

Dislocations and Shutdowns: MLK, BLM and the Rhetoric of Confrontation

Andre E. Johnson*

This article introduces and frames a special issue of the Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric entitled "From the Mountain Top and Beyond: Contemporary Meanings and Understandings of the Rhetoric of Martin Luther King Jr., 50 Years Later.

During the last year of King's life, his ability to persuade and to gain a national consensus around issues of war, poverty, economic injustice, and the inequality suffered by blacks and all people of color had waned. Faced with increasing hostility to him and the movement along with the rising white backlash, King knew that moral suasion would not give him the results that he had hoped. This led King, to launch the Poor People's Campaign as a movement of massive civil disobedience that would lead to economic boycotts and the shutdown entire cities. By doing this, King hoped that the government, sensitive to the dislocation and shutdowns would eventually do the "right thing." I conclude by arguing that BLM whether knowingly or not, have adopted many of the ideas that King argued during the last year of his life becoming the natural extension of King's vision in the last year of his life.

Keywords: Martin Luther King Jr., Social Movements, Black Lives Matter, Protest Rhetoric, African American Public Address

On April 4, 2018, America commemorated the 50th year anniversary of the death of Martin Luther King Jr. The social media landscape was full of think pieces, editorials, long-form essays and reflections that centered on the life and legacy of America's prophet of nonviolence. News stations and newspapers from all around the world produced stories and interviewed people who lived during King's time and those who did not. However, much of the commemoration focused on the memory of King and how his words continue to shape and frame our current challenges and problems.

Anticipating the conversations that would take place during the 50th year commemoration, I thought that a journal in our discipline should devote a special issue that examines the rhetoric of King. I thought this would give scholars in our field an opportunity to (re)discover the rhetoric of King and to study one of America's finest orators. It would also give us the opportunity to add to what is a surprisingly small collection of scholarship solely devoted to the rhetoric of King. To give a comparison, a search in the Communication and Mass Media index reveals a shocking discovery. Since his assassination in 1968, only thirty-five articles examine the rhetoric of King. Compare this to articles examining the rhetoric of President Barack Obama. Since 2005, seventy-

* Andre E. Johnson (Ph.D., University of Memphis) is an Assistant Professor of Communication at the University of Memphis where he teaches classes in African American Public Address, rhetoric, race, and religion. Dr. Johnson is currently collecting the writings of 19th century AME Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and directs the Digital Archive the Henry McNeal Turner Project. He is currently working on a book of speeches of Turner and a rhetorical history of Turner's career from 1895-1915. The guest editor and author can be reached by email at ajohnsn6@memphis.edu.

nine articles examine the rhetoric of Obama. Therefore, despite Edwin Black's observations that King left a very "considerable body of written work—speeches, articles and books" and that King's "influence on the character of public persuasion is by itself sufficient to regard King's rhetorical efforts as revolutionary,"¹ the dearth of scholarship in rhetoric on King speaks volumes.²

However, I did not want to lock King in the past. The commemorations that occurred throughout the world pointed to contemporary understanding and meanings of King's rhetoric. We wanted essays that would not only ground themselves in the rhetoric of King but also point to his legacy 50 years later after his death. We looked for essays that centered on people, groups or institutions that draw inspiration from King's rhetoric. In short, in this special issue, "*From the Mountain Top and Beyond: Contemporary Meanings and Understandings of the Rhetoric of Martin Luther King Jr., 50 Years Later*," we sought to connect the historical to the contemporary to show the vibrancy of King's rhetoric and how people interpret that rhetoric today.

