

Hate Acts, Public Rhetoric, and Civil Rights Activism: Forty Years after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

It is indeed a privilege to appear at this symposium on the always-timely topic of civic literacy across communities. I thank Michelle Hall Kells, the Program Chair, for inviting me. You folks in Albuquerque are fortunate to have among you one of such intellect, wisdom, and passion for justice. It is indeed a feeling for justice she shares with Martin Luther King, Jr., and it is no surprise that she is active in honoring King's legacy by prompting us to reflect on his achievement and its resonance. I perform such reflection, as Dr. Kells would have it, in relation to hate acts, to language, to the question of current civil rights activism. The connection of language and public deliberation has in a sense been the key connection of my career as I have been greatly absorbed with the project of how best to interpret language in the public sphere, how to examine its effects relative to educational and social equity, how to produce it, how to help students wield language skillfully both in production terms and in hermeneutic terms. In other words, the function and force of language in society has been as important a topic to me as any other. I imagine that to be true for many of you as well. We all probably remember this childhood ditty: "Sticks and stones may break my bones/But words will never hurt me." As I have often remarked, the only reason to assert this claim, a claim that is patently false, is because the potency of language to damage has been recognized by the speaker. The defiant words are an attempt to protect the psyche through the mechanism of denial. Consider an alternate riff that goes like this: "Words may hurt me/But sticks and stones will never break my bones." We would clearly see the fallacy there and understand the

utterance as a somewhat Spartan refusal to acknowledge the vulnerability of the flesh. So we would not be fooled, nor have we ever *really* been fooled by the phrase “but words will never hurt me” even as we may have said those words in a battle for psychic comfort.

This is the sort of thing about which the poet Countee Cullen wrote. He describes a young African American boy riding on his bicycle in old Baltimore, “heart-filled, head-filled with glee.” This is how eight-year-old children ought to be. At any rate, our young traveler comes across a young white Baltimorean at whom he smiles. He is called the N-word in return. Now childhood is a series of physical scrapes and bruises, but it is predictable, and rings true poetically, when the verse ends this way: “I saw the whole of Baltimore/From May until December/Of all the things that happened there/That’s all that I remember” (90). Again, this is testimony to the power of speech as a hateful act, as an assault. And of course words hurt, though, fortunately, not always at such a profound level.

Politicians and negative campaigners---is that redundant?---probably do not figure they are psychologically maiming their opponents with their attack ads, but they are betting on those attack ads to hurt their opponents in the polls and in the voting booth or at the ballot box. So it’s a language game, or at least partly a language game, all the way around from noose comments to noose displays that certainly have discursive force to meditations about putting lipstick on a pit bull or a pig. All of these significations and more have to be sorted out and evaluated by the general public. In fact, democratic progress requires it, requires that sound-bite analyses, which are also a form of contempt given the flagrant disregard for our collective intelligence, do not ultimately define us.

What I hope to lay out, therefore, is a partial agenda for doing the work of needed analysis. This activity involves a basic or at least beginning examination of the American political vocabulary and, in the spirit of this symposium, related examination of some of King's ideas and their continuing relevance with respect to the unfinished business of civil rights.

I suggest that one of the first tasks is to bring clarity to the terms *liberal* and *conservative*. They have become shorthand that obfuscates rather than clarifies. Conversations are doomed by the simple assertion of one charge or the other and possibilities for fruitful exchange are ignored. This is not to argue for an in-depth investigation by the populace of these concepts in philosophical or political science terms. That is far too daunting a task and fortunately unnecessary. What I am urging is for citizens to self-administer a semantic checkup, in a sense, and assess the health of their interpretive abilities relative to their own language use. Again, *their own language use*---as an initial step. In composition studies over the past thirty-five years, we have been discussing the question of "the students' right to their own language." This has been a reaction to prescriptive language policies relative to realities of language variation among students. *Own language*, for the most part, has meant native language variety. But *own language* could also be a challenge to construe public discourse in one's own verbal fashion.

