

Martin Luther King Jr., W.E.B. Du Bois, and Attitudes Toward Change

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There is a less recognized Martin Luther King Jr. who has received limited attention in history books. As King approached the final year of his life, his speeches appeared to evolve in their treatment of progress. One such speech is "Honoring Dr. Du Bois." In this essay, we suggest that "Honoring Dr. Du Bois" provides a platform to partially understand the nature of King's activism during his final year. We argue that the speech characterizes a perspective toward revolutionary change that differs significantly from the King of past years. In King's earlier and most iconic speeches, he often treats change as tangible and achievable; however, in "Honoring Dr. Du Bois," King regards social justice as an ongoing, indefinite journey. Therefore, we argue that rather than characterizing his activism as moving toward a "promised land" as he did in the "I Have a Dream" speech, "Honoring Dr. Du Bois" suggests that King now views progress as perpetual action with no clear-cut destination. Additionally, we argue that "Honoring Dr. Du Bois" provides a lens to examine the types of rhetorical moves King used to establish this evolved perspective. We contend that King employs synecdoche to establish and clarify his attitude. King eulogizes Du Bois while simultaneously adopting Du Bois' activist philosophy and the trajectory of his life. Ultimately, King uses the speech as a rhetorical vehicle to express his current vision of change and progress in 1968. In our conclusion, we explore the presence of King's sustaining influence in the contemporary US.

Keywords: W.E.B Du Bois, Martin Luther King Jr., Synecdoche, Substance, Change

Martin Luther King Jr.'s career includes many highlights that are forever nested in American history. His speeches in Birmingham and at the Lincoln memorial helped to facilitate the successful passing of the Civil Rights Act. His historic march on Selma effectively advocated for voting rights.¹ And his anti-war activism was instrumental in putting an end to American involvement in the Vietnam War.² In the aftermath of his most famous speech—"I Have a Dream," in August 1963—King helped to pass the Public Accommodations Bill in July 1964. Additionally, he received the Nobel Peace Prize in December 1964, he celebrated the success of the Voting Rights Act in August 1965, and in November 1967, he formed the "Poor People's Campaign" with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.³ Many recognize him as one of the most important facilitators of revolutionary social and political change in US history. James Washington writes that King inspired "more African Americans than ever before" to fight for their constitutional

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¹ Andrew Young, "Introduction," in *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard (New York: Warner Books, 2001): x.

² Young, "Introduction," x.

³ James M. Washington, "Introduction," in *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992): xxviii-xxx.

rights.⁴ King's work as an orator is perhaps his most defining characteristic, and his words still act as a pervasive force when it comes to the empowerment of marginalized groups to this day.⁵ The speeches he leaves behind act as "a written record of the man and of what he represented."⁶

While the public celebrates King for his most famous speeches and accomplishments, his tenure as an activist was more complex than popular recollection might suggest. In January 1967, King released his book *Where Do We Go From Here* indicating a continued desire for additional social progress.⁷ Some, including many longtime supporters, disagreed with his consistent persistence in the aftermath of such monumental success. During the final year of his life, King's supporters were quickly diminishing, and his public perception was far afield from that of the days of "I Have a Dream." Possibly because of the desire to retain King's remembrance as the triumphant figure from the March On Washington, scholars and biographers have largely neglected King's rhetoric during the final year of his life, a time when King's speeches seem to express a new vision regarding the prospects of American progress. Consequently, the "historical King" is perhaps a bit more myth than a true portrait of the man he was. Unlike the optimistic and energetic King of past years, King's speeches from 1967-1968 express tones of pessimism, exasperation, and disappointment. While some of the speeches during this period have been widely recognized,⁸ one particularly powerful speech—King's February 23rd, 1968 eulogy of W.E.B. Du Bois' life—has received little rhetorical attention.