The idea for this special issue came to me while teaching a graduate seminar on King's rhetoric. As we focused on the last year of King's public discourse, I begin to see and understand the shift in King's rhetoric. As Sunnemark noted in his study of King, the pre-1965, King had what he called a "common discourse." According to Sunnemark, this was an "inviting discourse," focused on "recognition and affirmation" that was meant to be "non-offensive" to as many people as possible. This, argued Sunnemark, opens the rhetoric to multiple interpretations when employed today. "The vague generality," wrote Sunnemark, "means that King's rhetoric can still be filled with meaning from different sources. It can still confirm a particular identity of traditional American ideology and self-understanding and its system of signification has become tied in with this identity." He further maintains that this is how King has become frozen in time with his "*I Have a Dream*" speech. The speech, argues Sunnemark, has become a signifier of righteousness which means people can use it in a "wide range of circumstances for a variety of means."³

However, according to Sunnemark, King's rhetoric later in his life "is not available for use in this manner." He argues that since King's transformation meant the "gradual disintegration of the Civil Rights movement discourse," one cannot fill it with different kinds of meaning in the same way his one could fill his earlier discourses. For Sunnemark, his later rhetoric poses a grave challenge and makes an accusation, and that is much harder to handle and use than an affirmation.⁴ So to compensate for this, we tend to misread King's rhetoric during his later life.

I argue that this misreading of King's later rhetoric, especially in the last year of his life, leads to a misremembering of King's legacy and the challenge that King left. In writing about this misremembering, Obery Hendricks opines that "we have hollowed the boldness of Martin Luther King by hallowing him into America's apostle extraordinaire of 'Kumbaya' and teary-eyed hand holding. The radicality of his vision and praxis is all but lost."⁵ Jamil Smith writes that even King Day rituals "while comforting and inspiring, lulled the American public into a lionization of a complicated man whose advocacy for economic justice and labor—and against war—are not

¹ 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, 1969), 9-10.

² I limited my search to articles that directly focused on the rhetoric of a speech of King and Obama.

³ Sunnemark, Fredrik. *Ring Out Freedom! The Voice of Martin Luther King Jr. and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 233.

⁴ Sunnemark, *Ring Out Freedom!* 234.

⁵ Obery Hendricks, "How I Met the Real Martin Luther King Jr.," *Colorlines*, January 16, 2017. <https://www.colorlines.com/articles/how-i-met-real-martin-luther-king-jr>.

always part of the story. As long as King's radicalism stays missing from our remembrances, it will be easier for people to lay claim to his story—even people who oppose King."⁶ Charlene Carruthers writes that today there is a "very sanitized, hero, peaceful, non-critical depiction of Dr. King. In fact, he was a human who struggled with many things. It's extremely important that we depict him as someone who had a firm critique of the American empire."⁷ It was that critique of American empire that led the FBI to call King, "the most dangerous Negro in America."⁸

Drawing from the moniker above for King, my co-author, Anthony J. Stone, and I examine one of the reasons we argue that King enjoys world-wide acclaim—"his seemingly or supposed color-blind, equality-based rhetoric."⁹ We suggest that, especially in the last year of his life, King began "to understand the hegemony of repressive ideologies, and to deconstruct the limits they appear to set on the possibilities of change" and became "deeply committed to the reconstruction of a social reality based on a radically different assessment of human potential."¹⁰ In that essay, we argue that the "foundation of these arguments is King's growing understanding of race and racism."¹¹

However, another reason for this misunderstanding of King may lay in his later understanding of social movements and protest. According to Robert S. Cathcart, there are two different forms of rhetoric and rhetorical acts used in movements. The first one he calls managerial, and he defines this as "rhetorical acts which by their form uphold and re-enforce the established order or system." For Cathcart, these rhetorics keep the existing system viable: they do not question underlying epistemology and group ethic." In his research of social movements within the then existing literature, he argues that much of it calls for an "adjustment to the existing order." He writes that managerial rhetoric "is primarily concerned with adjusting the existing order not rejecting it." Further, he writes about the reformist campaign

[It] stays inside the value structures of its existing order and speaks with the same vocabularies as do the conservation elements in the order. The reform must not seem to be a threat to the very existence of the established order, or the reformers may be forced out of the common value system. The reform movement uses managerial rhetoric because to some degree it must have a modus vivendi with those in power if it is to exist.¹²