So I am not primarily interested at this juncture in the use of the terms *liberal* and *conservative* by pundits, though being irked in general by their usage can be motivational. I am more interested, however, in what the general populace thinks the pundits, and major political candidates for that matter, *are explaining* with those terms

and with how valuable the public considers the pejorative dialectic to be and with ways to modify that perception, modification being necessary because the thinking and perception are not perfect. What would happen, for example, if we understood virtually all the political discourse on the airwaves to be a conversation or debate among liberals?

Radicals and anarchists don't make it on the air. Virtually all media political discourse takes place among people who believe individuality should flourish, business enterprise should be free, equality under the law should be maintained, citizens should possess civil rights such as voting, democratic elections should be held, and government should be elected and representative. These are all ideas of political liberals, not an exhaustive list but long enough to make the case. These ideas cover the spectrum of mass media coverage. Hannity and Colmes don't argue about these points. So, pushing the questioning further, what would happen if pundits could not rely on the word *liberal* as an epithet, which is how it mostly functions? What would happen if the word *liberal* functioned with very little explanatory power for an audience? What if the resounding question from an audience was simply this: Well, what kind of liberal are you? And what if the audience kept pressing: Are you one of those hard economic liberals who figure market logic should always dominate? (This is the kind of liberal that many of the people we call conservatives are.) Or are you the kind of liberal with an expanded view of civil rights, who might, in fact, see relief from poverty, health care insurance, and adequate education to be indeed civil rights?

Admittedly, I may be overly pessimistic in assuming that such interrogation is not the norm (such exchanges do occur at times) or overly optimistic that it could become the norm very soon if it is in fact the exception (which I really think it is the more I ponder

matters). And I hope all of you recognize that I could demystify or denaturalize the label *conservative* in the same manner. In other words, one can ask of another if he or she is the kind of social conservative that can support the idea of a government big enough to ameliorate seriously the plight of the poor? The main point, however, is that the public's refusal and any individual's refusal to respond positively to or reproduce overly limiting political jargon would reduce the power of such discourse. Not to stem and reverse the tide in this regard would exacerbate a dangerous situation for our democracy. An enlightened citizenry is a requirement for a true democracy, and citizens cannot be but so enlightened if overexposed to the calcified and reductive logic broadcast daily. Now I won't call all of these broadcasts acts of hate. However, there's some serious and fast-moving enmity going on, as data about viewer trends reveal. According to a 2004 Pew Study, the audience for Fox News Channel reflected pretty accurately the dispositions of the general public in 1998. By 2004, the viewers who self-identified as Republicans and conservatives rose from 24% to 41% and 40% to 52%, respectively. (See "News Audiences Increasingly Politicized.") I don't condemn the motion. But I am just dismayed to think that such growth has occurred in large part because the station's rhetorical style, replete with the rhetorical truncations I have been discussing, has been so effective.

Perhaps I should slow down to say a bit about the word *rhetoric*, which I obviously do not mean as a descriptor of specious speech, of empty and often pithy assertions not reflective of reality. This is how the word is mainly understood in popular culture. I have in mind, therefore, Charles Arthur Willard's definition of *rhetoric*

contained in his book *Liberalism and the Problem of Knowledge: A New Rhetoric for Modern Democracy*. Willard writes,

Here the word *rhetoric* means the theory, practice, and criticism of persuasion, the study of the constitution of discourses---of how people collectively form, enact, and represent their activities. A rhetoric for modern democracy thus refers to democracy's inner workings, its methods of influence and decision-making. It refers to the ways people represent democracy (and their roles in it) to themselves and others. These innards include the worst shenanigans of rhetoric's dark side, but they also include argument and negotiation---activities open to critique and reconstruction. And the study of argumentation and negotiation brings into the open an important problem for democracy---knowledge claims that conceal the grounds of their own creation. (9)

Although Willard approaches the idea of liberalism from a different perspective than I do on this occasion, focusing not on political definition but on liberalism as a collection of discourses about liberal democracy, he pushes home the same crucial point, that is, the most productive use of rhetoric involves the unmasking of terminology that prevents a more generative conversation or, as Willard might frame it, negotiation as part of our democratic experiment. It's another way of getting at the question of what kind of liberal are you.

