

# WWMLKD?: Coopting the Rhetorical Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement

Michelle Kelsey Kearl\*

*Created Equal, an anti-abortion organization based in Ohio, argues it is fulfilling the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) by fighting widespread and systemic age discrimination. Putting to work the images, tactics, and rhetorics of the Civil Rights Movement and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK), Created Equal argues abortion enacts ageism and is worthy of formal civil rights protection. I argue that Created Equal leverages the ideographic ethos and pathos of the CRM and MLK to tap into American public memory of the man and the movement, then use them as ciphers in which they invest their own connotative meaning. This appropriation or coopting of the rhetorical legacy of MLK and CRM allows Created Equal to repurpose the past towards contemporary political ends incongruous with King and the movement. I draw implications to broader neoliberal rhetorical practices that appropriate progressive narratives, in both form and content, towards traditionally conservative aims.*

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After hundreds of white supremacists and neo-Nazis marched on the University of Virginia campus in the Fall of 2017, and the dismantling of Confederate monuments in several cities in the South, Mark Harrington, President of the anti-abortion group, “Created Equal,” took to his weekly show “Activist Radio: The Mark Harrington Show”<sup>1</sup> to condemn the “real racists” in America. In his view of American culture, the real racists were: Black Lives Matter, Antifa, Lesbians, Planned Parenthood, Margaret Sanger and, the “obvious racist,” Supreme Court Justice, Ruth Bader Ginsburg. At many points during the show, Harrington laughs at and dismisses the concern of many at the renewed sense of entitlement to public space among white supremacist and nationalist groups, suggesting it is “faux outrage...over supposed racism in America.”<sup>2</sup> That is, Harrington believes that focusing on the racist impulses of those marching in public to intimidate and provoke people of color is a distraction from the “real racism” of our time—abortion.

An Operation Rescue-style anti-abortion group, named Created Equal, was founded and advocates on a claim that abortion is age discrimination against the “pre-born,” who deserve civil rights protection. The organization’s web content, promotional materials, and activities are organized around an extended analogical argument relative to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s (MLK)

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\* Michelle Kelsey Kearl (Ph.D., Arizona State University) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne. You can reach the author at kearlm@pfw.edu.

<sup>1</sup> Mark Harrington, “Abortion is at the Heart of America’s NEW Civil War,” *Activist Radio: The Mark Harrington Show*, Podcast audio, August 18, 2017, <https://createdequal.podbean.com/e/abortion-is-at-the-heart-of-americas-new-civil-war-the-mark-harrington-show-81717/>

<sup>2</sup> Harrington, “Abortion is at the Heart of America’s NEW Civil War.”

leadership of the Civil Rights Movement (CRM).<sup>3</sup> Created Equal participates in a decades-old rhetorical practice of claiming analogical links between contemporary struggles for equality and the legacy of MLK and the CRM. Appeals to both are easily found in public debates over marriage equality,<sup>4</sup> disability rights,<sup>5</sup> animal rights,<sup>6</sup> advocates on both sides of the abortion debate,<sup>7</sup> both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,<sup>8</sup> both sides of Affirmative Action,<sup>9</sup> and, most recently, in response to the wave of transphobic bathroom bills.<sup>10</sup> What is unique about Created Equal is that, in many cases, the analogy collapses into claiming movement lineage that meets and merges with the trajectory of the CRM. Created Equal claims to be *the* legacy of MLK and the CRM. Given the ubiquity of hailing the words, image, and philosophy of MLK and the tactics of the CRM to stand in for, authorize, and direct arguments about a multitude of cultural problems, it is essential we interrogate the manifestations of these historical claims.

This manuscript 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. The cipher leaves the form of the CRM and MLK but truncates or outright evacuates its original meaning or content. Once emptied and reappropriated to suit their own purposes, MLK and the CRM are used as authoritative figures for a host of ironically paradoxical positions in a landscape of public arguments MLK could not have foreseen or foretold. In this way, this article contributes to an assessment of the rhetorical legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., in the 50 years since his death, by offering a critical analysis of how MLK's and the CRM's legacies are put to rhetorical use in public discourse. Rhetors who seek to appropriate MLK's ethos, often purpose and repurpose MLK's activism and the CRM towards their own political ends, regardless of its congruence with the critical ethic of the man or the Movement.

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<sup>3</sup> I use the singular formal Civil Rights Movement here to signify both Harrington's conceptualization of the CRM and contemporary public memory of a singular movement led by Dr. King. Importantly, interdisciplinary research has made clear the many, diverse, and diversely-led movements against racism in the 1940s, and 1950s.

<sup>4</sup> Devon Carbado, "Black Rights, Gay Rights, Civil Rights," *UCLA Law Review* 47 (1999–2000): 1467–1519; Michelle Kelsey Kearn, "'Is Gay the New Black?': An Intersectional Perspective on Social Movement Rhetoric in California's Proposition 8 Debate," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 12, no. 1 (2015): 63–82; Jane Schacter, "The Gay Civil Rights Debate in the States: Decoding the Discourse of Equivalents," *Harvard Civil Rights and Civil Liberties Law Review* 29 (1994): 283–317.

<sup>5</sup> Katharina Heyer, *Rights Enabled: The Disability Revolution, from the US, to Germany and Japan, to the United Nations* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Kelly Oliver, *Animal Lessons: How They Teach Us to be Human*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Celeste Michelle Condit, *Decoding Abortion Rhetoric: Communicating Social Change* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1990); Grace Elizabeth Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 288–291.

<sup>8</sup> Hillel Cohen, "Joint Israeli-Palestinian Political Activity in Jerusalem: Characteristics and Challenges." *Locating Urban Conflicts: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and the Everyday*, ed. Wendy Pullan and Britt Baillie (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 144–145; Marin Tobin and Robert Tobin (eds), *How Long O Lord? Voices from the Ground and Visions for the Future in Israel/Palestine*. (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2002), 187.

<sup>9</sup> Andrea Guerrero, *Silence at Boalt Hall: The Dismantling of Affirmative Action* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2002): 96–97; James E. Jacob and Miriam Ma'at-Ka-Re Monges, "The White Backlash Against Affirmative Action: The Case of the California Civil Rights Initiative (Proposition 209)," in *The New Politics of Race: From DuBois to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Marlese Durr. (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2002), 23–38.

<sup>10</sup> Eric Tucker and Jonathan Drew, "Loretta Lynch Frames Bathroom Bill as Part of Civil Rights Movement," *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 10, 2016, <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Justice/2016/0510/Loretta-Lynch-frames-bathroom-bill-as-part-of-civil-rights-movement>.