One can find examples of this type of protest discourse in many of King's earlier speeches such as his *A Realistic Look at the Question of Progress in the Area of Race Relations* speech delivered April 10, 1957. The occasion of the speech was to drum up support for the Pilgrimage of Prayer and Freedom rally in Washington, DC that SCLC planned to have on May 17, 1957, the third year anniversary of the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. In calling upon

⁶ Jamil Smith, "Martin Luther King Jr. Doesn't Belong to You," *The New Republic*, January 18, 2016, <https://newrepublic.com/article/127879/martin-luther-king-jr-doesnt-belong>.

⁷ Quoted in Smith, "Martin Luther King Doesn't Belong to You."

⁸ Cornel West, "The Radical King We Don't Know," *UU World*, January 19, 2015, <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/radical-mlk>.

⁹ Andre E. Johnson and Anthony J. Stone, "'The Most Dangerous Negro in America': Rhetoric, Race, and the Prophetic Pessimism of Martin Luther King Jr.," *Journal of Communication and Religion*, 21, no. 1 (2018): 10.

¹⁰ Anthony Cook, "Beyond Critical Legal Studies: The Reconstructive Theology of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr." *Harvard Law Review*, 103, no. 5 (1990): 987-988. doi:10.2307/1341453

¹¹ Johnson and Stone, "The Most Dangerous Negro in America," 10.

¹² Robert Cathcart, "Movements: Confrontation as Rhetorical Form, in *Methods of Rhetorical Criticism: A Twenty-Century Perspective*," ed. Bernard Brock, Robert Scott, and James Chesebro (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 365.

every “freedom-loving Negro who could get off of work that day to come to Washington,” King sought to “persuade the federal government to use all of its powers to enforce the law of the land.” Then he reminded his audience

We are not going there to make any threats. We are not going there to say what you have to do. We are simply going there to thank God for what has already been done and to ask Him for His guidance through the other period of transition, and to appeal to the conscience of the nation to do something about the violence in the South, and to carry through the civil rights bill that is now being argued in Congress.¹³

In his speech, *A Creative Protest*, delivered February 16, 1960, in support of the students who participated in the sit-ins at downtown restaurants in Greensboro, North Carolina, King had similar goals for the movement. While pledging his support along with SCLC, he reminded the students to “continue the struggle on the highest level of dignity.”

As we protest, our ultimate aim is not to defeat or humiliate the white man but to win his friendship and understanding. We have a moral obligation to remind him that segregation is wrong. Let us protest with the ultimate aim of being reconciled with our white brothers. As we sit down quietly to request a cup of coffee, let us not forget to drink from that invisible cup of love, which can change a segregationist into an integrationist. Let us keep our eyes on the end we seek, but let us never forget the significance of proper means. There is a success of history and a success of eternity. Right methods to achieve a right objective is itself a coming together of history and eternity, and where one uses right methods there is, even if obscured in history, a spiritual victory.¹⁴

In closing, he reminded the protesters

We’re not rabble-rousers; we’re not dangerous agitators, nor do we seek political dominance. Black supremacy is as bad as white supremacy. But freedom is necessary for one’s selfhood, for one’s intrinsic worth. Let us say to the white people; we’re not going to take bombs into your communities. We will not do anything to destroy you physically. We will not turn to some foreign ideology. Communism has never invaded our ranks. We’ve been loyal to America. Now we want to be free.

