Letter* and the "Dream" reveals that many of the themes and stylistic devices employed in the "I Have a Dream" speech were hardly unique, but that is precisely why they gain rhetorical force; their use in the "Dream" speech links that text to the ideology of the *Letter*. An effective *written* manifesto, the *Letter* lacked the potency and power that only King's orality could supply. Thus, the March on Washington afforded King the opportunity to give voice to arguments penned in Birmingham four months earlier. On one front, the Birmingham text primed the rhetorical pump for King's August address. On another front, the attention generated by King's success in Birmingham, coupled with the concurrent publication and reception of the *Letter*, helped to trigger political action by a reluctant Kennedy administration. Kennedy's pursuit of civil rights legislation would contribute to the changing nature of the March and the broader integrative context enveloping the "I Have a Dream" speech.

Kennedy Addresses the Nation

On June 11, 1963, President Kennedy addressed the nation to lay the foundation for a civil rights bill that was sent to Congress eight days later. To this point, the Kennedy administration had restricted the federal government's role in the civil rights issue, only intervening when absolutely necessary to keep the peace. However, the events in Birmingham and the rising tide of protest it spawned "force[d] the Kennedy Administration to take a stand on civil rights, though reluctantly."³⁹ In his "Radio and Television Report to the American People on Civil Rights," Kennedy told Americans that they were confronted by "a moral crisis as a country and as a people."⁴⁰ In one critical sentence, Kennedy, following King's lead, presented civil rights as both a moral matter and a sacred obligation: "We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution."⁴¹ Kennedy effectively linked the secular and the sacred through his suggestion that the Constitution was derivative of biblical scripture, a theme widely circulated in King's rhetoric. In his address Kennedy appropriated some of the themes and stylistic devices employed by King in the Birmingham *Letter*. While these themes and devices are not unique to King, Kennedy, the *Letter*, or the presidential address to the nation, it is significant to note an emerging pattern that comes to fruition in the "I Have a Dream" speech. In the *Letter*, King, employing anaphora, provided a list of injustices that prompted the move toward nonviolent direct action: "when you have seen vicious mobs . . . when you have seen hate-filled policemen . . . when you take a cross country drive . . . when you are harried by day."⁴² Kennedy responded by echoing King: "If an American, because his skin is dark, cannot eat lunch in a restaurant open to the public, if he cannot send his children to the best public school available, if he cannot vote for the public officials who represent him."⁴³ In the *Letter*, King referenced Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson, as did Kennedy. In fact, Kennedy's reference bore a striking resemblance to King's opening remarks in the "I Have a Dream" speech:

Kennedy: One hundred years of delay have passed since President Lincoln freed the slaves, yet their heirs, their grandsons, are not fully free. They are not yet freed from the bonds of injustice. They are not yet freed from social and economic oppression.⁴⁴

King: Fivescore years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. . . . But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. . . . One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society. (72)

King's *Letter* stressed the oft-cited urgency of now, the prophetic sense of crisis, and that "the word 'Wait!' . . . has almost always meant 'never.'"⁴⁵ Kennedy appropriated the theme of crisis and urgency with his statement that "[n]ow the time has come for this Nation to fulfill its promise,"⁴⁶ and King reiterated it in the "Dream" speech when he declared that "[n]ow is the time to make real the promises of democracy" (74). Here we witness an integration of Kennedy's secular voice and King's sacred voice that speaks univocally to the "time of crisis" faced by the prophet.⁴⁷ The voice merging of King's *Letter* and Kennedy's national address created a call-and-response between the two leaders as well. King's "call" from the *Letter* was met by Kennedy's "response" that positioned the civil rights issue as a sacred moral obligation. King could now extend the conversation by reminding Kennedy of his commitment to this ideological turn. Two months later, the March on Washington presented King with the opportunity to do so.

A March Is "Reborn"

The introduction of civil right legislation in Congress on June 19, 1963, and the ensuing threat of filibustering segregationists caused March organizers to shift the demonstration's focus from jobs and economics to civil rights. Employment topped the list of organizers' demands when the event was first conceived. In the final draft of demands, however, the first six issues on the list dealt with the impending civil rights legislation, and employment issues were relegated to slots seven through ten.⁴⁸ This move, partly attributable to Kennedy's action, bode well for King, who saw economic issues as subsumed by social and moral concerns. That is, King believed that economic injustice resulted from the failure of America to meet its moral obligation to black America. Economic injustice was symptomatic of the greater disease of civil injustice. Since the character of the March now reflected King's philosophy, his type of rhetoric would likely seem more appropriate for the occasion.

The emerging emphasis on the moral aspect of the civil rights issue led to an interesting integration of speakers assembled to address the crowd. The roster of rhetors reflected the increasingly integrative nature of the March. "Secular" speakers included A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Walter Reuther of the United Auto Workers, SNCC's John Lewis, Whitney Young, James Farmer of CORE, and Roy Wilkins of the NAACP. "Sacred" speakers along with King included "the Reverend Eugene Carson Blake from the Commission on Race Relations of the National Council of Churches, Rabbi Joachim Prinz of the American Jewish Congress, and Mathew Ahmann of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice."⁴⁹ Bringing together representatives of Protestantism, Catholicism,

and Judaism further reflected the increasingly integrative nature of the March.

Another change in the character of the March that ultimately benefited King came about on August 28, when organizers decided to abandon attempts at orchestrating sit-ins throughout Washington. These plans were scrapped due to “the overwhelming need for unity of effort in the push for congressional action on civil rights legislation.”⁵⁰ With the potential threat of violence and bloodshed somewhat diminished by this decision, the stage was set for what turned out to be one of the most “uneventful” events in the movement’s history. Ironically, this lack of violence contributed to the spectacle of the event.