While the critical conversation about ciphers is less about the history tied to the figure and more about the making and proliferation of kinds of ciphers,<sup>11</sup> I argue for their historical treatment. In the case study that follows, a microcosm of the way MLK and the CRM are turned into ciphers, I argue that a critical, historically contextualized treatment of the cipher is a means by which we can resist the commodification of historical figures.

After reviewing the literature on analogy, particularly in social movements, I take up a methodological conversation about the nature of ciphers and how to approach them with an eye towards the historical contexts in which they emerged. Then, I critique the rhetoric of Created Equal to demonstrate how MLK and the CRM are, at once hailed for their historical importance and, simultaneously, drained of their historical specificity, to the point of erasure of their legacy and appropriated for anti-abortion politics. Finally, I offer conclusions and critical implications that suggest means by which we might strategically reject MLK's "immortaliz[ation] by the feeble romance of distorted memory."<sup>12</sup>

## Literature Review

Since antiquity, scholars interested in persuasion have studied the use of analogical reasoning; a "shared abstraction," whereby subjects of an analogy are revealed to share ideas or patterns, philosophy or ideology.<sup>13</sup> The analogized components were not, necessarily, closely related. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca suggest that analogy possesses some, though unstable, argumentative value and work towards absolving the differences between the compared parts.<sup>14</sup> Broadly, then, the use of analogy compares two concepts or situations with the purpose of learning something new about both.

Pushing the rhetorical force of analogies, Laclau and Mouffe suggest analogies are fundamentally concerned with equivocation through which a variety of comparative strategies can be streamlined.<sup>15</sup> Laclau and Mouffe's gesture helps make sense of the troubled reactions to analogies as they emerge in social protest rhetoric. Analogizing between and among movements is not a new, rhetorical tactic.<sup>16</sup> Modern social movements in the United States have consistently asso-

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<sup>11</sup> Marouf Hasian, Jr. and Lisa A. Flores, "Mass Mediated Representation of the Susan Smith Trail," *Howard Journal of Communication* 11 (2000): 163-178; Kent Ono and Derek T. Buescher, "Deciphering Pocahontas: Unpackaging the Commodification of a Native American Woman," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18, no. 1 (2001): 23-43; Jarrod Waetjen and Timothy A. Gibson, "Harry Potter and the Commodity Fetish: Activating Corporate Readings in the Journey from Text to Commercial Intertext," *Communication Critical/Cultural Studies* 4, no. 1 (2007): 3-26; Jefferson Walker, "A Candidate Commodified: Linda McMahon as a WWE Product in the 2010 Senate Campaign," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 2, no. 1 (2012): 11-18.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: The Free Press, 2000): 305.

<sup>13</sup> Cameron Shelley, *Multiple Analogies in Science and Philosophy*. (Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2003), 142-143.

<sup>14</sup> Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1971).

<sup>15</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso Books, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> Janet R. Jakobsen. "Queers are Like Jews, Aren't They? Analogy and Alliance Politics," in *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*, ed. Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 64-89; Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Trina Grillo and Stephanie M. Wildman. "Obscuring the Importance of Making Comparisons Between Racism and Sexism (or Other-isms)," *Duke Law Journal*, 1991, no. 2 (1991): 397-412; Michelle L. Kelsey, "Gen-

ciated themselves with the discourses and politics of movements past. The Women's Suffrage Movement in the United States cited the discourses of its Constitution and the practices of the early American revolutionaries to detail their equality as citizens.<sup>17</sup> Later, generations of feminists relied on Suffrage and Temperance Movement strategies, while early gay and lesbian activists borrowed the discourse and tactics of the Suffrage Movement. Later, the CRM also put to use the successful strategies of its predecessors.<sup>18</sup>

Jakobsen theorizes the rhetorical labor performed by analogies, particularly drawn from and with oppressed groups.<sup>19</sup> Initially, analogies have the effect of enhancing the complexity of one paired-part while reducing the scope or magnitude of the other. In this way, the use of analogies gives the impression that the equivalency explains everything about an experience. Finally, analogies, ironically, "fail to produce a connection" between the analogized items, particularly in the context of social movements, where such analogies often produce animus instead.<sup>20</sup> While Jakobsen sees the theoretical potential of analogical reasoning to give way to coalition building, the oft-characterized zero-sum game of identity politics can prevent such relationship building. Instead, analogies often foster anger and frustration, particularly for those who may find themselves identified with both movements subjected to the analogy.

Laclau and Mouffe similarly suggest the power of drawing equivalences is that they make "possible the complete cancellation of differences."<sup>21</sup> In this way, analogies break from the classical mold of literary device and become constitutive tools in a political field. Indeed, Grillo and Wildman argue analogizing marginalized experiences can be particularly troubling when the person drawing the analogy represents a group with more power and suggests they understand and/or are experiencing oppression in a way roughly equivalent to a group with less power.<sup>22</sup> Their inquiry into the analogy drawn between race and sex during the 1980s revealed that the privilege of white women overshadowed what could be learned about race through the analogy if anything. These types of analogies, then, use a static understanding of racism to understand sexism better.<sup>23</sup> In this way, we omit a critical investment in our reflections on the reality of racism.

It is on this brink of collapsing analogy into identification and, thereby, eliding important historical difference and reality, that we must raise critical questions about the consequences of analogizing around abortion. For anti-abortion advocates, the rhetorical project of the 1960s was to articulate abortion among the cadre of American and global evils. Towards this end, slavery was initially the subject of analogy—one that lost public appeal with some rapidity when the equivalence between the "womb" and "chains" or a "cage" was not effectively registered.<sup>24</sup> Con-

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dered Social Movements: A Critical Comparison of the Suffrage and Gay Marriage Movements," *Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research* 8, no. 7 (2009): 95-116; Laclau and Mouffe, 200.

<sup>17</sup> Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, *Man Cannot Speak for Her* (New York: Praeger, 1989); Aileen Kraditor, *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890-1920* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965); Susan E. Marshall, *Splintered Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Campaign Against Woman Suffrage* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press).

<sup>18</sup> Campbell, *Man Cannot Speak for Her*; Didi Herman, *The Anti-Gay Agenda: Orthodox Vision and the Christian Right* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Kelsey, "Gendered Social Movements"; Ralph R. Smith and Russel R. Windes, *Pro-gay/Antigay: The Rhetorical War Over Sexuality* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> Jakobsen, "Queers are Like Jews."

<sup>20</sup> Jakobsen, "Queers are Like Jews," 68.

<sup>21</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 127.

<sup>22</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 127.

<sup>23</sup> Grillo and Wildman, "Obscuring the Importance of Making Comparisons," 399.