In this essay, we suggest that "Honoring Dr. Du Bois" provides a platform to partially understand the nature of King's activism during his final year. We argue that the speech characterizes a perspective toward revolutionary change that differs significantly from the King of past years. In King's earlier and most iconic speeches, he often treats change as tangible and achievable; however, in "Honoring Dr. Du Bois," King regards social justice as an ongoing, indefinite journey. Therefore, rather than characterizing his activism as moving toward a "promised land" as he did in the "I Have a Dream" speech, "Honoring Dr. Du Bois" suggests that King now views progress as perpetual action with no clear-cut destination. Additionally, we argue that "Honoring Dr. Du Bois" provides a lens to examine the types of rhetorical moves King used to establish this evolved perspective. We contend that King employs synecdoche to establish and clarify his attitude. King eulogizes Du Bois while simultaneously adopting Du Bois' activist philosophy and the trajectory of his life. Ultimately, King uses the speech as a rhetorical vehicle to express his vision of American change and progress in 1968.

In support of these claims, this essay proceeds in four parts. First, we bring context to an analysis of "Honoring Dr. Du Bois" with a discussion of King's activism and rhetorical style during the final year of his life. Second, we establish a theoretical lens by drawing on Kenneth Burke's conception of "synecdoche" and "substance." Third, we analyze "Honoring Dr. Du Bois" to characterize King's perspective in 1968. Finally, we conclude with an exploration of the presence of each of these perspectives in the contemporary US.

⁴ Washington, "Introduction," xi.

⁵ Washington, "Introduction," xi.

⁶ Washington, "Introduction," xi.

⁷ Washington, "Introduction," xxx.

⁸ See "Where do We Go From Here?," "A Time to Break the Silence," "I've Been to the Mountaintop."

King's Final Year

King's major accomplishments often act as the dominant lens through which many remember him, but this perspective provides only a weak glimpse of his life as an activist. To truly understand King, we must take into account his work during the years leading up to his death. During this period, King experienced a significant "shift in focus."⁹ He expanded his activism to include poverty and "the geopolitical complexities of the Vietnam War."¹⁰ He possessed a "widening moral imperative," and it became increasingly apparent that "his compassion for humanity would not be contained to calls for justice on a single front."¹¹ As James Washington writes, "During the final year and a half of his life, King concluded that racism, poverty, and the Vietnam War were interrelated and equally wrong in robbing the nation of its vitality."¹² King's new focus comes through in many of the speeches he delivered between 1967-1968. In "A Testament of Hope," King displays a radicalism scarcely recognized by historians. "White America must recognize that justice for black people cannot be achieved without radical changes in the structure of our society," King asserts. "The comfortable, the entrenched, the privileged cannot continue to tremble at the prospect of change in the status quo."¹³ In "The Meaning of Hope," King's renewed purpose is on full display as he outlines the tripartite oppression of racism, poverty, and militarism. Scholars note that there is a "situation a social movement faces when it achieves its pragmatic goals, as the civil rights movement had, only to find the impossibility of reaching its ultimate vision starkly revealed."¹⁴ King's shifting perspective was likely related to a renewed sense of clarity about the potential of the Civil Rights movement.

As King shifted his focus to these other issues, his demeanor changed significantly as well. Biographers write that he became depressed, disappointed, and downtrodden. Tavis Smiley's account suggests that King had a "preoccupation with death" and a "precarious balance between ups and downs."¹⁵ He vacillated between moments of "bleakness and light, despair and hope," and his emotional disposition during his final days was "one of 'frantic melancholy.'"¹⁶ Keith Miller notes that we often "dutifully honor King on the annual national holiday commemorating the King of the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-1956 and the King of 'I Have a Dream' from 1963 while almost entirely bypassing the King of 1966-1968, whose major speeches proved more radical and more disturbing."¹⁷ When King delivered "Honoring Dr. Du Bois," his condition was evident. Smiley writes that he appeared "tired and out of sorts," but he was nevertheless successful in reasserting "his belief in radical solutions to social ills."¹⁸

⁹ Edward C. Appel, "The Rhetoric of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: Comedy and Context in Tragic Collision," *Western Journal of Communication* 61 (1997): 377.

¹⁰ George N. Dionisopoulos, Victoria J. Gallagher, Steven R. Goldzwig & David Zarefsky, "Martin Luther King, The American Dream and Vietnam: A Collision of Rhetorical Trajectories," *Western Journal of Communication* 56 (1992): 99.