The Spectacle of the “March”

The March on Washington was the largest single demonstration for civil rights in American history, drawing people from all walks of life and all parts of the country. Given Farrell’s claim that the spectacle relies on “external factors . . . as a substitute for intrinsic aesthetic integrity,” the sheer visual impact of 250,000 people filling the vast expanse of the Mall under the stony yet benevolent gaze of Abraham Lincoln would undoubtedly augment the gravity of the speeches delivered that day.⁵¹ The significance of the March as spectacle is supported by Hansen’s comment that for “some who heard King speak on a regular basis, the setting of his speech at the march made it memorable, but most of what he said was familiar. Furthermore, the speeches at the march were less important to many in the movement than the political meaning of a pro-civil-rights demonstration of 250,000 people. The pressing question . . . was how to channel the march’s energy into practical action on civil rights, not which speeches, if any, would go down in history.”⁵²

Beyond the spectacular physical setting, the March on Washington had some Hollywood glamour attached to it. A roster of actors and singers, including Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, Charlton Heston, Marlon Brando, Lena Horne, Bob Dylan, and Mahalia Jackson, injected the event with the feel of a Hollywood premier or Broadway opening. Indicative of the event’s integrative nature, secular protest songs such as “Blowin’ in the Wind,” sung by Peter, Paul, and Mary, were intermingled with old Negro spirituals and hymns. Perhaps the day’s most notable musical performance was turned in by Mahalia Jackson with her rendition of “I’ve Been ‘Buked, I’ve Been Scorned.” Jackson’s late afternoon performance is credited by some March historians for bringing a wilted crowd back to life, thereby preventing a premature exodus of marchers from the event.⁵³ In addition to the assemblage of marchers on the Mall, this spectacle was seen and heard by millions of people around the world

who were able to listen to or watch the speech "live" as the new Telstar satellite instantaneously beamed King's words and image around the globe.⁵⁴ Consequently, King was undoubtedly speaking to his largest audience ever.⁵⁵ The palpable cultural tension of the times added to the sense of spectacle as well. Given the recent events in Birmingham, many Americans feared that the March would turn violent. By the time King spoke by day's end, it was already apparent that this demonstration would be uncharacteristically peaceful, thus proving a powerful point. Those persons seeking civil rights through nonviolent direct action *were* nonviolent; the violent agitators were the repudiators of those rights. When the actions of 250,000 people—an estimated 75 percent of whom were black—demonstrated that nonviolent protest was indeed possible, King's creed of nonviolence was largely validated.⁵⁶ In the end, the spectacle and the speaker exhibited a consonance that fostered a favorable reception of King's message.

Martin Luther King had tremendous momentum behind him as he stepped up to the lectern on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. His prominent role in the successful Birmingham campaign deflected attention away from the failed 1962 Albany campaign. Through the publication of the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, the public saw civil rights framed as a sanctified moral obligation. The treatise provided more depth, detail, and permanence than any of King's speeches up to that point. Kennedy's radio address sanctioned civil rights as a moral and sacred obligation for many Americans. The shifting focus of the March on Washington from economic concerns to civil rights issues provided a better ideological fit for King. Finally, the manifestation of the spectacle, the massive number of demonstrators, the massive number of speakers and celebrities present, the massive mediated audience, the massive expression of peace and love exhibited during the March bolstered the ethos of King and his message advocating the implementation of nonviolent direct action to facilitate racial integration. In sum, antecedent events and the dynamics of the March provided King the opportunity to complete the sanctification of the civil rights movement as a moral imperative and a religio-political obligation through the articulation of his dream.

THE INTEGRATIVE TEXT

Most of what King said at the March he had said before on several occasions. In accordance with Black's early critique, Hansen calls the "I Have a Dream" speech "a pastiche of familiar King set pieces. King had used the 'I Have a dream' refrain several times before the march, and the 'Let freedom ring' set piece had been in his repertoire since 1956."⁵⁷ Accordingly, I suggest that the text's rhetorical power is owed in part to King's careful arrangement of these

set pieces. Previous studies of “I Have a Dream” have explained how King integrated the overarching tripartite organization of his speech into a single, cogent argument for his audience.⁵⁸ Building on these observations, I contend that such conceptual integration takes place not only from section to section but from sentence to sentence as well. The meticulous arrangement of figures and tropes at this fundamental level performs significant rhetorical work by symbolizing the oration’s theme of integration. Furthermore, the rhetorical implications of this integrative rhetorical strategy remain largely undeveloped. I argue that “I Have a Dream” exhibits what Michael C. Leff and Andrew Sachs call “iconicity,” which occurs when “[t]he text constructs a formal network of relationships that embody its meaning.” In other words, the text’s form “iconically represents” the rhetor’s meaning.⁵⁹ King’s arrangement of his familiar, pastiche set pieces serves as a type of voice merging by integrating two issues widely viewed as fundamentally political: social justice and economic justice. King’s challenge is to position these issues as sacred certitude rather than political potentiality. Early in his speech, King works to integrate the two issues so that the divinely ordained issue of social justice comes to represent economic justice. To accomplish this task, King invokes sanctified political documents that support his argument and links them to the issue of social justice. Then King moves his audience to accept his claim that economic parity for African Americans is subsumed by the now sanctified issue of social justice and is therefore guaranteed by both “the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence” *and* God.