<sup>24</sup> Condit, *Decoding Abortion Rhetoric*, 90.

dit notes that eventually, the slavery analogy gave way to a Holocaust analogy. The hyperbole of this analogy also coincides, chronologically, with the proliferation of graphic fetal images. The dual presentation of mangled and mutilated bodies necessarily taps into collective guilt and horror at the reality of the Holocaust to facilitate a logical transfer to abortion as an analog.<sup>25</sup>

Resistance to abortion found its most fully throated register during Ronald Reagan's tenure as President. Indeed, Reagan, himself, worried about the collapse of the social and ethical fabric of the American public, particularly as it related to the expanded social and cultural acceptance of the sexual politics of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>26</sup> Reagan's social conservatism and Christian faith nurtured emergent anti-abortion groups, including Operation Rescue, in the mid-1980s.<sup>27</sup> Operation Rescue founder, Randall Terry, took lessons from the philosophy and tactics of MLK and the CRM.<sup>28</sup> Through a philosophy of non-violent civil disobedience, Terry encouraged his followers to crowd the entrances of abortion clinics to prevent patients from entering the facilities. When faced with arrest, Terry also taught protestors to force their bodies to "go limp," so that they could not be moved without considerable effort. While Terry was more interested in borrowing the tactics of the CRM, anti-abortion leaders pushed the relationship a bit further.

The Genocide Awareness Project (GAP) is the movement wing of the Center for Bio-ethical Reform (CBR) a conservative organization that suggests that one can legally interpret abortion as "genocide."<sup>29</sup> As its name suggests, the GAP sustains the most enduring Holocaust analogy related to abortion. The GAP's rhetorical strategy relies on lessons learned from Abolitionist and Civil Rights Movement strategies of exploiting image events; that is, to be sure visually impactful images were circulated widely to make material the violence done to black bodies. The GAP cites the explicit representations orchestrated by Wilber Wilberforce and Martin Luther King, Jr. to draw the public's attention to the hidden or suppressed aspects of racist violence.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, concerted public efforts to maintain a cultural knowledge of the atrocities committed during the Holocaust were appropriated by GAP to draw abortion in relation to all forms of hate-motivated violence related to slavery, lynching, and the Shoah.<sup>31</sup> GAP's analogical reasoning suggests parallel philosophical and tactical agitating as that of the CRM. Additionally, their name, the images they display on college campuses across the United States, and the arguments they make about

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<sup>25</sup> Condit, *Decoding Abortion Rhetoric*, 90. It is important to note, but is beyond the scope of this manuscript, the considerable literature indicting Holocaust analogies. These critics agree, congruent with the conversation here, that the analogies work against historical realities and in the specific case of the Holocaust, its intangible horror. While the whole book is helpful in thinking through the trouble of analogy, this chapter is especially useful: Andreas Mulsolf, "Instrumentalisation of Holocaust Memory and False Historical Analogies," in *The Holocaust in the Twenty First Century: Contesting/Contested Memories*, ed. David M Seymour and Mercedes Camino (New York, Routledge, 2016). See also, Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, *Hi Hitler! How the Nazi Past is Being Normalized in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> Brantley W. Gasaway, *Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 138.

<sup>27</sup> Richard L. Hughes, "'The Civil Rights Movement of the 1990s?': The Anti-Abortion Movement and the Struggle for Racial Justice," *The Oral History Review* 33, no. 2 (2006): 13.

<sup>28</sup> Hughes, "'The Civil Rights Movement of the 1990s?'" 18-19.

<sup>29</sup> See Woolford and Woolford for a clear and satisfying refutation of the CBR's definitional claims: Jessica Woolford and Andrew Woolford, "Abortion and Genocide: The Unbridgeable Gap," *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society* 14, no. 1 (2007): 126-153.

<sup>30</sup> George Cunningham, "Should Christian Pro-Lifers Use Graphic Imagery?" March 16, 2011, <https://www.abortionno.org/should-christian-pro-lifers-use-graphic-imagery/>.

<sup>31</sup> George Cunningham, "Why Abortion Is Genocide," *Center for Bio-ethical Reform*, June, 2012, <https://www.abortionno.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/whyabortionisgenocide.pdf>.

abortion clinics as “killing centers,” make clear the analogical relationship they draw between systemic extermination, enslavement, identity-based violence, and acts of abortion.

Mark Harrington, Created Equal’s leader, is the former Midwest Director for the Center for Bio-ethical Reform and modeled his new organization based on their tactical and rhetorical tradition. Created Equal articulates a similar yet significantly distinguished relationship with MLK and the CRM. More skillfully articulating themselves as oppressed by increasingly liberal mainstream bias, Created Equal suggests that acts of abortion constitute systemic violence that approximates the violence of slavery, the Holocaust, and racism, combined. Moreover, they also suggest that their efforts towards social justice are the fulfillment of MLK’s and the CRM’s legacy of working towards a “beloved community.”

Gronbeck argues the rhetorical use of the past “depends explicitly on the appropriation of the past for present purposes.”<sup>32</sup> This appropriation is not without consequence for the rhetorical project of the present or collective understanding of the past. Indeed, collective memory can be drawn wherein the past is “recalled, seemingly, so as to let the past guide the present, but it can do so only when the past itself is remade.” That is, the past and present collapse, presenting a seamless narrative that loops back onto itself. To inform the present the past must be subject to interpellation; most relevant here is a concern for what ends such historical citation is purposed.

Gronbeck suggests one rhetorical project of collective memory is “an evoking of a past to frame a present but also to conform the past to the present. It is a discourse of absolute identification—an interpretation of then and now wherein the hermeneutic circle spins in exceedingly small rotation.”<sup>33</sup> Brad Vivian works against understanding memory and forgetting in dialectical terms; instead, public forgetting is reciprocal with memory. Forgetting requires an intentional practice of advocacy “not in order to negate collective memory per se but in order to transform its sense and value—to remember anew, in politically or morally transformative ways.”<sup>34</sup> Suggested, here, is a practice of forgetting that which is purposeful and not inherently valued positively or negatively, but instead is, like public memory, a rhetorical practice. Indeed, Vivian is hopeful in the critical possibilities of forgetting a normatively constructed history.

It is precisely in the moment of expansive forgetting of a normative history, particularly around the CRM, that the analogical reasoning to the public memory of MLK and the CRM is intersectionally suspect. Indeed, the intersectional moment and memory of the CRM, broadly, and the politics of MLK, specifically, has only culminated in the past decade, thereby not limiting the past to the 1950s and 60s.<sup>35</sup> That is, while the public and the academy, alike, have worked at forgetting the official memory of the movement and its leaders as single-issue advocates, Cre-

<sup>32</sup> Bruce E. Gronbeck, “The Rhetorics of the Past: History, Argument, and Collective Memory,” in *Doing Rhetorical History: Concepts and Cases*, ed. Kathleen J. Turner (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2003): 54.