¹¹ Dionisopoulos et. al., "Martin Luther King, The American Dream and Vietnam," 99.

¹² Washington, "Introduction," xii.

¹³ Martin Luther King Jr., "A Testament of Hope," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1986): 314.

¹⁴ Dionisopoulos et. al., "Martin Luther King, The American Dream and Vietnam," 106.

¹⁵ Tavis Smiley, *Death of a King: The Real Story of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Final Year* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2014): 175.

¹⁶ Smiley, *Death of a King*, 175.

¹⁷ Keith D. Miller, *Martin Luther King's Biblical Epic: His Final, Great Speech* (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2011): 14.

¹⁸ Smiley, *Death of a King*, 179.

Some scholars have taken up the task of bringing awareness to the “true” King. In Michael Eric Dyson’s *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.*, he contends that as a country, we have a distorted conception of who King really was. “In the last thirty years,” he writes, “we have trapped King in romantic images or frozen his legacy in worship.”¹⁹ Dyson says his goal is to “rescue King from his admirers and deliver him from his foes.”²⁰ He outlines three primary mistakes plaguing popular conceptions of the historical King: “First, we have sanitized his *ideas*,” “Second, we have twisted his *identity*,” and “Finally, we have ceded control of his *image*.”²¹ There seems to be a tendency, Dyson notes, for individuals to pick and choose the attributes associated with King that fit their desired narrative. For instance, King is often regarded as a “racial healer” rather than by his “later-life contention that most whites were unconscious racists.”²² Miller agrees, and argues that “Americans strongly prefer to treasure the earlier King while ignoring his later years.”²³ Smiley recognizes this tendency as well, writing that King “is a man whose true character has been misinterpreted, ignored, or forgotten.”²⁴ Scholars should thus work to “bring to life” the “the essential truths about King in his final months before they are unremembered and irrecoverable.”²⁵ This latter King is perhaps the one we should be primarily lauding, as “in the face of unrelenting adversity, [he] expressed the full measure of his character and courage.”²⁶

King’s Rhetorical Style

As King’s perspective evolved, so did his rhetorical style. Many often remember King as a unique and charismatic orator. Many laud him for his incorporation of tropes, linguistic devices, and his iconic use of emphasis. King was well aware of the fact that the effectiveness of his speaking style would widen the net of his influence. He took great care to be effective in both “what he said and . . . how he said it.”²⁷ However, King’s rhetorical style matured and shifted somewhat in his later years. As Frederick Antczak recognizes, during the final year of his life, King had both a “revolution in values” and a “revolution in language.”²⁸ His “revolution of values required a revolution in language: To say what needed to be said, he had to reshape the language of political discourse.”²⁹ Edward Appel argues that this shift represents a departure from the “comic style” to the “tragic style.”³⁰ He states:

¹⁹ Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Touchstone, 2000): xv.

²⁰ Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You*, xv.

²¹ Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You*, xvi.

²² Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You*, 29.

²³ Miller, *Martin Luther King’s Biblical Epic*, 14.

²⁴ Smiley, *Death of a King*, 5.

²⁵ Smiley, *Death of a King*, 5.

²⁶ Smiley, *Death of a King*, 5.

²⁷ Mia Klein, “The Other Beauty of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Letter from Birmingham Jail,” *College Composition and Communication* 32 (1981): 37.

²⁸ Frederick J. Antczak, “When ‘Silence is Betrayal’: An Ethical Criticism of the Revolution of Values in the Speech at Riverside Church,” in *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Sermonic Power of Public Discourse*, ed. Carolyn Callo-way-Thomas and John Lucaites (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1993), 127-137.

²⁹ Antczak, “When ‘Silence is Betrayal,’” 137.