Voice Merging: The Founding Fathers, Lincoln, and the Prophet King

Following his brief prooemion, King opens the second paragraph of his speech with a call for social justice, immediately setting out to cast this call in a sacred light. Invoking the memory of Abraham Lincoln, King begins, “Fivescore years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation” (72). Note that King’s appropriation of Lincoln’s language (“Fivescore years ago”) is inspired not by the decree that ended slavery but by the Gettysburg Address. King’s references to Lincoln are hardly surprising considering the March’s purpose and setting, and scholars have duly noted King’s reference to the Emancipation Proclamation.⁶⁰ But why does King conflate, if not fully integrate, Lincoln’s two texts in one breath? The first reason for King to appropriate the Gettysburg Address is one of cultural familiarity. Lincoln’s brief remarks on the Gettysburg battlefield are arguably his most famous and familiar. The Gettysburg Address had been taught in grammar schools throughout the country for many years, and schoolchildren were frequently conscripted to commit the speech to memory.⁶¹ It is unlikely that

King's broader audience possessed this type of textual familiarity with the Emancipation Proclamation. This cultural familiarity virtually guaranteed King's audience would immediately recognize that he was merging his voice with Lincoln's.

Second, King merged his voice with Lincoln's Gettysburg voice to set a suitably sacred tone through his appropriation of the biblical practice of using scores and years to quantify the passage of time.⁶² King must rely on the Gettysburg Address because there is absolutely nothing sacred in the language of the Emancipation Proclamation from which to borrow. A decidedly secular edict once described by historian Richard Hofstadter as having "all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading," the Emancipation Proclamation's dry formalism speaks of order and declaration, not dedication and consecration.⁶³ The only allusion to the sacred in Lincoln's slavery-ending proclamation comes near the end when he requests "the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of Almighty God."⁶⁴ Additionally, when King taps the Gettysburg Address, he sanctifies the "I Have a Dream" speech by linking it to a sacred political text that draws much of its rhetorical power from a "biblical vocabulary" that articulates "a chosen nation's consecration and suffering and resurrection."⁶⁵ In other words, invoking the Gettysburg Address sanctifies King's speech by association while injecting a dose of the sacred into a secular Emancipation Proclamation that grants social justice. King next amplifies this sanctification when he states that the Emancipation Proclamation "came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice" (72). With this one sentence, King evokes the fiery image of eternal damnation, and the social and economic injustice of slave labor forced to work in the withering heat of the South. Injustice is Satan's tool; justice belongs to the Divine. With the sanctified Emancipation Proclamation's social justice now linked to the Gettysburg Address, King has moved the social *injustice* of slavery from the politically secular to the morally sacred.

King's attempt to sanctify the Emancipation Proclamation through its integration with the Gettysburg Address mirrors Lincoln's use of the Gettysburg Address to rid the Constitution of the stain of slavery by conflating it with the Declaration of Independence. Garry Wills argues that Lincoln's speech "cleanse[d] the Constitution" of "its tolerance of slavery" by "altering the document from within," and "undertook a new founding of the nation, to correct things felt to be imperfect in the founders' own achievement."⁶⁶ Wills claims that "Lincoln's use of the Declaration's phrase about all men being equal . . . determines how we read the Declaration. For most people now, the Declaration means what Lincoln told us it means, as a way of correcting the Constitution itself without overthrowing it."⁶⁷ Similarly, King's integration of the conflated Emancipation Proclamation and Gettysburg Address into the "I

Have a Dream” speech connects King’s word to the Constitution and the Declaration, suggesting that we read all five texts as documents endorsing social and economic justice. King, working through Lincoln’s attempt to fix flaws in the founding documents, reconstitutes the Constitution and the Declaration as texts that endorse a sanctified social justice. With the issue of social justice now tightly tethered to the sacred, King next shepherds the issue of economic justice into the same sacrosanct fold.

While King raises the issue of economic justice for black Americans in the third paragraph, he avoids any overt attempt to link the economic to the sacred. Instead, King inserts economic justice between two metaphorical references to social justice. He begins by revisiting slavery, an issue now safely ensconced within the bosom of sacred social justice: “One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination” (72). The next sentence introduces economic justice: “One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity” (72). King then returns to social justice: “One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land” (72–73). The careful arrangement of these three sentences reflects King’s ideological commitment to integration and paves the way for the conceptual integration of social justice and economic justice into a single entity. Accordingly, economic justice assumes a sacred countenance through its proximate association with an already sanctified social justice. Stylistically, King promotes this linkage of the social and the economic through his use of anaphora and metaphor. Each of the three ideational elements in this paragraph—slavery, poverty, and exile—is introduced with, and linked by, the phrase “One hundred years later,” and each is represented metaphorically. Notice, too, that King avoids using a biblical metaphor when speaking of economic justice. Although “the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination” is not overtly biblical in nature, slavery has already been linked to a biblical metaphor (“the flames of withering injustice”) just two sentences prior; that linkage still retains its currency. The “exiled American” metaphor refers to the long-suffering Israelites who endured a similar fate.⁶⁸ The economic issue, however, is stranded on a blatantly nonbiblical “lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.” While King’s acute caution in articulating economic justice as a sacred obligation may seem out of place, perhaps he was contending with the apparent paradox of merging finances and faith; the moneychangers were, after all, driven from the temple. Nevertheless, King begins to draw economic justice into the sacred fold through a baptism of arrangement and style, bracing his audience for complete immersion and conversion in the next paragraph.