<sup>33</sup> Gronbeck, “The Rhetorics of the Past,” 58-59.

<sup>34</sup> Bradford Vivian, *Public Forgetting: The Rhetoric and Politics of Beginning Again*. (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010): 49.

<sup>35</sup> This moment is represented by a dearth of research about the diversity of leaders, strategies, and potential trajectories of the Civil Rights Movement, itself, that demands a complex narrative of itself. Including the re-membering of the Movement’s women leaders, gay and lesbian organizers, and an insistence on the complexity of the critical objectives of the Movement towards the end of Dr. King’s life and beyond. A few exemplars: John D’emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin*, (New York: Free Press, 2003); Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King’s Last Campaign*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007). Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon, *Women and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965*, (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2009); Paul Le Blanc and Michael D. Yates, *A Freedom Budget for All Americans: Recapturing the Promise of the Civil Rights Movement in the Struggle for Economic Justice Today*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013); Cornell West, *The Radical King*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016).

ated Equal insists on the unitary memory of MLK and the CRM, a neo-liberal reading of the Movement and its past, as well as a vacuous view of that past, repurposed for an uncritical present. They “reduce King to an icon for the status quo or a puppet of civil and social order.”<sup>36</sup>

Borrowing from the literature reviewed here and persuasive claims that analogies can do the rhetorical work of eliding history and difference, I explore and analyze the concept of ciphers as a mechanism for understanding how the rhetoric of organizations like Created Equal help negotiate a neo-liberal understanding of MLK and the CRM as universal models of equality and justice free of the critical race and economic justice projects central to their continued relevance and importance in American politics and history.

## Understanding Ciphers

With their critical lenses on the production, reproduction, and distribution of Disney’s *Pocahontas*, Ono and Buescher theorize rhetorical ciphers as a figure or form that becomes a “blank slate...a free-floating signifier...”<sup>37</sup> Importantly, they do not start this way. The form in which the cipher emerges is hollowed out or drained of its original or specific meaning and “ultimately is then filled with various meanings.”<sup>38</sup> The polysemic “cipher becomes the referent itself” and thereby produces “a self-contained symbolic world” in which it is “never fixed, never fully seen in its totality, and always changing.”<sup>39</sup> In this way, the cipher can be purposed and re-purposed for varied, and paradoxical, social, political, or economic projects.

On the other hand, the malleable and intangible aspects of ciphers warrant Ono and Buescher’s call for research to “pinpoint and evaluate” the making and use of them.<sup>40</sup> Critically, understanding ciphers can move us away from the fetishization of the cipher itself and towards an understanding of the process by which a figure becomes a cipher. Criticism then stabilizes the cipher “even while all around us cultural practices continually absorb and package that form.”<sup>41</sup>

For Ono and Buescher the historical origin or fidelity of the cipher was secondary to fettering out the process by which it materialized, particularly related to commercial products. For the purposes of this research, I am interested both in process and historical context; and to help marry process and history, I turn to McGee’s ideographic criticism.<sup>42</sup> Initially, ideographs and ciphers may appear to be twin concerns of how rhetors traffic ideology through specific words or terms; but they, in fact, move in competing directions. While McGee’s ideograph is “pregnant with meaning”<sup>43</sup> the cipher is “an empty container.”<sup>44</sup> While Ono and Buescher’s cipher becomes “a self-contained symbolic world,” the ideograph socializes a community towards a specific belief encoded in abstracted language.

The critical utility of ciphers to understand the process by which a figure can be transformed into a commodity to circulate in a universal market is essential to the analysis here but is insufficient to explain the rhetorical work of Created Equal. Ideographic criticism provides the dia-

<sup>36</sup> Dyson, *I May Not Get There with You*, 305.

<sup>37</sup> Ono and Buescher, “Deciphering Pocahontas,” 25.

<sup>38</sup> Ono and Buescher, “Deciphering Pocahontas,” 25.

<sup>39</sup> Ono and Buescher, “Deciphering Pocahontas,” 28.

<sup>40</sup> Ono and Buescher, “Deciphering Pocahontas,” 37.

<sup>41</sup> Ono and Buescher, “Deciphering Pocahontas,” 38.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Calvin McGee, “The ‘Ideograph’: A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, no. 1, (1980): 1-16.

<sup>43</sup> McGee, “The ‘Ideograph,’” 7.

<sup>44</sup> Ono and Buescher, “Deciphering Pocahontas,” 25.

chronic and synchronic analysis needed to historically situate the cipher to make better sense of the symbolic world it constitutes and assess the cipher's relationship to competing interpretations or historical narratives that it once possessed. This seems a relevant site of inquiry for rhetorical critics, particularly as ideographs often stand in for entire ideological agendas and arguments, while ciphers remove meaning to facilitate a wider circulation. Working towards an understanding of how ideographs and ciphers might co-mingle in meaning-making enhances our critical abilities to counter what consistently appears as nonsensical conservative representations of progressive ideographs, rhetorical practices, and movement strategies towards antagonistic ends.

McGee calls for a diachronic analysis that illustrates the use of an ideograph across time as well as how the ideograph has changed to maintain its influence. Synchronic analyses investigate how an ideograph is being deployed in a specific rhetorical situation. DeLuca points to synchronic analysis as a way to "understand how ideographs...function presently as a rhetorical force"<sup>45</sup> and of course, the abortion debate is full of ideographs that have been explored by rhetorical critics for decades.<sup>46</sup> However, the legacy of MLK and the CRM appears to be in a liminal space between ideograph and cipher; precariously balanced between bursting with rhetorical potential and enervated of meaning. Being pushed too far in one direction or the other risks the loss of the critical project started by MLK and the CRM that continues today. How we process and treat the legacy of MLK or the CRM, then, has material consequences that require our critical care.

### Ciphering King's Legacy

When confronted with the explicit racism and nationalism of white supremacy on display in Virginia, Mark Harrington balked at addressing the material realities of such racism, despite his claims to be part of the Civil Rights Movement guided by Martin Luther King, Jr. Remarkably, Harrington asks his audience to imagine "WWMLKD? What Would Martin Luther King Do?" to implore his audience to expose the "real" injustice of abortion "like a boil...in the light of human conscience" and to pay no attention to the "façade of politics as usual of using race...to advance your own political ends."<sup>47</sup>

Constituted in Columbus Ohio in 2003, Created Equal's mission is predicated upon an extended analogical relationship with the CRM and MLK. The group began their tours of American university campuses and neighborhoods as "Justice Riders" (like "Freedom Riders,") for the "preborn." While Created Equal distanced themselves from Holocaust analogies, they remain diligent to the tradition of CBR, GAP, and Operation Rescue in their use of poster-size images of "real aborted babies," typically arranged on American currency for scale. They justify their use of graphic images by citing its historical lineage in the family tree of social protest tactics. Thus, Harrington points to the relationship between Created Equal, MLK, and the CRM to explain:

1. Activists in both organizations willingly endure(d) persecution for their commitments
2. Both movements understand the necessity of using disturbing images
3. Both movements are other ori-

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<sup>45</sup> Kevin Michael Deluca, *Image Politics: The New Rhetoric of Environmental Activism*. (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), 35-37.