³⁰ Appel draws primarily on Burke in order to explain the distinction between the comic and tragic style. According to Appel, the tragic style utilizes “guilt-redemption terms that provide a more specific anatomy of action, the modifiers of the general notions so to speak, are perfected.” Conversely, in discourse exhibiting comic characteristics,

[S]everal scholars have commented generally on changes in the content or style of his discourse toward the end of [King's] career. To date, however, none have fully explained either the nature or the importance of the shift from the mostly comic style of his 1955-1966 discourse to the mostly tragic style of the discourse of his last year (1967-1968).³¹

Scholars have also recognized that King's rhetoric during this period held a heightened capacity to address multiple audiences and juggle multiple purposes. King acquired the skill of employing "dual communication;" he could present "a practical, unifying vision" for those included and excluded from "mainstream American life" while also evoking "the transcendent image of moralist."³² Put another way; King often used rhetoric that "made room for both the most idealistic claims of justice" while making practical applications and addressing "the most specific claims of actual fact and felt need."³³ Similarly, in "Honoring Dr. Du Bois," King had the dual purpose of eulogizing Du Bois and establishing his personal perspective about the American social landscape of 1968. As the forthcoming analysis will show, he did so with the use of synecdoche. But first, we turn to a discussion of Kenneth Burke to characterize the nature of this shift in perspective.

Burke's Synecdoche and Substance

"Honoring Dr. Du Bois" can be treated as a rhetorical construction of King's activist attitude and perspective. This perspective is established through King's use of Du Bois' narrative as synecdoche. Kenneth Burke writes that we should regard metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, and irony as the "four master tropes."³⁴ He states: "For *metaphor* we could substitute *perspective*; For *metonymy* we could substitute *reduction*; For *synecdoche* we could substitute *representation*; For *irony* we could substitute *dialectic*."³⁵ These tropes are not purely figurative; they are involved in the role of "discovery and description of 'the truth.'"³⁶ Burke writes that synecdoche "stresses a *relationship* or *connectedness* between two sides of an equation, a connectedness that, like a road, extends in either direction, from quantity to quality or from quality to quantity."³⁷ We find synecdoches in rhetoric if two things are shown to be used as "part for the whole, whole for the part, container for the contained, sign for the thing signified, material for the thing made...cause for effect, effect for cause, genus for species, species for genus, etc."³⁸ In "Honoring Dr. Du Bois," we can regard Du Bois as a "representation" of King's own attitude toward the prospects of progress. King uses the "whole" of Du Bois' activist narrative to establish "part" of his own perspective.

"Honoring Dr. Du Bois" contains a vision of progress that is ongoing, indefinite, and perpetual. Conversely, in earlier speeches like King's "I Have a Dream," his view of progress seemed to favor benchmarks and a tangible "finish line" or "promised land" to be reached. We can fur-

"those terms and tensions tend to be relaxed, loosened, unperfected. Terms come under the sign of moderation, action in a temperate, less extreme key." Appel, "The Rhetoric of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.," 383.

³¹ Appel, "The Rhetoric of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.," 376.

³² Dionisopoulos et. al., "Martin Luther King, The American Dream and Vietnam," 93.

³³ Antczak, "When 'Silence is Betrayal,'" 128.

³⁴ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 503.

³⁵ Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 503.

³⁶ Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 503.

³⁷ Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 509.

³⁸ Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 508.

ther explicate these two seemingly disparate perspectives by drawing on Kenneth Burke's theory of substance. Burke writes that discourse may sometimes be undergirded by trends in language representing distinct overarching categories of existence—a particular “substance.” Substance suggests that within a person, thing, idea, or concept, there is a greater theme “standing under” or “upholding.”³⁹ This conception is derived from the idea that the mind is made up of some “simple ideas” that at times deserve classification because they “constantly go together.”⁴⁰ Thus, single speeches or rhetorical artifacts can be clarified regarding their overall substance based “theme.” Burke theorized four main categories of substance: geometric, familial, directional, and dialectical.⁴¹ Association with one category often leads to the negation of others. If a rhetorical artifact demonstrates a proclivity for one category of substance, it is also demonstrating a capacity to establish what it is not.

In the analysis, we will demonstrate how King used Du Bois' eulogy as a synecdoche to establish and clarify his view of American progress in 1968—a view that is decidedly “directional” and views progress as an indefinite struggle. After analyzing “Honoring Dr. Du Bois” to demonstrate this rhetorical move, we will juxtapose it against a brief analysis of “I Have a Dream” to establish the “geometric” nature of King's attitude in his earlier years.