In the fourth paragraph, King concentrates on economic justice by dispatching his check metaphor:

In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men—yes, black men as well as white men—would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check; a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds." (73–74)

Martha Solomon Watson argues that the check metaphor, when linked to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, becomes part of a "covenant matrix metaphor" that serves as a potent synthesizing symbol for the American experience. No biblical metaphors appear in this section of the speech, and the phrase "sacred obligation" is King's only explicit mention of the sacred in this passage. King instead uses the Declaration and the Constitution to sanctify economic justice. Watson provides a convincing rationale for this strategy:

Since these documents embody and represent the essence of our government, they are virtually sacred writ to Americans. They synthesize quite powerfully disparate aspects of the American experience. Moreover, the covenant, which serves as the vehicle in the matrix metaphor, has rich associations in Judeo-Christian culture. Not only does it convey the moral imperative underlying black demands, but also it suggests both the "chosenness" of the participants in the covenant and their ultimate triumph. The coalescence of the religious and political associations surrounding the two terms in King's metaphor provides both patriotic and moral sanction for his view. The joining of these key symbols also helps the audience "collapse" the complex argument(s) surrounding demands for civil rights legislation into a single element: such legislation is simply a fulfillment of moral and political commitments. The protestors' path is the Christian *and* American way.⁶⁹

At issue here is *why* King frames these documents as covenantal. Positioning the check and the conflated founding texts as covenantal allows the *prophet* King to argue that the nation has strayed from its sacred promise to all Americans. So even if some of King's auditors failed to perceive the

Declaration and the Constitution as “sacred writ,” he has predisposed them to viewing as sacred any political document invoked within the context of his speech when he contextualized Lincoln’s speeches as sacred. In that the Gettysburg Address and Emancipation Proclamation are now sanctified secular documents, so too are those documents instrumental to the founding of this country. King’s task is not to convert capitalism into a religion, but to sanctify the political structure that permits the promise of economic justice by *integrating* capitalism and religion. Subsumed under the rubric of a sanctified democracy, the issue of economic justice itself becomes sanctified, which leads King to conclude that the check is a *sacred* obligation. By positioning these political documents—metaphorically represented by the check—as sacred, the failure to “make good” the check is not a breach of contract; it is the breaking of a covenant. The integrated check is fiducial both morally and financially.⁷⁰ Watson’s observation that the check offers “both patriotic and moral sanction for [King’s] view” comes very close to articulating the underlying rhetorical significance of this metaphor. King’s successful rhetorical integration of outwardly dissimilar concepts symbolically signifies and ultimately affirms the attainability of his dream that envisions a racially integrated America.

King continues to reinforce the similitude of social and economic justice in the fifth paragraph when he refers to “the bank of justice,” “the great vaults of opportunity,” and “the riches of freedom” (74). From this point forward the concepts of economic justice and social justice are transposable, if not equivalent. Later, when King speaks of “the storms of persecution” (79), it is a persecution construed as both social and economic. An African American who “cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities” (77–78) is subjected to the social injustice of racial discrimination and the economic injustice arising from the inability to participate in the marketplace. King can now return to biblical metaphors because his explicit remarks focus solely on social justice. With social justice now signifying the economic, King’s biblical metaphors are implicitly linked to issues of economic justice. Furthermore, the social and economic inequities articulated in the speech serve as concrete examples of how America has strayed from its covenant with its black citizenry.

King returns to biblical metaphors in the sixth paragraph when he revisits Gettysburg by referring to the Lincoln Memorial as sacred ground through his appropriation of Lincoln’s word, “hallowed”: “We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now” (74). With this statement, King defines both the Lincoln Memorial and Washington as sacred ground, legitimizing King’s claim in the fourth paragraph that America’s failure to uphold the promise to guarantee black Americans “the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” is a breach of the “sacred obligation” (73) espoused in the covenant. This breach requires immediate

mending. The prophet King, by means of biblical allusion, calls for a return to the covenant when he urges America to "rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation," speaks of "the solid rock of brotherhood" (74–75), and concludes that "[n]ow is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children" (75). With this first explicit reference to God, King completes his linkage of justice to the sacred. It is unnecessary for King to specify the type of justice to which he is referring—social or economic—for he has successfully integrated the two.

In the seventh and eighth paragraphs, King uses language that seems rooted in economic justice, yet its context is that of social justice. King warns that "[t]hose who hope that the Negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual" (75). This sentence comes in the wake of King's reference to the explosively violent summer of 1963, the "sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent [that] will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality" (75). Given King's prior linkage of social and economic justice, "business as usual" acquires a dual meaning with a singular purpose. Black Americans will no longer tolerate the figurative "business" of social injustice (that is, discrimination), nor will they tolerate the literal "business" of economic injustice. Because of his prior linkage, King can effectively use an economic metaphor in a social context, thereby further galvanizing the integration of social and economic justice.

The remainder of King's speech is devoid of explicit references to economic justice. The closest King comes to anything slightly suggestive of commerce is the lodging reference that appears at midpoint. However, King is no longer compelled to speak of economic injustice explicitly, for he has safely integrated it with the issue of social justice; the mention of one invariably evokes the other. King's successful deployment of sacred imagery in this speech, especially his generous use of biblical metaphors, depends on his ability to take two disparate issues of justice that are primarily political and secular, and secure them to the sanctified texts of the Gettysburg Address, Emancipation Proclamation, Declaration of Independence, and Constitution. Consequently, the ideals espoused by these documents, including social and economic justice, are read as sacred obligations. With the secular successfully sanctified, King can now leave his carefully prepared manuscript and give his prophetic integrative voice full register by articulating his dream.