<sup>46</sup> An exhaustive list here is impossible. I provide, here, a few good places to start in the field of rhetoric: Condit, *Decoding Abortion Rhetoric*; Sara Hayden, "Revitalizing the Debate between <Life> and <Choice>: The 2004 March for Women's Lives," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2 (2009): 111-131; Catherine L. Langford, "On Making <Person>s: Ideographs of Legal <Person>hood," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 52 (2015): 125-140.

<sup>47</sup> Harrington, "Abortion is at the Heart of America's NEW Civil War."



ented--they defend the rights of others 4. Both movements must command a portion of the media to be successful and finally, 5. They both *move(d)*—they are more than a belief; they are a movement.<sup>48</sup>

The parallel case articulated here moves towards analogy and identification in Created Equal's promotional material and their movement strategy. I take up both, in turn, to illustrate how the analogy at work in the organization constitutes both MLK and the CRM as a cipher through which their own whiteness and racism can be routed to garner the ethos of the mainstream public memory of King and the CRM.

### The Brochure

The organization's high-quality brochure outlines their fundamental claims.<sup>49</sup> The front cover asks, against a black background, "Are we all created equal?" On pages two and three in the pamphlet, on the left side, a white, fetal body appears to be floating in ethereal space, connected to what a reader might assume is an umbilical cord. The body takes up the top two-thirds of the page. Under the fetal image, the language reads: "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up..."<sup>50</sup> while on the other side of the fold is the rest of the quotation "...and live out the true meaning of its creed...that all men are created equal." -Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr."<sup>51</sup> To the right of the quotation, a fully formed baby takes up the other half of the page. The white baby is sleeping, wearing a white knitted hat, with their left hand raised over their head. Neither the fetal body's stage of development or the age of the baby is made clear, however, when juxtaposed, the fetal body and the baby are equal in size.

The fourth page features a grid of six images in three rows of two columns. The first row is labeled "COLOR" next to which are two photos—one of a young white man and another of a young black man. The second row labeled "GENDER" features an image of a young, ethnically ambiguous man on his cell phone, and a young Asian/Pacific Islander woman, also on her cell phone. The final row, labeled "AGE," pictures a white baby next to a photo of a fetal body, again both rendered the same size. To the right of the grid are two short paragraphs of text, which read:

Regardless of our skin color, gender, or age, we are all human beings. The pre-born differ from the born according to size, level of development, environment, and dependency.

But toddlers and adults differ from one another in those ways as well, yet we don't kill them based on these arbitrary differences. Should we really let age determine which humans live or die?<sup>52</sup>

Across the fold, the title reads "We are all equal despite our differences." At the bottom and in the considerably larger font is "Abortion is ageism." To the right of the text, and on page five of the brochure are four graphic images of what the reader would likely assume are the fetal remains of an abortion.<sup>53</sup> The first and largest image (twice the size of the others) are two, bloody

<sup>48</sup> Mark Harrington, "21<sup>st</sup> Century Defenders," Weekly Newsletter, Last accessed June 21, 2016:

<http://www.createdequal.org/newsletters/>.

<sup>49</sup> "Are We All Created Equal?" *Created Equal*, Last Accessed November 1, 2017:

<http://www.createdequal.org/brochure/>

<sup>50</sup> "Are We All Created Equal?" 2.

<sup>51</sup> "Are We All Created Equal?" 3.

<sup>52</sup> "Are We All Created Equal?" 4.

<sup>53</sup> "Are We All Created Equal?" 5.

hands positioned on an American quarter. In the bottom right of the image in white text, it reads, “13 weeks.” The other three photos are similarly situated at “12 weeks,” where the hands seem to be pointing the audience to read “In God we trust” on the quarter; and another at “11 weeks,” arranged on a quarter, so the face of Washington is no longer visible, and a final one ambiguously labeled “6 & 11 weeks,” where four hands, a foot, and what appears to be a head are gathered around the tip of a yellow crayon. Continuing, page six begins, “We are all humans from the beginning” and features six pictures in progressive, human development from conception to old age of a single individual.<sup>54</sup> There are four prenatal pictures and five images post-birth: a baby, a toddler, a teenager, a middle-aged woman, and an elderly woman. The two quotations explain the pictures, one from a science textbook, the other from a white paper, both argue for an understanding of human life at conception because the genetic material needed to form a human being are present from that initial stage. Page seven encourages the reader to take action: “Help end age discrimination against the preborn” and the top third of the back cover, page eight, invites the reader to, “Be part of this historic battle for equality.” Finally, the middle third of the page provides contact information for Created Equal, and the bottom third provides information pregnancy and post-abortion counseling.<sup>55</sup>

The final line of the pamphlet is most curious in its use of the phrase, “this historic battle.” Generously, “this historic battle” could imply that the fight against abortion has spanned decades and therefore constitutes the specific battle to which the ambiguous phrasing refers. However, the brochure does no other work to situate social activism against abortion; instead, it features the words of MLK and the Constitutional rights-based strategy of the CRM, prominently. The phrase “this historic battle,” then, does the rhetorical work of conjoining anti-abortion activism with the philosophy and practices of MLK and the CRM. While claiming the historic movement as their own, the language Created Equal uses in its brochure also characterizes race and gender as wins in the “battle for equality” that are securely fastened to the past. More plainly, racism and sexism are read as manifestations of historical prejudice that have been resolved. In this ahistorical context, the primary civil rights concern can be centered on abortion as an exercise of ageism. This culminating phrase, combined with the rhetoric used throughout the rest of the pamphlet, reveals how the analogy collapses into identification and initiates the ciphering.

The initial language used in the brochure begins at one of the heights of the CRM and with MLK’s most famous speech. The ubiquity of the “I Have a Dream” speech in its reproduction for varied political ends is the subject of much academic debate.<sup>56</sup> Scholars argue that the language of this speech has been so thoroughly taken out of its political, social and historical context that it can be made to sound as if it were not pointedly about race.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, Michael Eric Dyson, frustrated with its appropriation, suggested a ten-year ban on the speech.<sup>58</sup> Dyson’s call for a ban suggests the history of the CRM and MLK are not, in fact, closed; instead, it has been prematurely and even deceptively appropriated, repeatedly. With MLK’s words juxtaposed in the brochure against a stark, black background with two white fetal figures, it is difficult to imagine them as part of a movement challenging segregation, war, and housing, wage, and employment discrimination; or that the speech was delivered at the historic March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963. The use of MLK’s soaring speech as both an authorization of anti-abortion politics

<sup>54</sup> “Are We All Created Equal?” 6.