Eulogizing Du Bois and Du Bois as Synecdoche

Delivered just months before King's eventual death, “Honoring Dr. Du Bois” was presented at *Freedomways: A Quarterly Review of the Freedom Movement*, which commemorated the hundredth anniversary of W.E.B. Du Bois' birth.⁴² King accepted the invitation to speak with great pleasure and was said to have reveled in the chance to “honor one of his revolutionary heroes.”⁴³ Reactions to the speech highlighted its apparent radicalism. Halpern notes that King helped to solidify his place as “the single most prominent progressive activist in the country” because he seemed to “share space with the Communist-oriented left.”⁴⁴ Because of this connection, “Honoring Dr. Du Bois” should be considered “the most radical of his life.”⁴⁵

Eulogizing Du Bois and Du Bois as Synecdoche

“Honoring Dr. Du Bois” shares the narrative of Du Bois' life struggle, praises his scholarly contribution, honors his character, and discusses his enduring legacy.⁴⁶ King calls Du Bois “one of the most remarkable men of our time.” According to King, Du Bois set out to dispel the “myth of inferiority” attributed to African Americans of his era. Du Bois' activism led him to pursue a life of “daily abuse and humiliation” rather than one of luxury. He dedicated his life to a “quest for truth about his own people” and was a pioneer who “completed works on health, education, em-

³⁹ Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 23.

⁴⁰ Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 22.

⁴¹ Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 29.

⁴² Martin Halpern, “Honoring Dr. Du Bois: Martin Luther King's Most Radical Speech,” *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History*, 39 (2015): 32.

⁴³ Smiley, *Death of a King*, 179.

⁴⁴ Halpern, “Honoring Dr. Du Bois,” 32.

⁴⁵ Halpern, “Honoring Dr. Du Bois,” 36.

⁴⁶ Martin Luther King Jr., “Honoring Dr. Du Bois,” in *Black Titan: WEB DuBois*, ed. John Henrik Clarke (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970). All subsequent citations to this speech are from this source.

ployment, urban conditions, and religion.” King highlights that Du Bois wrote *Suppression of the African Slave-Trade*, *The Philadelphia Negro*, and *Black Reconstruction in America*. Du Bois helped found the NAACP and “the first negro scholarly publication, *Phylon*.” He worked three successful careers as “a pioneer sociologist,” an “activist to further mass organization,” and a historian. In recognizing Du Bois' character, King states, “Dr. Du Bois *the man* needs to be remembered today when despair is all too prevalent. In the years he lived and fought there was far more justification for frustration and hopelessness, and yet his faith in his people never wavered.” Dr. Du Bois took pride in his people, avoided “hurling invectives,” embraced radicalism, and lived with passion.

Throughout the speech, King characterizes Du Bois' life as one of oppression, redemption, and posthumous influence. During Du Bois' time, African Americans were consistently rebuked by a White America that had been shrouded in ignorance. African Americans were “kept in oppression and deprivation by a poisonous fog of lies that depicted them as inferior, born deficient and deservedly doomed to servitude to the grave.” Du Bois faced an era where “poison” had “been injected into the mind of America” leading to the infection of “not only whites but many Negroes.” The American government “heaped venom and scorn” onto Du Bois in an attempt to silence him. King relates the circumstances of Du Bois' era to the 1968 landscape stating that worldwide “imperialist exploitation” has created “the long night of poverty, illiteracy, and disease.” As the speech progresses, King then juxtaposes his characterization of the oppression faced by Du Bois against a picture of a man who successfully confronted his oppression. King says Du Bois had the “indomitable fighting spirit of the valiant.” He was a “tireless explorer and a gifted discoverer.” He confronted this “powerful structure of historical distortion and dismantled it.” Du Bois battled, transformed, and unified others. He brought “free public education into existence” for Blacks and poor Whites, and brought perspective to the achievements of Reconstruction.