The Spectacle of the "Dream"

The "dream" segment performs tremendous integrative work for King by harkening back to statements he made earlier in the oration, making "I Have

a Dream” all the more remarkable because it ends up appearing fully scripted and entirely seamless. The speech’s extemporized segment begins when King tells his audience to return to their homes with the knowledge “that somehow this situation can, and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair” (80). Earlier, King had spoken of the “dark and desolate valley of segregation” (74).⁷¹ King’s dream that America will someday “rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal” (80), reminds us of the promissory note warranted by his integrated Declaration, Constitution, and Gettysburg Address. King’s transcontinental tour of a fully integrated America (he takes us from Georgia, to New Hampshire, to California) suggests that the weary black traveler can now rent a motel room along America’s highways. King’s “sweltering summer of the Negro’s legitimate discontent” (75) has finally cooled as he dreams of a Mississippi that has become a temperate “oasis of freedom and justice” after “sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression” (81). King’s dream restores the “selfhood” and “dignity” that had been “stripped” and “robbed” (78) from black children when he envisions an Alabama where “little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers” (82). Finally, King concludes his speech with the image of a country where “all of God’s children—black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics—will be able to join hands” (85) and profit from the riches afforded by a check that no longer bounces. And it would seem an impossible image to behold had it not just unfolded before America’s eyes in the dynamic spectacle of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

From the moment that King first spoke to the world about his dream, countless King adherents have epitomized this extemporized oratory as a magical, mystical tour de force that defies rational explanation. Rhetorical scholars might fret that such mythologizing tempers the political potency of this powerful prose. In fact, such lionizing rhetoric is indicative of a dynamic spectacle, as witnesses to the spectacle transform the event rhetorically until “[t]he material reality of the event becomes largely irrelevant because what we know of the event comes from the communication of others.”⁷² This contingency emerges as rhetors “contextualize dynamic events into historical narratives, transform the event into an ideological rhetoric, and convert the event into an agenda for action.”⁷³ While auditor-rhetors have undoubtedly transformed King’s speech into a dynamic spectacle, the rhetor King transformed his own oration into a dynamic spectacle. King contextualizes the contemporaneous struggle for civil rights by situating it within the historical narrative “of intrinsic values and principles inherent in the democratic tradition.”⁷⁴ Integrating social and economic justice along with the sacred and secular, King transforms

his speech into an ideological rhetoric that transcends immediate political exigencies by fundamentally altering the ideological principles espoused in the nation's most sacrosanct texts. King's agenda for action is articulated when he directs his auditors to "make the pledge that we shall always march ahead" (77) and to "[c]ontinue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive" (79). The clarion call comes when King commands the crowd to "[g]o back to Mississippi; go back to Alabama; go back to South Carolina; go back to Georgia; go back to Louisiana; go back to the slums and ghettos of our Northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can, and will be changed" (80). When King invites us into the harmoniously integrated world of his dream, it becomes more than a collective reverie. The dream is transformed into a promissory note that documents the blessings bestowed by a sustained performance of the dynamic spectacle that is the nonviolent direct-action civil rights movement. In the end, King sustains the dynamic spectacle of his speech by creating a dynamic spectacle within it.

It may be true, as Hansen claims, that "[h]ad King not decided to leave his written text, it is doubtful that his speech at the march would be remembered at all."⁷⁵ However, I believe that this essay provides good reasons to believe that it was much more than the extemporized dream segment that made King's remarks so unforgettable. If King had not succeeded in merging his voice with others; had not cultivated his prophetic persona; had not capitalized on the dynamic spectacle of the March by rhetorically constructing a dynamic spectacle within his text; had not fortified his call for an integrated America with a masterful display of intricate integrative rhetoric throughout his speech, the "dream" of an integrated America could just as easily have faded from our collective consciousness the morning after the March.

CONCLUSION

The tightly woven relationship between the text and context of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech again demonstrates that a rhetorical artifact and a rhetorical situation are, to paraphrase King, tied up in a single garment of destiny. Beyond reaffirming an argument made by other rhetorical critics, I believe this study argues for the scholarly practice of integrating various theoretical lenses when studying a rhetorical artifact. Furthermore, it encourages critics to puzzle over how an artifact's rhetorical power is augmented by the performative interaction between text and context. That is, how does the interrelationship between text and context "play out" in the text? Finally, this study advances the notion of applying "iconicity" to the form and content of the rhetorical situation as a way to explain how context helps to shape a rhetorical act. In other words, how does the performative interaction of text

and context construct a formal network of relationships that embody the meaning of a rhetorical act?

Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech was to some extent constrained and shaped by broader contextual factors, the immediate rhetorical situation, and antecedent rhetorical acts. This was, after all, the March on Washington for *Jobs and Freedom*, and King was most likely expected to address both economic (jobs) and social (freedom) issues, especially in light of Kennedy's call for civil rights legislation. King's rhetorical challenge was to integrate these two seemingly disparate concepts. While King has been reconstructed in our collective cultural memory as a champion of social justice, the issue of economic parity was equally important to the civil rights leader, and he was well aware that continued economic injustice would likely lead to escalating social turmoil and increased outbreaks of tragic violence. As the civil rights prophet stood before the chosen people on a bright August afternoon, he darkly forewarned of the "rude awakening" that Americans faced if they "return[ed] to business as usual." Eighteen days later, a bomb planted in a Birmingham church stairwell took the lives of four innocents and shattered King's dream. Once again, it was business as usual in America. The Watts riots of 1965, coupled with the SCLC's failure to secure open housing for black Chicagoans one year later, further burdened a prophet whose voice had yet to merge with the voice of white America. Moreover, it was a voice that was sounding tired and strained to many in the black community. As the militancy of Black Power and Malcolm X took hold of the civil rights movement, and as civil disobedience collapsed into violent civil unrest, King, while remaining true to nonviolent direct action, silently wondered if violent revolution was inevitable.⁷⁶ But on August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr.'s goal was to promote the formation of the "Beloved Community" that "envisaged a new social order wherein all kinds of people and groups would live together as brothers and share equally the abundance of God's creation."⁷⁷ Considering the grim days that followed the March on Washington, it would almost seem appropriate to deem King's "I Have a Dream" speech a rhetorical failure. Dreams are, after all, difficult to realize, materializing in an otherworld far different from our own. Perhaps we have always understood that fully realizing "the dream" was improbable, if not impossible. And yet it is the promise of the dream's unfulfilled future that sustains the speech and its auditors in the present. As one who was keenly aware of *kairos*,⁷⁸ Martin Luther King Jr. made certain that his oration was a rhetorical act *of* the right time, *by* the right time, and *for* the right time. Even now, the time, timeliness, and timelessness of King's dream dwells in the "urgency of now."

NOTES

1. Lucy G. Barber, *Marching on Washington: The Forging of an American Political Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 162.
2. Thomas R. Brooks, *Walls Come Tumbling Down: A History of the Civil Right Movement, 1940–1970* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1974), 227–28; John A. Salmond, *My Mind Set on Freedom: A History of the Civil Rights Movement, 1954–1968* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1974), 80.
3. Lerone Bennett Jr., "The March," in *The Day They Marched*, ed. D. E. Saunders (Chicago: Johnson Publishing, 1963), 13.
4. R. L. Hill, *Rhetoric of Radical Revolt* (Denver: Golden Bell Press, 1964); Alexandra Alvarez, "Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream': The Speech Event as Metaphor," *Journal of Black Studies* 3 (1998): 337–57; Keith D. Miller, "Voice Merging and Self-making: The Epistemology of 'I Have a Dream,'" *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 19 (1989): 23–31; Elizabeth Vander Lei and Keith D. Miller, "Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' Speech in Context: Ceremonial Protest and African American Jeremiad," *College English* 62 (1999): 83–99; J. Robert Cox, "The Fulfillment of Time: King's 'I Have a Dream' Speech (August 28, 1963)," 181–204, and Robert Hariman, "Time and Reconstitution of Gradualism in King's Address: A Response to Cox," 205–18, in *Texts in Context: Critical Dialogues on Significant Episodes in American Political Rhetoric*, ed. Michael C. Leff and Fred J. Kauffeld (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1989); Martha Solomon [Watson], "Covenanted Rights: The Metaphoric Matrix of 'I Have a Dream,'" 66–84, John Louis Lucaites and Celeste Michelle Condit, "Universalizing 'Equality': The Public Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.," 85–103, and John H. Patton, "'I Have a Dream': The Performance of Theology Fused with the Power of Orality," 104–26, in *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Sermonic Power of Public Discourse*, ed. Carolyn Calloway-Thomas and John Louis Lucaites (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993); Al Weitzel, "King's 'I Have a Dream' Speech: A Case Study of Incorporating Orality in Rhetorical Criticism," *Communication Reports* 7 (1994): 50–56.
5. Keith D. Miller, *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Its Sources* (New York: Free Press, 1992).
6. James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 10, 19, 47.
7. David E. Procter, "The Dynamic Spectacle: Transforming Experience into Social Forms of Community," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 76 (1990): 117–33.
8. Edwin Black, "The 'Vision' of Martin Luther King," in *Literature as Revolt and Revolt as Literature: The Proceedings of the Fourth Annual University of Minnesota Spring Symposium in Speech-Communication* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1970), 9–10.
9. Black, "The 'Vision' of Martin Luther King," 9.
10. Darsey, *Prophetic Tradition*, 16.
11. Cornel West, *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1993), 19.
12. Miller, "Voice Merging," 24.
13. Miller, "Voice Merging," 28–29.
14. Drew D. Hansen, *The Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Speech That Inspired a Nation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 78, 82. All subsequent references to the "I Have a Dream" speech are from Hansen's transcript. Specific page references to this edition are indicated

parenthetically in the text of the paper. Quotations are rendered exactly as Hansen has reproduced them, with one exception. I have not retained the bold typeface that Hansen uses to designate changes that King made while speaking.

15. Miller, "Voice Merging," 25.
16. Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986), 126.
17. Miller, *Voice of Deliverance*, 145.
18. Hansen, *The Dream*, 153.
19. Darsey, *Prophetic Tradition*, 6–33. Quote at 33.
20. Thomas B. Farrell, "Media Rhetoric as Social Drama: The Winter Olympics of 1984," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6 (1989): 159–60.
21. Procter, "Dynamic Spectacle," 118–20.
22. Sasha Torres, *Black, White, and in Color: Television and Black Civil Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003). Torres argues "that civil rights strategists, particularly those associated with King's SCLC, proved remarkably adept both at providing visually dramatic and narratively coherent stories designed with the networks in mind, and at streamlining the logistics of the networks' incorporation of those stories into their narrative flows" (33–34).
23. Bennett, "The March," 3.
24. Brooks, *Walls Come Tumbling Down*, 218.
25. Brooks, *Walls Come Tumbling Down*, 219.
26. Brooks, *Walls Come Tumbling Down*, 224.
27. Brooks, *Walls Come Tumbling Down*, 210.
28. Salmond, *My Mind Set on Freedom*, 74.
29. Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from Birmingham City Jail* (Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, 1963), 3–14. Quote at page 3.
30. King, *Letter*, 11.
31. King, *Letter*, 11.
32. King, *Letter*, 11.
33. King, *Letter*, 14.
34. Solomon, "Covenanted Rights," 69.
35. King, *Letter*, 11, 14.
36. King, *Letter*, 12.
37. In the *Letter*, King writes, "On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at her [the South's] beautiful churches with their spires pointing heavenward" (12); these seasons reappear in the "Dream" as the "sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent [which] will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality" (75). The "paralyzing chains of conformity" (13) in the *Letter* are transformed by the "Dream" into "the chains of discrimination" that cause the Negro to be "sadly crippled" (72). In the *Letter*, "our destiny is tied up with the destiny of America" (13); in the "Dream," "many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny" (77). In the *Letter*, "There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over" (6); in the "Dream," we must "not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred" (76). In the *Letter*,