<sup>55</sup> “Are We All Created Equal?” 8.

<sup>56</sup> For a thorough synthesis of this literature see Eric J. Sundquist, *King’s Dream* (Yale University Press, 2009).

<sup>57</sup> Sundquist, *King’s Dream*; Dyson, *I May Not Make it There*.

<sup>58</sup> Sundquist, *King’s Dream*.

broadly, and the logical deductions on the brochure pages that follow constructs a cipher of Dr. King by specifically draining the contextual, social and political meaning. Created Equal is, of course, not the first organization to appropriate MLK; indeed, it is likely the sustained memory of MLK's words and the forgetting of his politics that makes possible the broad commodification of MLK and the CRM, overall. Created Equal's message is audible to its audience because they already have, in part, a politically sanitized relationship with MLK and the history of the CRM. Thus, citing MLK's rhetoric works in concert with other moments that attempt to arrest and truncate the official memory of King. MLK and the CRM operate as both ideograph and cipher simultaneously in the arguments produced by Harrington's organization. MLK and the CRM contain unbounded ideographic potential for equality and justice but such potency is remanded to the service of a movement antagonistic to its historical potential.

Mainstream knowledge about the CRM and MLK is further exploited in the textual explanations of why abortion should be understood as a practice of ageism. The grid of pictures in the brochure suggests, to some degree, the fulfillment of King's dream. The headline, "We are all equal despite our differences," directs the reader to see the subjects of the images as essentially equal. In this way, the grid provides a sort of visual syllogism that begins with the conclusion. For example, if we agree that all people are equal, we can agree that both the white man and black man pictured in the row labeled "color" are equal. If we agree to that, we can further concede that the man and woman in the row labeled "gender" are also equal. If on the scale of "color" and "gender" all people are equal, then, it stands to reason that despite the minor differences between the baby and the fetus pictured in the bottom row labeled "age" they, too, are equal. While this syllogism fails both deductively and inductively, the accompanying text makes sense of the conspicuous fact that one picture in the grid is not a fully formed person, suggesting "size, level of development, environment, and dependency" are differences we might find between toddlers and adults but are not grounds for murder. With such logic, according to Created Equal, to defend abortion on similarly rendered grounds necessarily supports murder.

Consonant with emergent visual ideographs in the 1980s and 1990s, the brochures are absent depictions of any pregnant women. Such a strategy is meant to elide an explicit defense of the most substantive challenge of pro-choice critics: that the fetus is part of a pregnant woman who ought to have body autonomy equal to all people and the right to exercise agency therein.<sup>59</sup> The brochure text presents a direct response to this claim by charting the differences between a fetus and a fully developed baby, contrasted with other differences that it suggests no longer warrants discrimination but all of which have been used to some degree to justify systemic and cultural violence against people throughout history. Making no explicit reference to the rights of pregnant women, body autonomy, or socio-economic or socio-cultural locations the brochure presents text largely characterized by logos, but readers cannot process the full presentation of the brochure without encountering the other, heavily emotive and manipulative appeals in the four graphic images across the fold.

I spend time here on the graphic images because Harrington charts them as central to his CRM strategy. On the organization's "FAQ" page, the answers that justify the use of graphic images are based on several passages, taken from MLK's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."<sup>60</sup> To warrant the use of graphic images, Harrington states "Dr. King was intentional in having media

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<sup>59</sup> Condit, *Decoding Abortion Rhetoric*, 79-81; Barbara Duden, *Disembodying Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>60</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," *The King Center*, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/letter-birmingham-city-jail-0>

present at his demonstrations against racism so that the brutality of black citizens being beaten and shot with water hoses would be caught on film. He found this kind of exposure critical to the process of ending bigotry.”<sup>61</sup> He continues referencing King’s letter quoting, “We seek to expose the injustice of abortion to the same light of human consciousness and air of national opinion...because our society has advanced the lie that the preborn are not human.”<sup>62</sup>

In response to another question on the FAQ page about how many of the signs make people angry instead of interested in reasoned debate, Harrington responds by, again, borrowing from King’s Letter. He states that “The tension present at Dr. King’s demonstrations was a result of racism, not the tactic of nonviolent disobedience. Likewise, the tension present at Created Equal’s activities is a result of the ageism that lies under the surface. When we bring this grisly truth out into the open, the tension that has long been ignored is finally revealed.”<sup>63</sup>

The legitimacy and political utility of graphic fetal imagery is of interest across academic disciplines and helps to inform my own analysis regarding analogies, false equivalences and appropriation of MLK and the CRM.<sup>64</sup> In this case, they provide visual evidence of the minor differences illustrated with a visual chart, at the bottom of the brochure, between the fetus and the baby. The positioning of the fetal remains appear on American quarters and are illustrated next to the tip of a crayon, for scale. In the largest picture of the grouping, two hands are positioned as if they are holding on to the face of the quarter. The hands are translucent, but the underlying bone structure of a hand appears in its skeletal form (although it appears this detail has been graphically enhanced). This image suggests that, at 13 weeks of pregnancy, when a woman may legally acquire an abortion, a reasonable viewer could recognize these remains, specifically, as a human person. As the photos progress chronologically, the development of the baby decreases further, while the hands continue to appear smaller and smaller, but remain recognizable as that of a human being. Even at six weeks of development, feet and hands are easily discernable, this time positioned around the crayon, perhaps to emphasize childhood, itself. In these ways, the bloody images of the fetus’s hands are meant to engender pathos relative to the logos on the left side of the brochure.

Hence, the imagery and language on both the brochure and the website expose the troubled relationship between the graphic project of Created Equal and the material history and philosophy of MLK and the CRM. King is cited for his specific historical context, as the leader of the CRM against racism, while simultaneously purposed for the movement against abortion. The positioning of such ideologies remain, at best, agnostic and (as the reader has already seen), at worst, antagonistic on material questions of racism, from the death penalty to the prison industrial complex, to neo-nazis marching in American streets. Citing MLK’s rhetoric is designed to appropriate his ethos for equality, drains his mission of its critical anti-racist project and, by suggesting the work of the CRM is complete, Created Equal repurposes the entirety of the rhetorical library towards ending abortion. By signifying that the CRM is not only over but was also successful, Harrington can chart the movement as a blueprint and vision for his own and far more narrow, activism.