Drawing from Cathcart, King wanted an adjustment to the existing order. To reach his goals, King stayed within the “value structures of the existing order.” For instance, when he promises not to make any threats or to tell anyone what they should do, King demonstrated that he not only respected the common understanding of order but pledged to abide by that order. While the end of segregation would seem like a threat to the existing order especially in the South, the means by which King would want to eradicate it was within the bounds of acceptability. King’s earlier calls for non-violence, passive aggressiveness and the respect and love for one’s opponent were examples of this acceptable rhetoric. Indeed, it was this type of rhetoric that culminates with his infamous *I Have a Dream* speech on August 28, 1963. While the speech did criticize the government for not living up to the ideals it espouses regarding African Americans; King still had a message for African Americans on how to protest. He reminded them “not to satisfy their

¹³ Martin Luther King Jr., “A Realistic Look at the Question of Progress in the Area of Race Relations,” *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute*, May 10, 1957, para. 21, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/realistic-look-question-progress-area-race-relations-address-delivered-st>.

¹⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., “A Creative Protest,” *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute*, February 16, 1960, para. 9, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/creative-protest>.

“thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.” He challenged them to conduct the “struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline.” He called for a “creative protest” that would not “degenerate into physical violence.” Then he reminded African Americans in his audience:

Again, and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force. The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people, for 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. And they have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom.¹⁵

The second form of rhetoric and rhetorical acts used in movements, according to Cathcart is *confrontation*. Seeing movements as “ritual conflict,” Cathcart defines confrontation as the “symbolic display acted out when one is in the throes of agony.”¹⁶ Arguing that confrontation contains the rhetoric of “corrosion” and “impiety,” Cathcart further asserts that the “dramatic enactment of this rhetoric reveals persons who have become so alienated that they reject “the mystery” and cease to identify with the prevailing hierarchy.”¹⁷ He further asserts that “through confrontation, the seekers of change (the victims) experience a conversion wherein they recognize their own guilt, transcend the faulty order and acquire a new perspective.”¹⁸ Confrontation is not as Cathcart reminds us “an act of violence per se; nor is it a method of warfare. Rather it is a symbolic enactment which dramatizes the complete alienation of the confronter.”¹⁹

Although scholars note the shift in King’s rhetoric as early as 1965, it was during the last year of his life that it became more pronounced. As racism, militarism, and capitalism became the three evils of society according to King, his rhetoric had to adjust for America’s lack of commitment to the poor and its continued escalation of the war in Vietnam. However, not only did his rhetoric had to adjust, but also the aims and goals of the movement had to as well. No longer able to build a consensus around the aims of the movement, along with the increasing “white backlash” that would eventually give rise to Nixon’s silent majority, King began to understand that “moral suasion” would not give him the results that he had hoped. Therefore, according to King, not only did the rhetoric have to change, but the movement itself had to change as well.

As Amanda Nell Edgar and I note in a forthcoming work,²⁰ King planned to implement this strategy through the Poor People’s Campaign. During a press conference on December 4, 1967,²¹ Martin Luther King Jr. and members from the Southern Christian Leadership Council announced their plan to lead thousands of poor people – including all races, ethnicities, and nationalities – to

¹⁵ Martin Luther King Jr., “I have a Dream,” *American Rhetoric*, August 28, 1963, para 8-9, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkhaveadream.htm>

¹⁶ Cathcart, “Confrontation as Rhetorical Form,” 362-363.

¹⁷ Cathcart, “Confrontation as Rhetorical Form,” 366.

¹⁸ Cathcart, “Confrontation as Rhetorical Form,” 367.

¹⁹ Cathcart, “Confrontation as Rhetorical Form,” 369.

²⁰ Amanda Nell Edgar and Andre E. Johnson, *A Movement from the Margins: Black Lives Matter, #AllLivesMatter, and the Struggle over a Memphis Movement* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018).

²¹ Press Conference Announcing the Poor People’s Campaign, *Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, https://swap.stanford.edu/20141218232253/http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/publications/papers/unpub/671204-003_Announcing_Poor_Peoples_campaign.htm.

the nation's capital to bring attention to the plight of people living in abject poverty. In announcing this major initiative, King stated,

We will go there, we will demand to be heard, and we will stay until America responds. If this means forcible repression of our movement we will confront it, for we have done this before. If this means scorn or ridicule we embrace it, for that is what America's poor now receive. If it means jail we accept it willingly, for the millions of poor already are imprisoned by exploitation and discrimination.