there are "twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an air-tight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society" (6); in the "Dream," "the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity" (72). In the *Letter*, "Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity" (9); in the "Dream," "Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood" (74–75). And finally, King draws on what is perhaps his favorite biblical metaphor gleaned from Amos. In the *Letter*, King quotes Amos almost verbatim: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream" (10); in the "Dream" "we will not be satisfied, until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream" (78).

38. Miller, "Voice Merging," 24.
39. Brooks, *Walls Come Tumbling Down*, 211.
40. John F. Kennedy, "Radio and Television Report to the American People on Civil Rights," in Steven R. Goldzwig and George N. Dionisopoulos, *In a Perilous Hour: The Public Address of John F. Kennedy* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), 179.
41. Kennedy, "Radio," 178.
42. King, *Letter*, 6.
43. Kennedy, "Radio," 178.
44. Kennedy, "Radio," 178.
45. King, *Letter*, 5.
46. Kennedy, "Radio," 178.
47. Darsey, *Prophetic Tradition*, 23.
48. Brooks, *Walls Come Tumbling Down*, 219.
49. Bennett, "The March," 16–28. Farmer was incarcerated in Louisiana at the time of the March and did not speak. However, a message ostensibly written by Farmer was read to the audience by Floyd McKissick. While Lewis could be classified as a "sacred" speaker (he attended American Baptist Theological Seminary and preached on a few occasions in the late 1950s), I chose to place Lewis in the "secular" camp for two reasons. First, Lewis's public persona was shaped almost exclusively by his civil rights activism beginning in 1960 (for example, his participation in the 1960 Nashville sit-ins and the 1961 Freedom Rides). Second, the text of Lewis's speech at the March on Washington reveals a militant secular message that only briefly mentions "God" at its conclusion. See Garth E. Pauley, "John Lewis's 'Serious Revolution': Rhetoric, Resistance, and Revision at the March on Washington," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 84 (1998): 320–40.
50. Brooks, *Walls Come Tumbling Down*, 220.
51. Farrell, "Media Rhetoric," 159.
52. Hansen, *The Dream*, 173.
53. Patrick Henry Bass, *Like a Mighty Stream: The March on Washington, August 28, 1963* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2002), 130; Thomas Gentile, *March on Washington: August 28, 1963* (Washington, DC: New Day, 1983), 239; Hansen, *The Dream*, 50.
54. Barber, *Marching on Washington*, 162.
55. Gentile, *March on Washington*, 223. While CBS broadcast the March on Washington in its entirety, ABC and NBC opted to broadcast only King's speech. Consequently, King actually spoke to more people that day than did any of the other scheduled speakers.
56. Brooks, *Walls Come Tumbling Down*, 226.

57. Hansen, *The Dream*, 172–73. Hansen reports that “[t]he earliest known transcription of ‘I have a dream’ comes from King’s November 27, 1962, speech in Rocky Mount, North Carolina” (110), and that “King had used the ‘I have a dream’ refrain several times before the march” (172). Hansen also relates that King may have heard SNCC worker Prathia Hall utter the “I have a dream” refrain during a September 1962 prayer service. A second story has SCLC staffer Dorothy Cotton telling King about a woman who used the phrase during a prayer service attended by Cotton in 1961 or 1962. To date, neither story has been corroborated through documentation (114).
58. Lucaites and Condit see the speech divided by three disparate themes—hope, dream, and faith—that are ultimately integrated to form a speech about equality. They also note King’s “eloquent integration of style and content” and his ability to construct “a discursive frame that allows a Christian/American audience to integrate its secular beliefs with its spiritual faith” (97–99). However, the implications of such integrative rhetoric are not explored. Solomon [Watson] sees the speech divided into three distinct “images.” While examining in great detail King’s ability to integrate the sacred and secular, Solomon [Watson] comes very close to articulating the implications of this integrative rhetoric when she concludes that “[w]hat distinguishes this speech is King’s use of evocative images unified and dignified by the philosophy which underlies them” (81).
59. Michael Leff and Andrew Sachs, “Words the Most Like Things: Iconicity and the Rhetorical Text,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54 (1990): 263.
60. Cox, “Fulfillment of Time,” 190; Lucaites and Condit, “Universalizing,” 94–97; Patton, “Orality,” 111; Solomon, “Covenantal Rights,” 69–79.
61. Martha Watson, “Ordeal by Fire: The Transformative Rhetoric of Abraham Lincoln,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 3 (2000): 33–48.
62. Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992). Wills characterizes Lincoln’s recurrent use of scores and years in his public discourse as a scriptural allusion that “echo[es] the ‘four score and ten years’ allotted to mankind in Psalm 90” (78). Cox argues that King’s reference to the Gettysburg Address and Emancipation Proclamation works to set a temporal tone for the remainder of the speech, fixing Lincoln’s words as a “site of meaning” for the audience (190). While this explanation is convincing, I will argue that the Gettysburg Address performs more extensive rhetorical work for King.
63. Richard Hofstadter cited in Wills, *Lincoln*, 137.
64. Abraham Lincoln, “Emancipation Proclamation,” January 1, 1863, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy Basler, vol. 5 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 30.
65. Wills, *Lincoln*, 89.
66. Wills, *Lincoln*, 38–39.
67. Wills, *Lincoln*, 146–47.
68. Vander Lei and Miller, “Ceremonial Protest,” 88.
69. Solomon, “Covenantal Rights,” 79.
70. The check metaphor has lent itself to several scholarly interpretations. Cox argues that check cashing represents the temporal concerns implied in the pledge of making good on a past promise. As such, King recognized America’s failure to make good on the “check” as a moral failure on the country’s part. Hariman counters Cox’s claim by arguing that the check metaphor “suggests a sense of time that is closer to the gradualism King is opposing than to