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<sup>61</sup> “Frequently Asked Questions: Why Use Abortion Images? Can’t We Have a Discussion Without Seeing Those Grisly Photos?” *Created Equal*, accessed November 1, 2017: <http://www.createdequal.org/faqs/>

<sup>62</sup> “Frequently Asked Questions.”

<sup>63</sup> “Frequently Asked Questions.”

<sup>64</sup> Condit, *Decoding Abortion Rhetoric*; Duden, *Disembodying Women*; Nick Hopkins, Suzanne Zeedyk, and Fiona Raitt, “Visualising Abortion: Emotion Discourse and Fetal Imagery in a Contemporary Abortion Debate,” *Social Science & Medicine* 61, no. 2 (2005): 393-403; Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, “Fetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction,” *Feminist Studies* 13, no. 2 (1987): 263-292.

In this way, as the reader moves past the graphic images that remind them, “In God We Trust” one finds the next step in Harrington’s CRM strategy---“Justice Rides,” which are nothing more than repackaged “Freedom rides,” channeled through a ciphered King and CRM that now have the rhetorical force of warranting the movement Harrington envisions. Indeed, the paradoxical treatment of King as an ideograph full of cultural ethos and legitimacy and as a ciphered form is redoubled in the discourse of Created Equal’s Justice Rides.

### **Justice Rides**

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the brochure is the scarcity of religious language. In fact, the only specifically religious references are embossed on American currency and solicitations to speak at local churches. The absence of religious script is curious given how religious Created Equal portends itself to be, but it is no accident. Indeed, the whole project of Created Equal is to present an organization invested in a “scholarly rejection” of abortion as their “justice warriors” travel the country visiting colleges, high school, and junior high campuses, generating “reasoned debate.”<sup>65</sup> In his first newsletter after establishing Created Equal, Harrington makes explicit these choices, stating that, “Created Equal’s program will emphasize developing longer-term relationships with young people on campus” to “raise up a new generation of thinkers and debaters to take on the culture of death.”<sup>66</sup> While still establishing the framework and public orientation of Created Equal, Harrington praises the work of the CRM to launch a movement largely generated via the energies of young people and, thus, quickly launched the “Justice Ride” program. Modeled on the Freedom Rides of the CRM, where young people spent weeks on a bus, traveling to college campuses throughout the American South to protest segregation, Harrington’s group protests abortions.<sup>67</sup>

The “Justice Rides” web page automatically plays a recruitment video that begins by placing its potential participants into the figurative seats of the Freedom Riders of 1961.<sup>68</sup> Music and white text on a black background start the video with, “1961; in response to racism,” then three, iconic, black and white images flash onto the screen, with a sign reading, “Colored Waiting Room,” which displays a large arrow pointing in the left direction. Also included is an image of a policeman holding the leash of a German Shepard, now lunging and attacking an African American man, and three African American protestors hugging the front of a building, while the flood of water from the fire hoses rip into their fleshy bodies. The text continues, “human rights defenders joined the Freedom Rides,” followed by a photo of a bus of white freedom riders holding protest signs demanding an end to segregation. The text reads, “in response to abortion today [sic] defenders join Justice Rides” followed by full-color images of 35-40 mostly white teenagers in approximately equal numbers of men and women. Again, textual images appear, “create conversation,” “handle objections,” “change minds,” “share your faith,” and the final question---“will you join us?” Interspersed between the text are testimonials of “Justice Riders” who confirm the rich experience of talking with the public about abortion.

The “Justice Rides” tap into the tradition and legacy of the CRM, in similar ways that the rhetoric and graphic imagery inside the brochure taps into the legacy of MLK; that is, the rides

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<sup>65</sup> Mark Harrington, “21<sup>st</sup> Century Defenders.”

<sup>66</sup> Mark Harrington, “A Movement Not Just A Cause,” Weekly Newsletter, Last accessed June 21, 2016: <http://www.createdequal.org/newsletters/>.

<sup>67</sup> Mark Harrington, “21<sup>st</sup> Century Defenders.”

<sup>68</sup> “Justice Rides,” last accessed June 21, 2016: <http://www.justiceride.org/>.

appropriate a specific anti-racist strategy and repurpose it in form only. But even in form, this dubious appropriation is troubling. The Created Equal video is most jarring in its juxtaposition of white teenagers braving public conversations about abortion where they “handle objections” and “change minds” while the Freedom Riders were beaten with baseball bats and their bus set on fire while racist hoards advanced on them yelling “Burn them alive.”<sup>69</sup>

Freedom Rides were meant to test the limits of the Supreme Court decision in *Boynton v. Virginia* (1960) that declared segregation in public transportation illegal; and, specifically, “to create a crisis so that the federal government would be compelled to enforce the law.”<sup>70</sup> Then CRM activist and now Georgia Congressman, John Lewis, was badly beaten as he attempted to enter a whites-only waiting room in South Carolina.<sup>71</sup> Later that year, the bus full of Freedom Riders was ambushed and burned in Alabama, with the riders barely making it out alive.<sup>72</sup> Alternatively, Justice Riders from the Created Equal video discuss how they have learned to “communicate effectively” and “deal with people,” and to “express my views while being respectful of other people’s views,” and “change their [pro-choice advocates] hearts and their minds.” Justice Riders are not putting their lives in danger and are rarely, if ever, harmed in any way. My intention is not to belittle the efforts of students engaged in their communities, but what is concerning is the positionality from which they are encouraged to speak. Situated as an oppressed group of white teenagers traversing American colleges and high schools to speak against abortion, safely (and perhaps overly) protected by free speech codes, who wear go-pro cameras in the hopes of capturing someone trying to assault them, is problematic. While Created Equal might identify as “the resistance,” they are comfortably protected by their considerable privilege that far removes them from the danger, let alone the mission, the Freedom Riders faced.

Positioning the Justice Riders as analogically similar to Freedom Riders, or explicitly taking up the legacy itself, also has the effect of allowing Created Equal to stake out an anti-racist position without being anti-racist. Demonstrated by his response to the neo-nazis in Charlottesville, Virginia, in addition to his statements concerning the Black Lives Matter Movement, Harrington is, actually, antagonistic to anti-racist activism. Further, the Justice Rides, themselves, are saddled with representational problems. In the promotional video for the Justice Rides, there appears to be only one African American participant; this lack of diverse participation seems to be the average across cohorts as well. While the Justice Riders appear to be predominately white, their targets for disruption in the promotional videos are often black women. In this way, mostly white, male Justice Riders are engaged in persuasive campaigns to restrict access to the bodily autonomy of predominantly black women. The visual representation of white men, who believe themselves to be part of an oppressed group, engaged in prescribing behaviors and beliefs to black women about abortion and/or their reproductive objections should cause some alarm. The long history of racist bio-medical treatment of black women, particularly in relation to reproductive justice in the United States is well documented.<sup>73</sup> While the Justice Riders are not participat-

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<sup>69</sup> Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 97.