King's narrative of oppression and redemption sets up his eventual discussion of the way Du Bois “lives on” in the present day. King emphasizes the relevance and importance of Du Bois' posthumous influence. The redemptive quality of Du Bois' life is still felt because his spirit continues to influence those advocating for change. King characterizes Du Bois as having an enduring legacy or “continued spirit.” He says White America has a “debt to Dr. Du Bois.” Du Bois gave America “a gift of truth for which they should eternally be indebted to him.” He remarks that Du Bois “has left us but he has not died,” and the “spirit of freedom is not buried in the grave of the valiant.” He theorizes that Du Bois would fight for the same things King does currently: “Dr. Du Bois would be in the front ranks of the peace movement today. He would readily see the parallel between American support of the corrupt and despised Thieu-Ky regime and Northern support to the Southern slave masters in 1876.” In essence, Du Bois' spirit is still with those advocating for change today. As King states, “[Du Bois] will be with us when we go to Washington in April to demand our right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

In eulogizing Du Bois, King reveals details of his present worldview by connecting Du Bois' struggle to his own. King and Du Bois were alike in some apparent ways. Halpern writes that “Like Du Bois, King was committed to striving for African American equality and was an independent radical intellectual whose views evolved due to changing circumstances and his probing of those changes.”⁴⁷ Du Bois' path of oppression, redemption, and continued influence parallels King's struggle for change as related to equality, poverty, and the Vietnam War. Throughout the speech, King hints at the fact that Du Bois' activism and his own are similar and connected. King

⁴⁷ Halpern, “Honoring Dr. Du Bois,” 37.

stresses that there is a relationship between Du Bois' activism and his own activism in 1968. As synecdoche, the “whole” of Du Bois' activist narrative is used to represent “part” of the struggle King is currently enduring.⁴⁸ King concludes his speech by regarding Du Bois' narrative as inspirational for the present era. “In conclusion” he states, “let me say that Dr. Du Bois' greatest virtue was his committed empathy with all the oppressed and his divine dissatisfaction with all forms of injustice. Today we are still challenged to be dissatisfied.”

King's use of Du Bois' narrative as synecdoche reveals some specific qualities about King's perspective in 1968. King uses Du Bois, Du Bois' era, and Du Bois' struggle to help characterize the landscape of his own activism. King alludes to the idea that he and Du Bois, as activists in separate eras, are similar historical figures. Other scholars writing about “Honoring Dr. Du Bois” have alluded to this as well. As Halpern writes, “King's speech at the Carnegie Hall rally contained an overview of Du Bois' life and career, placed in their historical context.”⁴⁹ Keith Miller explains that King's speech was “eloquently moving” and that there was clearly “a vibration of his own severely tested manhood.”⁵⁰ Like Du Bois, King has experienced oppression and redemption, failure and success, and, perhaps, the capacity for a posthumous influence. King states: “People deprived of their freedom do not give up—Negroes have been fighting more than a hundred years, and even if the date of full emancipation is uncertain, what is explicitly certain is that the struggle for it will endure.”

Ultimately, by using Du Bois as synecdoche, King characterizes his own attitude toward progress. From a Burkean perspective, this attitude is decidedly “directional” regarding its substance. King advocates for a perpetual struggle and an ongoing journey toward social justice. Compared to his perspective in earlier years, his vision is less tangible, and his sense of inevitability is noticeably absent. Burke explains directional substance as “often strongly futuristic, purposive, its slogan might be: Not ‘Who are you?’ or ‘Where are you from?’ but ‘Where are you going?’”⁵¹ He goes on to say that “‘moments’ are directional in that, being led up to and away from, they summarize the preceding and seminally contain the subsequent.”⁵² The King of the past may have emphasized Du Bois' concrete accomplishments as a means to demonstrate the possibilities for tangible change, but in “Honoring Dr. Du Bois,” King maintains that Du Bois' spirit lives on, and thus, the struggle for change lives on, too. King too has experienced oppression and moments of redemption, and he now foresees that, rather than being a force for immediate revolutionary change, change may not be possible and he instead wishes to embody Du Bois' enduring influence. Through synecdoche, King can successfully use Du Bois' narrative to establish his present perspective.

King's Attitudinal Shift

King's recognition that we should continue to “be dissatisfied” and that it is “explicitly certain” that “the struggle will endure” represents an adjustment in attitude from some of his earlier activism. This shift in mentality represents an activist perspective that is decidedly different than King's vision in past years; it represents a rhetorical turn signifying a fundamental change in his philosophy. “Honoring Dr. Du Bois” demonstrates that King is more concerned with advocating

⁴⁸ Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 503.