any sense of urgency," and that the moral breach of the "commitment to justice" is supplanted by "the metaphor of a check communicat[ing] one of the basic assumptions of the moderate voice, which is that the institutional order is essentially sound, legitimate, in need only of reform." King's check "can be a sacred obligation only if capitalism is a religion" (210–11). Darsey argues that the radical rhetoric of the prophetic voice is marked by "a consistent denigration of the idea that political and economic power is necessarily connected to righteousness," and he discounts the "I Have a Dream" speech as radical rhetoric by claiming that King's "emphasis on the contractual nature of the Constitution is precisely the converse of the denigration of charter rights by the American Revolutionaries, and his development of the metaphor of the check in the exordium suggests as the basis for rights the very economic rationality identified by Weber, Berger, Habermas, and others as a hallmark of postreligious society" (126). Here I part company with Darsey's argument for two reasons. First, King's interpretation of the Constitution (the check) as a sanctified document representing a sacred obligation moves it from the contractual to the covenantal. King's rhetoric remains radical, and his voice rings prophetic. The sanctification of economic justice and social justice is achieved; the payoff for the promissory note becomes the realized promise of social justice embodied by "the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." King's integration of economic justice and social justice makes the two issues equivalent. Second, the prophets of the Old Testament often told of God's promise of material and economic reward upon fulfillment of the covenant: "For brass I will bring gold, and for iron I will bring silver, and for wood brass, and for stones iron" (Isa. 60:17 [Authorized Version]); "And Judah also shall fight at Jerusalem; and the wealth of all the heathen round about shall be gathered together, gold, and silver, and apparel, in great abundance" (Zech. 14:14); "And ye shall eat in plenty, and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, that hath dealt wonderously with you: and my people shall never be ashamed" (Joel 2:26). In this light, King's words ring prophetic for black Americans. As Miller explains in *Voice of Deliverance*, "in the holistic vision of slaves, God redeems his children in both the next world and this world, for in the end the sacred and secular worlds are inseparable" (146). Darsey does not account for King speaking in the tradition of the African American jeremiad. In "Ceremonial Protest," Vander Lei and Miller explain that in the jeremiad "the speaker signals . . . alienation through metaphor and scriptural allusion rather than through social isolation" (87). When the African American religious tradition is considered, it becomes clear that King's voice was indeed prophetic. Given this understanding of the work performed by the problematic check metaphor, I take issue with Darsey's claim that "[t]he genetic heritage of the speech manifests itself in the fact that the group protesting at the 1996 Democratic National Convention in Chicago was not the 'I Have a Dream Coalition,' but the 'Cash the Check Coalition'" (126–27). This appropriation of the check metaphor should not necessarily be taken at face value. It is possible (and appropriate, I believe, given the above analysis) to accuse the "Cash the Check Coalition" of misappropriating King's check metaphor in much the same way that the conservative right has misappropriated King's "content of their character/not the color of their skin" line in its battle to erase the gains of affirmative action. Hansen reminds us that "we do not speak of King's 'Bad Check' speech, or his 'Now Is the Time' speech. It is known as the 'I Have a Dream' speech and remembered for the soaring refrains of hope that King added at the end" (135).

71. Hansen, *The Dream*, 101–8. King's "valley of segregation/despair" is a refiguring of Ps. 23:4: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death." Hansen notes that this phrase, among others used by King throughout the speech, can be traced directly back to

the Bible. This practice of secularizing biblical passage is yet another example of King's adroit integration of the secular and sacred. Hansen also notes that King directly quotes Bible verses twice in the speech: once near the very end of his prepared remarks, and once in the extemporized dream segment. I would argue that King was able to do so because he had successfully integrated his prophetic preacher persona and civil rights leader persona by integrating secular concepts and biblical imagery earlier in the speech. While a thorough discussion of King's integrated persona is beyond the scope of this essay, it is a topic worthy of further investigation by rhetorical scholars.

72. Procter, "Dynamic Spectacle," 119.
73. Procter, "Dynamic Spectacle," 131.
74. Patton, "Orality," 125.
75. Hansen, *The Dream*, 135.
76. David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1986), 611–12.
77. Smith and Zepp, *Search for the Beloved Community*, 126.
78. For a concise yet insightful discussion of the role of *kairos* in the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, see Martha Solomon Watson, "The Issue Is Justice: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Response to the Birmingham Clergy," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 7 (2004): 1–22.