As I cast my gaze back forty years or so, I am struck again by how Martin Luther King Jr., a rhetorician operating in the public sphere, expansively and clearly articulated his vision of political liberalism fused with ideals of social justice. In his last book,

Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community, he painstakingly described the nation's progress and concomitant lack of progress regarding racism. He examined issues of white backlashes and putative wars on poverty. His bedrock conclusion was that the situation required a "radical restructuring of the architecture of American society" (133). In other words, he argued, "Our economy must become more person-centered than property-and profit-centered" (133). King favored a massive federal investment program, analogous to A. Philip Randolph's proposed Freedom Budget, to ensure adequate schools, decent housing, and guaranteed income. He acknowledged that his advocacy was not of civil rights as the term was generally understood, but he placed the phrase *civil rights* within quotation marks, indicating that he, in fact, was redefining relief from poverty as a civil right (165). I must point out, of course, that his proposal was not race-based. He stressed that his proposals benefited all of the poor, 2/3 of whom were white. King's suggestions for domestic policy coupled with his internationalist perspective--- that international peace and prosperity were tied to the extent that the wealthy nations of the world enact a Marshall Plan for Africa, Asia, and South America---along with his prophetic Christian ethic formed the heart of his latter-life jeremiad. Not surprisingly, his rejection of old-style machine politics constituted his practical political advice. As he wrote,

In addition to the development of genuinely independent and representative political leaders, we shall have to master the art of political alliances. Negroes should be natural allies of many white reform and independent political groups, yet they are more commonly organized by old-line machine politicians. We will have to learn to refuse crumbs from the big-city machines and steadfastly demand

a fair share of the loaf. When the machine politicians defer, we must be prepared to act in unity and throw our support to such independent parties or reform wings of the major parties as are prepared to take our demands seriously and fight for them vigorously. This is political freedom; this is political maturity expressing our aroused and determined new spirit to be treated as equals in all aspects of life. (150).

In other words, as King expressed it, “the future of the deep structural changes we seek will not be found in the decaying political machines” (150).

I am also struck in retrospect by King’s rhetoric *qua* rhetoric, particularly as King’s awareness of the practice of rhetoric reflects the pragmatist, epistemic quality articulated by Willard. For example, early in the text, King asserts, “Negroes hold only one key to the double lock of peaceful change” (22). I take this as his acknowledgment as a student of rhetoric that the transformation he envisioned---because no one key would suffice---was an expressly dialogic one, a rhetorical one. The same is true with a closely following remark, “Like life, racial understanding is not something we find but something that we must create” (28). King then reminds us “a leader has be concerned about the problem of semantics” as he recalls a five-hour conversation he participated in with members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Congress of Racial Equality, and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee about the slogan *Black Power*, a slogan King opposed (30-31). He demonstrates further concern with semantics when he ruminates about the synonyms for *black* and *white* contained in *Roget’s Thesaurus*. Even King’s invoking of Orpheus, whose rhetorical power proved superior to that of the Sirens, speaks to his meta-awareness concerning rhetoric (185). He

erroneously blended the story of Ulysses with the tale of Jason and the Argonauts but nonetheless made his point. Orpheus did not physically conquer the Sirens but, instead, maximized his splendid rhetorical gifts to deliver Jason and his crew from danger. For King, those gifts are the kind of gifts that contemporary rhetors must use to persuade people that “peace represents a sweeter music, a cosmic melody that is far superior to the discords of war” (185).