King would further call for "dramatic expansion of nonviolent demonstrations in Washington and simultaneous protests elsewhere. In short, we will be petitioning our government for specific reforms, and we intend to build militant nonviolent actions until that government moves against poverty."

Through all of this, King was clear that the campaign would not be a "mere one-day march." Instead, they would "stay until some definite and positive action is taken to provide jobs and income for the poor." The reason for this type of action, King argued, was that America was at a "crossroads of history and it is critically important for us as a nation and a society to choose a new path and move upon it with resolution and courage." For America to choose this new path, King argued that a new type of movement was needed:

We have learned from hard and bitter experience in our movement that our government does not move to correct a problem involving race until it is confronted directly and dramatically. It required a Selma before the fundamental right to vote was written into the federal statutes. It took a Birmingham before the government moved to open doors of public accommodations to all human beings. What we now need is a new kind of Selma or Birmingham to dramatize the economic plight of the Negro and compel the government to act.

When asked by a reporter that it seemed as if this new movement had a more militant tone to it, King responded:

I would say that this will be a move that will be consciously designed to develop massive dislocation. I think this is absolutely necessary at this point. It will be massive dislocation without destroying life or property and we've found through our experience that timid supplications for justice will not solve the problem. We've got to massively confront the power structure. So this is a move to dramatize the situation, channelize the very legitimate and understandable rage of the ghetto and we know we can't do it with something weak. It has to be something strong, dramatic, and attention-getting.

When another reporter asked King did he expect resistance and if so what type, King answered

Well I'm sure with the various methods that they are now using to break up demonstrations that we'll face some of that, I imagine. We don't know what will happen. They may try to run us out, they did it with the bonus marches you remembered years ago. The army may try to run us out. We are prepared for any of this kind of resistance. We don't go in with the feeling that there won't be an attempt to block it because we will be engaging in civil disobedience, there's no doubt about that.

Another reporter asked King about the political implications of the campaign. Noting that it was an election year, the reporters wondered if an action such as the one proposed by King and SCLC would create a backlash that would harm the Civil Rights movement. King responded that he did not think that it would. He reminded the reporter that the campaign would engage in non-

violent dislocation and that if it ever became violent, he would call it off. He further reminded his audience that the goal of this disruption was to “bring the issues out in the open.” Then he closed by saying that the “only thing is we’ve got to face the fact that we have a very recalcitrant Congress that’s behind the times. It’s not even responding to its constituency, and this is what we’ve got to arouse. We’ve got to get the nation moving once more around a kind of coalition of conscience that will make change possible.”

After the news conference, King began campaigning to drum up support for the campaign. In a sermon delivered on March 31, 1968,²² in which would be his last sermon delivered from a pulpit, King explained the campaign.

In a few weeks some of us are coming to Washington....in a Poor People’s Campaign. Yes, we are going to bring the tired, the poor, the huddled masses. We are going to bring those who have known long years of hurt and neglect. We are going to bring those who have come to feel that life is a long and desolate corridor with no exit signs. We are going to bring children and adults and old people, people who have never seen a doctor or a dentist in their lives.....We are coming to demand that the government address itself to the problem of poverty.

Further, he told the congregation in the National Cathedral in Washington DC that day,

And we are coming to engage in dramatic nonviolent action, to call attention to the gulf between promise and fulfillment; to make the invisible visible. Why do we do it this way? We do it this way because it is our experience that the nation doesn’t move around questions of genuine equality for the poor and for black people until it is confronted massively, dramatically in terms of direct action.....And I submit that nothing will be done until people of goodwill put their bodies and their souls in motion. And it will be the kind of soul force brought into being as a result of this confrontation that I believe will make the difference.