<sup>70</sup> Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*, 7.

<sup>71</sup> Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*, 7.

<sup>72</sup> Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*, 98-101.

<sup>73</sup> Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1998); Jael Sillman, Marlene Gerber Fried, Loretta Ross, and Elena Gutierrez, *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2016); Siobhan Sommerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

ing in a “racially specific” campaign targeting black women, they do generate a “smokescreen of African American aimed rhetoric” by advancing the CRM analogy and appropriating the arguments of MLK.<sup>74</sup> Without any “real world” reactions to their problematic use of MLK and the CRM in this way, we are left only to imagine the double damage the Justice Riders do; first, rehearsing and re-entrenching racial differences as they shed their considerable privilege for victimhood and, second, ‘educating’ black women through the ciphered language of MLK and the CRM. Harrington and the Justice Riders, then, cloak themselves in the ideographic potential of MLK and the CRM while leaving it empty of any antiracist project further harming black women who continue to be intersectional victims of race, class and gender oppression in America.

When Created Equal is challenged to respond to Black Lives Matter, the death penalty, war, or issues of economic justice for people of color, they pivot in two, hypocritical directions. The first, refuses a position outside of abortion, stating that, “We are made up of individuals with diverse positions on issues such as capital punishment...however, we are all united in our opposition to abortion;” and second, they concede that “we do not think that affirmation of all humans’ right to life...is *prima facie* incompatible with support for capital punishment.”<sup>75</sup> This oppositional ideology refuses recognition of the complexity of the critique argued by MLK and others within the CRM. Given our expanding and intersectional knowledge of the CRM, to resuscitate a single-issue movement politics is to refuse the full complexity of the memory and legacy of MLK and the CRM. The tunnel vision with which Created Equal operates regarding abortion necessitates dismissing the robust critiques sustained by MLK and the CRM, particularly those that would indict the organization itself.

The second, oppositional shift in ideology is to demonstrate their perceived oppression. Specifically, Created Equal's refrain is to underscore its shared social movement ethic with MLK and the CRM. That Harrington could ask “WWMLKD?” as a means to discourage any meaningful response to racist protestors in Virginia, demonstrates the ciphered quality of MLK’s legacy in the symbolically robust, but ultimately vacuous, system sustained by Created Equal. The rhetorical labor of Harrington and Created Equal is pitched to render anti-abortion activists as “the resistance”—the minority—to be contrasted with the “rebellious spirit” harnessed for “evil,” and made manifest in movements geared toward social justice and the beloved community far more congruent with MLK and the CRM, including Black Lives Matter, Occupy Wallstreet, and the Women’s March.<sup>76</sup>

On his radio show on April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2017, Mark Harrington culminates a 30-minute segment about the violence Created Equal experienced at the Women’s March, by suggesting that Created Equal “are the peaceful ones. Compared to the Civil Rights Movement, compared to any anti-war movement, we are the most peaceful, most respectful, and most civil movement in American history and that’s been proven in the 40 years we’ve been fighting *Roe v. Wade*.”<sup>77</sup> Here, the movement Harrington has helped build in the image of MLK, and the tactics of the CRM ex-

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<sup>74</sup> Crystal L. Swift, “Abortion as African American Cultural Amnesia: An Examination of the Dayton Right to Life Brochures,” *Women and Language* 32, no. 1 (2009): 44-50.

<sup>75</sup> Created Equal, “Frequently Asked Questions: What Do You Think About Capital Punishment?” *Created Equal*, last accessed November 1, 2017, <http://www.createdequal.org/faqs/>.

<sup>76</sup> Mark Harrington, “Justice Ride: Training Committed Activists for Life,” *Activist Radio: The Mark Harrington Show*, Podcast audio, November 29, 2016, <http://createdequal.podbean.com/e/justice-ride-training-committed-activists-for-life/>.

<sup>77</sup> Mark Harrington, “The Left’s Violence, Vandalism and Villains in the Era of Trump,” *Activist Radio: The Mark Harrington Show*, Podcast audio, April 07, 2017, <http://createdequal.podbean.com/e/the-lefts-violence-vandalism-and-villains-in-the-era-of-trump-the-mark-harrington-show/>.

ceeds its identification with both. Created Equal becomes, for Harrington, an (a)historical exception in its own right. The historic battle that he implores people to join is now of his own, fictive creation, wherein MLK and the CRM help constitute its self-contained, largely vacuous world. In this symbolically laden but substantively vacant world, movements are not coalitional or intersectional. Ideological commitments demand a kind of purity to anathema of abortion only, rendering questions of race, class, gender, and sexuality as irrelevant. Thus the question Harrington might more properly ask is, “WCIUMLKTJ? What Can I Use Martin Luther King To Justify?”

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Created Equal recruits MLK as a celebrated movement leader—an agitator that won public acceptance and acclaim, whose beloved community was realized and his memory elastic. But, this MLK is an ideograph of the hope of democracy, freedom, and equality. He is used, solely, as an exalted figure that acts as their protector from accusations of aggression, incivility, and impatience. They need not alter the public memory or ideographic aura of King to engender their appropriation.

When a specific King comes into view, one whose ideology or strategy might run counter to the project of Created Equal, they adapt to, redefine and customize its meaning to suit their narratives and their activism. The analogical relationship is collapsed into identification wherein they simply become the hope of realizing King’s dream. They empty MLK and the CRM of their actual, intersectional ideology and fill them up with rigid absolutism that uses King to condemn Black Lives Matter, the Women’s Movement, or any movement not specifically invested in anti-abortion politics. There is no room for complex social and political policies, no coalitions to be built, no intersectionality and no compromise. And when this is still not enough to ensure their legitimacy, Created Equal exceeds identification; they become an exceptional movement of their own creation, where MLK and the CRM prove insufficient in comparison.

Martin Luther King, Jr.’s life and death were exceptional and deserve an expansive memory and space in narratives of our culture’s past and future. Fifty years after his assassination, King’s critical, multifaceted anti-racist project must continue to hold Americans accountable, even as we scribe his soaring speeches onto national monuments in his honor. We must remember that he was assassinated while charting a vision of a world we have not achieved, a vision that many Americans continue to reject in practice but praise in theory. As we reflect on the rhetorical legacy of MLK and work towards the realization of the goals outlined in the CRM, an insistent and critical eye must be maintained on rhetorical practices that truncate the Movement and seek to appropriate it for narrowed political ends, divisive ideologies, and selfish gains.