When I think in terms of King and the notion of public rhetoric, I also suppose his entire body of work to be an elaborate call to which there has been a large and polyvocal response over the past forty years. A notable expression is that of King’s lawyer and adviser Clarence B. Jones, who authored the recent book *What Would Martin Say?* In a provocative and creative display, Jones summarizes some of the central tendencies in King’s thoughts and imagines the martyr’s response to a range of current questions. In other words, what would King say about today’s African-American leadership or affirmative action or illegal immigration? The short answers: He would view black leadership pretty unfavorably, oppose affirmative action, and take a hard line against illegal immigrants. More expansively, Jones laments, “If only the current crop of civil rights leaders understood that crying wolf---or supporting those who do---only hurts the people it’s theoretically intended to help” (61). He mentions only Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, and the NAACP by name, so we must assume these are his paradigmatic examples of an ill-conceived involvement with the Duke lacrosse team sexual assault case or the Jena 6 protests. This is not to say that there should have been *no* activist engagement with those cases; historical and racial dynamics demanded inquiry. But, as Jones indicates, Mychal Bell is not Rosa Parks, and the Jena 6 are not the Scottsboro

Boys. What was missing---and this somewhat applies to the Duke case---were the obvious heroes and villains necessary to produce the Manichean texture of the reporter-covered and televised morality plays that were so successful during the Civil Rights Movement. Who this side of Susan Brownmiller could deny the very real innocence of Emmett Till? (See Brownmiller's *Against Our Will*.) Rosa's character was unassailable, as King publicly acknowledged on several occasions, and she became the catalyst for the Montgomery bus boycott because Claudia Colvin and Mary Louise Smith, both arrested on buses before Parks, were judged by the likes of E. D. Nixon not to have good enough character. No, it was the purified Rosa types all over the South who had to be cast opposite Bull Conner-style rabid racists and Dixiecrats like George Wallace. This rhetorical consideration is important when trying to understand why the Jena 6 ignited no massive new civil rights movement---at least not yet---as many youth, who traveled to Louisiana from afar hoping for an approximate sample of 1960s fervor, thought it would.

When the "movement" showed up in Louisiana this time, a lot of town folks just went inside and waited for the media to leave, which they did fairly soon. No long-running drama. Hardly anyone argued strenuously that Bell and other defendants were not charged unjustly. The case was, in fact, sorted out reasonably. I think the pressure exerted by the likes of Sharpton, Jackson, and the NAACP, all of whom I regard about the same way Jones does, did, however, help the process along. So Jena 6 was an important case, but it just was not a case with the rhetorical ingredients to ignite a movement. Which leads to another crucial query. We know that acts of injustice occur regularly, but are the hot civil rights media cases the only ones the public cares about? Will the main civil rights action be only where the cameras are? One hopes not because

the everyday economic issues that most working people and the unemployed face, which are now the major civil rights issues if I understand King correctly, are usually not the bulk of daily news unless the overall economy sails out of control and fails into the headlines. And what I find lacking in Jones' account (in a generally stellar book) is fuller acknowledgment of King's desire relative to the economy.

I speculate that King would have become even more concerned with economic issues as the years passed as well as become even more sophisticated in his historical and economic analyses. For these reasons, I do think he would have approached the issues of affirmative action and illegal immigration from a broader perspective than Jones suggests and not settled for the position, as Jones does, that affirmative action is no longer necessary because all barriers to progress except one's initiative have been removed for African Americans or that the most important facts about illegal aliens are that they broke the law, do not want to suffer the consequences of such action, wave foreign flags at rallies, and thus are not operating in a manner that King, who was always willing to suffer the consequences of his disobedient acts, would approve. His goal would not be to take an intransigent position for or against a specific policy, but to strive for fundamental fairness insofar as possible given the realities of globalization. I cannot see him being strictly anti-affirmative action or anti-illegal immigration. Above all, I think King would have continued to stress labor issues. As E.R. Shipp argues in her article "King Knew Labor's Worth---Have We Forgotten?" we don't think of the beginning of King's "I Have a Dream" speech as much as we think of the end. Moreover, she contends, we think of the March on Washington as a "civil rights march rather than a human rights gathering led by labor" and that King "whether he was supporting chemical workers in Georgia in

1964 or sanitation workers in Memphis in 1968, never missed beat when it came to insisting that the labor movement and the civil rights movement are one.” Shipp reminds us of King’s words spoken at the 1961 AFL-CIO convention: “Our needs are identical with labor’s needs. That is why the labor hater and labor baiter is virtually always a twin-headed creature spewing anti-Negro epithets out of one mouth and anti-labor propaganda from the other mouth.”