In short, no longer believing that government officials would “do the right thing,” King called for a campaign of massive civil disobedience that would lead to economic boycotts and shut down entire cities. He called for people to demand to be heard by putting their bodies on the line, and to face jail willingly. He argued that the protest needed to be huge to compel the government to act. It needed to “massively confront the power structure” and to “dramatize the situations.” It also needed to provide space for the rage that some would have, therefore, according to King, protests could not be “weak.” He expected the authorities to break up demonstrations; he even thought that the administration would call the military to break up the demonstrations. He argued that this was the only response left for a “recalcitrant Congress” that would bring issues out in the open.

Thus, during the last year of King’s life, his ability to persuade and to gain a national consensus around issues of war, poverty, economic injustice, and the inequality suffered by blacks and all people of color had waned. Faced with increasing hostility to him and the movement along with the rising white backlash that eventually would give birth to Nixon’s silent majority coalition, King knew that moral suasion would not give him the results that he had hoped. Thus King begins a campaign, grounded in non-violence that aimed to force the government to act on behalf of the movement. No longer believing that government officials would “do the right thing,” King

²² Martin Luther King, Jr., “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution,” *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute*, March 31, 1968. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/publications/knock-midnight-inspiration-great-sermons-reverend-martin-luther-king-jr-10>.

called for a campaign of massive civil disobedience that would lead to economic boycotts and shut down entire cities.

If any of this sounds familiar, it should. Black Lives Matter activists have adopted many of the ideas that King argued during the last year of his life becoming the natural extension of King's last vision. Created in 2012 by Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors after the acquittal of George Zimmerman and becoming more pronounced during the events in Ferguson, Black Lives Matter grounds itself in the "experiences of Black people who actively resist dehumanization."²³ Moreover, according to their website, BLM is an "ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks' humanity, [their] contributions to this society, and [their] resilience in the face of deadly oppression."²⁴

For Bailey and Leonard, the Black Lives Matter movement is "first and foremost a challenge to the affront of racial violence and prejudiced policing." The movement is also a "challenge to white privilege and supremacy, and it seeks to disrupt the *status quo* by forcing America to unflinchingly examine the ways in which state-sponsored agents treat black Americans as, at best, second-class citizens."²⁵ They further argue that "by spotlighting the persistent violence, and through elucidating the fallacies, hypocrisies, and double standards that anchor white supremacy, Black Lives Matter challenges the "very foundations upon which Americans claim their democracy is built: that we are all created equal, that all are equally entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."²⁶

Despite the constant refrain from some in the movement who say "this ain't your grandparent's movement,"²⁷ it would seem if BLM has directly picked up the mantle from King and have used the methods of protests that he advocated during the last year of his life. As Simone Sebastian wrote:

As much as BLM's opponents and supporters (who insist that "this ain't yo mama's civil rights movement") differentiate it from the 1960s effort, these two historical moments have a lot in common. Both have been opposed by more than half of Americans, both have needed violent confrontations to attract national media attention, and both have been criticized for their combative tactics. Whether in the 1960s or the 2010s, the aggressive disruption of American race relations has caused the same anger and fear — from Northerners and Southerners, from blacks and whites, from liberal "allies" and racist adversaries.²⁸

It is this confrontation form that gives Black Lives Matter "its identity, its substance, and its form" because according to Cathcart, "no movement for radical change can be taken seriously without acts of confrontation."²⁹ What the BLM movement attempts to do with its rhetoric of confrontation is to cause the established Powers to reveal itself for what it is. It then causes the "establishment to respond to the challenge of its authority—which invariably leads to polariza-

²³ "Black Lives Matter and Alicia Garza," *Equal Justice Society*, <https://equaljusticesociety.org/blacklivesmatter/>.

²⁴ "Herstory," *Black Lives Matter*, <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/herstory/>.