⁴⁹ Halpern, “Honoring Dr. Du Bois,” 65.

⁵⁰ Quoted in David Levering Lewis, *King: A Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012): 376.

⁵¹ Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 31.

⁵² Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 32.

for an indefinite journey toward progress rather than one who sees tangible benchmarks or an impending “end” to the movement. As with Du Bois, the “spirit” of King’s struggle will continue into the indefinite future.

This adjusted perspective is further clarified when juxtaposed against one of King’s earlier speeches—the “I Have a Dream” speech. “I Have a Dream” serves as a suitable point of comparison because it is commonly used as a touchstone to characterize King’s perspective and style. However, our analysis reveals important differences between his rhetoric in “I Have a Dream” and his altered perspective in “Honoring Dr. Du Bois.” The “I Have a Dream” speech demonstrates a King who is determined to see fundamental sociopolitical change. King asserts the following: “we’ve come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice”; “There is something I must say to my people, who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice”; and “[G]o back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed.”⁵³ Collectively, these statements hold the conception that a desirable end to the Civil Rights struggle can and will be reached. King advocates for the change from standing on the “warm threshold” to standing in “the palace of justice;” the change from limited justice to justice for all; the change from a check “marked insufficient funds” to “a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice;” and the change of a dream of racial equality to reality.

The perspectives toward change present in “I Have a Dream” and “Honoring Dr. Du Bois” are distinct. In “I Have a Dream,” King is confident in the prospects of accomplishment; in “Honoring Dr. Du Bois,” King is pessimistic and advocates for constant movement forward. King’s shift away from viewing progress as tangible and achievable represents a perspective that is far less “geometric” in nature. Burke writes that geometric substance deals with “an object placed in its setting, existing both in itself and as part of its background. Participation in a context.”⁵⁴ Discourse displaying geometric substance will display traits and qualities that are shaped by inevitability.⁵⁵ In contrast, with “Honoring Dr. Du Bois, King has a more “directional” attitude regarding change. Whereas he once encouraged his audience toward tangible moments of revolutionary change, the 1968 King seems resigned to the idea that change will be an ongoing process and his activist spirit will have to carry on indefinitely.

King used his eulogy of Dr. Du Bois to both celebrate the life of an iconic man and to characterize his perspective toward change. His “directional” vision of activism suggests a pessimistic outlook when it comes to revolutionary change. Pessimism of this sort may seem to suggest stagnation or apathy, however, for King it did not. For King, the optimism/pessimism dichotomy was not a choice between choosing to advocate or abstaining; rather, it was a matter of continuing to advocate even when the prospects of change were bleak. Unfortunately, the “I Have a Dream” King tends to dominate historical representations. We see King as the hero of the Civil Rights struggle who brought about major change and experienced widespread acclaim and popularity, but this summation is misguided. King had lost a great deal of the support he enjoyed during the times of “I Have a Dream” and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. For King, however, the *struggle endured* even when his activism became unpopular.

⁵³ Martin Luther King Jr., “I Have a Dream,” *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1986). All subsequent citations to this speech are from this source.

⁵⁴ Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 29.

⁵⁵ Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 29.

King's Perspective in the Contemporary US

In the contemporary US, the presence of optimistic and pessimistic perspectives of this kind persist. For instance, Cornell West—who has long tended toward a more optimistic perspective regarding advocacy for social justice—wrote an article in December of 2017 lambasting the pessimistic perspective held by author Ta-Nehisi Coates.⁵⁶ West calls Coates “the neoliberal face of the black freedom struggle.” He sees Coates as advocating for “apolitical pessimism” and holding a view of black America that is “narrow and dangerously misleading.”⁵⁷ Coates’s pessimistic outlook, however, is not that simple. He considers it dangerous to regard momentary successes as steps toward any “ultimate resolution.” Coates writes:

For now the country holds to the common theory that emancipation and civil rights were redemptive, a fraught and still-incomplete resolution of the accidental hypocrisy of a nation founded by slaveholders extolling a gospel of freedom. This common theory dominates much of American discourse, from left to right. Conveniently, it holds the possibility of ultimate resolution, for if right-thinking individuals can dedicate themselves to finishing the work of ensuring freedom for all, then perhaps the ghosts of history can be escaped.⁵⁸

Robin D. G. Kelley calls the West/Coates feud “the latest battle royale among the titans of the black intelligentsia.” He writes that Coates’s vision is “deeply pessimistic because his focus is on structures of race and class oppression, and the policies and ideologies that shore up these structures. He is concerned that we survive”⁵⁹ However, like King, Coates is not completely hopeless; rather, he is pessimistic about opportunities for revolutionary change. This position does not lead him to be apathetic; he continues his advocacy—for example, in his widely cited case for reparations⁶⁰—despite the bleakness of its capacity for progress. He recognizes that “part of the task of mobilizing requires ideological work, changing minds, challenging received wisdom, [and] revealing hidden structures of oppression and the possibility of human liberation.”⁶¹ Coates and those who share in his view are prone to question everything, stay curious, and embrace “self-reflection” and the “uncomfortable questions.”⁶² Conversely, Cornell West holds the optimistic perspective that social movements, or “our fightback” have altered history and will continue to do so—he believes that “we can win.”⁶³ He holds an “unwavering commitment to the power of collective resistance” and works to guard the “optimism of the will.”⁶⁴

These two disparate stances help to illustrate the way that King’s various dispositions as an activist live on today. Whereas King used Du Bois’ narrative as a synecdoche to establish his

⁵⁶ Cornell West, “Ta-Nehisi Coates is the Neoliberal Face of the Black Freedom Struggle,” *The Guardian*, December 17, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/17/ta-nehisi-coates-neoliberal-black-struggle-cornel-west>.

⁵⁷ West, “Ta-Nehisi Coates is the Neoliberal Face of the Black Freedom Struggle.”

⁵⁸ Ta-Nehisi Coates, “We Should Have Seen Trump Coming,” *The Guardian*, September 29, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/sep/29/we-should-have-seen-trump-coming>.

⁵⁹ Robin D. G. Kelley, “Coates and West in Jackson,” *Boston Review*, December 22, 2017, <http://bostonreview.net/race/robin-d-g-kelley-coates-and-west-jackson>.

⁶⁰ Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic*, June, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>.

⁶¹ Kelley, “Coates and West in Jackson.”

⁶² Kelley, “Coates and West in Jackson.”

⁶³ Kelley, “Coates and West in Jackson.”

⁶⁴ Kelley, “Coates and West in Jackson.”

newly forming perspective, contemporary intellectuals are displaying a propensity to embody both King's earlier "I Have a Dream" outlook, and his later "Honoring Dr. Du Bois" position.

As a prophetic figure, King likely came to realize the value in viewing change as an indefinite process. He felt that Du Bois' legacy could be used as a beacon for future encouragement. Just as Du Bois lived on with posthumous influence, King may have sought to establish his own continued spirit and establish a legacy that would have an impact on future generations. As Coates and West both demonstrate, King's revolutionary spirit has undoubtedly continued to be an important factor in the philosophies of contemporary social movements. Edward Kennedy recognizes that King's advocacy "helped bring much of the progress we have achieved over the past three decades, and our similar response now can achieve similar progress in the years ahead."⁶⁵

"Honoring Dr. Du Bois" suggests that the later, less recognized King would advocate for a contemporary position similar to Ta-Nehisi Coates; a vision of progress that is ongoing rather than working toward a "finish line." Perhaps, if King were here today, he too would be subjected to the scorn of Cornell West and others. As Clayborne Carson notes, if King were to "return" today, "his oratory would be unsettling and intellectually challenging rather than remembered diction and cadences. He would probably be the unpopular social critic he was on the eve of the Poor People's Campaign rather than the object of national homage he became after his death."⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Edward Kennedy, "Introduction to 'Where Do We Go From Here,'" in *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard (New York: Warner Books, 2001), 168.

⁶⁶ Clayborne Carson, "Martin Luther King, Jr.: Charismatic Leadership in a Mass Struggle," *The Journal of American History* 74 (1987): 454.