Of course, by juxtaposition, King was also twin-headed, passionately pro-civil rights and pro-labor. This is an important recognition because nowadays in public discourse civil rights efforts are sometimes coded as dark, multicultural ethnicity while progressive labor efforts are coded as white ethnicity---and the advocacy and activism that follow from the two concepts are seen to be in competition. I get this sense when reading, for example, Walter Benn Michaels’ *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*. As Michaels frames the issue, “When I comes to economic inequality, we should stop finding ways to ignore it, we should concentrate not on respecting the illusions of cultural difference but on reducing the reality of economic difference. That is the heart of a progressive politics” (203).

However, put another way, the heart of a progressive rhetoric, which in itself is a form of political practice, is an attempt to find the best approach to persuading people that the previously articulated progressive politics are the way to go. This is where Michaels’ project comes up dramatically short---on rhetorical grounds more so than theoretical grounds. He isn’t going to convince, or even seriously try to, many of those folks who in his view so misguidedly trade in cultural celebrations or deliberations about identity. For although Michaels believes “in an ideal world we wouldn’t be celebrating

diversity at all” (15), and he goes on about “the irrelevance of identity” (190), and he doesn’t want to talk much about history, in the very real world in which we live perceptions of culture, identity, and history do matter to a large segment of his intended audience, assuming that audience includes the kind of participants I have just described, each of whom has one body that contains the mind, if you will, where versions of political and cultural theory, class consciousness, and ethnic affiliations, in flux, all reside. None of these notions are irrelevant, as Michaels thinks.

For example, *African American* is obviously a social construct. A story. But this fact only initiates a conversation about *African Americanness*; it is not the closing declaration. To discuss the matter fully with respect, say, to my life, one has to consider that the phenotype of my parents, to just go back one generation, factored significantly in the educational, employment, and residential opportunities available to them, which, in turn, brought me into the world of Harlem where I had my early interactions and emerged for transactions beyond. This is not the least important thing about me. It’s not the most important either, but hardly irrelevant. Now that *African Americanness*, such as it is, does not determine every choice I make culturally or politically. I prefer Pablo Neruda over cultural-nationalist black poets. I don’t bother much with Kwanzaa. I opposed the appointment of Clarence Thomas. Early in this election season I was opting for pre-baby daddy John Edwards over Barack Obama, And I agree with a leftist Jewish contemporary like Michaels---who does label himself Jewish, though being against identity, and even admits he doesn’t know what Jewish means---about economics. I am also the type of history buff who knows a little something about the labor movement that Michaels regards somewhat favorably, especially if we are talking about that movement’s heyday.

Regarding racism, it's a checkered labor history, perhaps typified most spectacularly by the failure of the CIO's Operation Dixie, an activity unsuccessful because waves of Southern white workers refused to join an integrated union. But the main point is not a deep analysis of that failure but that such an episode and numerous others have crystallized into a many-layered narrative about white betrayal. It doesn't matter whether the story is now accurate or fair in every detail but that it informs the deliberations of African Americans like me and heavily shapes the deliberations of others. Also informing is awareness that much black organizing energy has been poured into class-conscious efforts like the CPUSA and the National Negro Labor Council, which demonstrates, as do the writings of King, that concerns with cultural pride and dignity do not necessarily block discernment of system-wide economic exploitation. So if the first argumentation strategy directed toward African Americans is that we should purge ourselves of the lived experience of African Americanness because, after all, it is really socially constructed and ultimately illusionary, and we should accept that racism is not a major problem, this despite the fact that many of us are on intimate terms with racist poverty or racist prisons or racist schools or racist health systems, then how is that the best discussion starter (those are all simply class issues, Keith!) for any African American less open-minded or left-leaning than I?