²⁵ Julius Bailey and David Leonard, "Black Lives Matter: Post-Nihilistic Freedom Dreams," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*, 5, no. 3/4 (2015): 68.

²⁶ Bailey and Leonard, "Black Lives Matter," 69.

²⁷ Edgar and Johnson, *A Movement from the Margins*.

²⁸ Simone Sebastian, "Don't Criticize Black Lives Matter for Provoking Violence. The Civil Rights Movement Did, Too," *Washington Post*, October 1, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/10/01/dont-criticize-black-lives-matter-for-provoking-violence-the-civil-rights-movement-did-too/?utm_term=.ed2a1580eec6.

²⁹ Cathcart, "Confrontation," 370.

tion and radical division.”³⁰ It is this polarization and division that King experiences in the last year of his life, and it is what Black Lives Matter activists experience today.

As I mentioned earlier, the goal of this issue was to connect the historical to the contemporary to show the vibrancy of King’s rhetoric and how people interpret that rhetoric today. In the first essay, Jonathan Smith and Antonio de Velasco also examine King’s rhetoric during the last year of his life that. Taking a different approach from the one above, they argue that King’s speech “Honoring Dr. Du Bois,” provides a platform to partially understand the nature of King’s activism during his final year. They argue that in King’s earlier speeches he “treats changes as tangible and achievable”; while in “Honoring Dr. Du Bois,” King regards social justice as an “ongoing, indefinite journey.” The authors further argue that the speech “provides a lens to examine the types of rhetorical moves King uses to establish this evolved perspective. In so doing, they conclude by offering an “exploration of the presence of each of these perspectives among members of the Civil Rights community in contemporary America.

Next, Dave Deifell notes how President Barack Obama draws from the rhetoric of King. In his essay, by analyzing King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, Deifell examines the “rhetorical relationship between King’s Dream and the election of Obama.” By framing the “I Have a Dream” speech as a “constitutive narrativity for how we imagine race in America, Deifell then analyzes “competing placements of Obama regarding that subject in the Dream narrative.” He further suggests that in King’s “Dream through Obama’s election, this essay examines the rhetorical tension that developed into the debate about whether society has become post-racial or not.”

In the next essay, Melissa Renee Harris and Ashley Hall also examines how Obama draws from the rhetorical well of King by examining his eulogy of Clementa Pinckney while using what they call the “rhetorical blueprint” of King’s eulogy at 16th Street Baptist Church for the girls (Addie Mae Collins, Carol Denise McNair, Cynthia Diane Wesley) killed in the bombing of the church in Birmingham, Alabama. As King framed the girls as “pure vessels of God sent to Earth for a heavenly purpose,” Harris and Hall argue that Obama draws from that framing in connecting Pinckney’s “goodwill and benevolence as fulfilling the will of God through the “Good News” and works.” They further argue that King moved rhetorically between his personas as an “activist preacher to that of a politician,” delivering “scathing indictments against the social structures and institutions which breed hatred. Moreover, Obama rhetorically moves an activist politician to preacher through historical remembrances and scripture, while calling out enduring legacies of racism.

Finally, Michelle Kearl in her essay argues that the “legacy of MLK and the CRM have over the past 50 years become a cipher through which various and competing ideological, political, social, and economic projects have been routed.” Since this cipher leaves “form” but eliminates “original meaning and content,” anyone or in this case any group can use it to present arguments that “King himself could not have foreseen.” By examining the rhetoric of the anti-abortion group Created Equal, Kearl demonstrates “how MLK and the CRM are at once hailed for their historical importance and simultaneously drained of their historical specificity so that their legacy can be appropriated anti-abortion politics.”

I would like to thank first Michael Warren Tumolo, editor of the *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*, for believing in this project and allowing me to guest edit this issue. Second, I would like to thank the reviewers who took the time to review the essays. You offered good constructive criticism, and while several essays did not make it into this issue, we hope to see some of those published soon.

³⁰ Cathcart, “Confrontation,” 370.