Neither is the cheap psychological read inviting: Michaels sees black professionals to be modern-day analogues to Dr. Miller of Charles Chesnut's novel *The Marrow of Tradition*. That is, they want to prioritize race over class and are nostalgic for segregation because it bonded them with poorer blacks through common perceptions of culture, bonds now threatened by professional success (74). I know none of the bonds I

share with poorer blacks are predicated upon a yearning on my part for segregation---and none of those bonds seem to be in jeopardy. (I wish some of them were!) In the final analysis, I cannot legitimately speak for other black professionals. But I'm pretty sure Michaels, who holds a simplistic view of the range of experiences they are involved in, cannot either. Moreover, I can imagine cultural projects incorporated into multi-pronged political intervention. If educational curriculums organized around cultural pride *and* academic excellence have proved to be viable alternatives for poor children rescued from failing school systems---and there are cases of this---I'm sure Michaels can see how these educational experiments help poor children. But for Michaels it's the either/or fallacy. To celebrate diversity is to support poverty. You see class only or you explicitly support a neoliberal nightmare. In his zeal, Michaels claims, "there is no connection between who you are and what you think" (177). This is an astounding claim because what you think can only be a product of who you are. It certainly cannot be a product of who you are *not*. I think he meant to write that to be, say, African American guarantees no particular thoughts. But I already knew that.

Now I think Michaels is absolutely right about that nightmare---CEOs taking home \$200, 000 per week, their pay hundreds of times what the average worker makes. But ultimately his book is another entry in a decades-old race vs. class debate (among others) that I think has always been most illuminating when reconstructed in terms of race *and* class. I envision King expressing a renewed understanding of that. He both appreciated Negro History Week *and* championed redistributive justice. There was no contradiction. I hear King saying Michaels and I should be twin-headed allies. And I certainly would not argue that recommendation with Martin Luther King, Jr.

Returning to the question of rhetoric, the point is that even if one is theoretically correct, and Michaels is in large measure, it gets you nowhere. Why, you cannot even theorize yourself down the block. You have to walk, drive, pedal, skate, physically move. And to move political ideas democratically you have to rely on rhetoric, the sort of epistemic exploration mentioned earlier. With respect to books, for those who get access to vaults like Henry Holt's, a strong rhetorical move would be to record the productive tension and practical consequences of placing a political theory and cultural critique in conversation with respectful but sometimes divergent viewpoints. It would also be wise not to understate the value of ethos, a mistake that activists, including King, avoided in Montgomery when they rallied around Rosa Parks in 1955. Michaels believes "the validity of the arguments does not rely upon the virtue of the person making them" (191). But folks have implicitly or explicitly known for millennia what Aristotle realized, that is, ethos not logos---character not logic---is usually the more powerful persuader. This is certainly not to argue against logic but to caution again that if we ignore or disparage the personas that people often develop with respect to some of the mythic identity constructions that Michaels deems irrelevant, then we miss possibilities for organizing. Solidarity should never be taken for granted, and rhetoric, particularly ethos, is how you build it. As Emilie M. Townes notes in "Growing like Topsy: Solidarity in a Multicultural U.S.A.," "I do not *assume* solidarity when I join others in the work of justice in the midst of our present and growing multiculturalism. Solidarity is something that is nurtured and grown in the yearning for and living out of justice. Solidarity comes from hard work; listening, hearing, analyzing, questioning, rethinking, accepting, rejecting. It comes from a place of respecting and being respected" (49). And it comes with no

guarantees. As Townes recognizes, “I do try to give all of who I am to the work for justice and to hang in there with others who recognize that solidarities and differences are messy and utterly human. In some small way, this marks our humanity and turns the absurdities into living, breathing, and active hope” (52).

Townes is describing the best that rhetoric can achieve in the public sphere. A push for social and economic justice. Sharpening perpetually the conceptions of what justice can mean. And constantly activating hope.

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