REMEMBERING JOBS AND NOT JUST FREEDOM: THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF RACE AND CLASS & THE RHETORICAL ECOLOGY OF THE 1963 MARCH ON WASHINGTON

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ABSTRACT

Leading civil rights organizer Bayard Rustin famously described the Civil Rights Movement by dividing it into two phases. As Rustin proposes, the first phase, circumscribed by the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, mainly focused on legal advancements. In contrast, he pontificates that the second phase (post-1964) dissimilarly featured the pursuit of economic gains that did not accompany the judicial enhancements of the previous phase. Instead of observing the Civil Rights Movement in the hardened, dichotomous phases that Rustin presents, “Remembering Jobs and Not Just Freedom” theorizes how the 1963 March on Washington can be treated as a junction that embodies the focuses of both phases. The historic event provides fertile ground to analyze the intersectionality between race and class. By using revisionist historiography as a foundation, this thesis probes how the speeches delivered by A. Philip Randolph and Martin Luther King, Jr. at the 1963 March on Washington featured rhetoric inspired by the Labor Movement of the 1920s – 1940s. Examining how the popularly remembered and propagated racial narrative of the Civil Rights Movement was interwoven with an economic narrative that emanated from an earlier period of activism uncovers how the leftist economic ideologies of the Labor Movement were also present during the Civil Rights Movement. Furthermore, this thesis employs the theory of rhetorical ecologies to show how the inclusive language used by Randolph and the dream metaphor used by King—largely inspired by Langston Hughes’ radical poetry—are vestiges that communicate part of the economic agenda from the Labor Movement.
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INTRODUCTION
Phase One and Phase Two of the Civil Rights Movement Overlap: The Intersectionality of Race and Class

“Jack Selzer once told me that the rhetoric of the civil rights movement is ‘almost infinite.’ I agree. Our work has barely begun. If you want a rewarding project, then try the rhetoric of the civil rights movement. You can start almost anywhere.”


In *Behind the Dream: The Making of the Speech that Transformed a Nation*, Clarence B. Jones, the co-writer of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, describes frantically handwriting the copyright symbol on hundreds of King’s speeches as they were being inserted into press kits on the sunny morning of August 28, 1963. At the last minute, Jones only thought of the importance of copyrighting the speech after predicting that the day may become more historically significant than what the planners’ might have ever envisioned. Five decades later have proven Jones’ instinct correct—King’s oration at the March on Washington has arguably become the most recognized speech in the history of the United States. Although Jones is sure to clarify that his intention for copyrighting the speech was not driven by profit but motivated by his interest to ensure its protection, his impulsive action has allowed the speech to become a steady source of enormous revenue for the King estate (Jones 93).

Despite the “I Have a Dream” speech’s historical prestige and financial fruition, Keith D. Miller—one of the leading scholars on King’s speeches—notes how “surprisingly few scholars have carefully examined the rhetoric of King and other figures of the civil rights movement” (Miller 168). However, Miller explains that this disinterest in the oratory and rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement is waning as scholarship on the subject has increased in the last half-decade (168). He suggests that recent scholarship on King is “strenuously challenging the national
memory of King as the only notable leader of racial agitation” (168). Although Miller does not give a concrete reason to indicate why scholars have become more interested in examining the rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement, new scholarship by historians who study the era has provided a platform for scholars to investigate the period from new avenues. As Miller indicates, civil rights historians have largely been working to “destabilize the King-dominated narrative” since the 1980s. I further posit that the steady production of revisionist civil rights historiography has reawakened a leftist perspective that enables us to re-envision how the messages of the Civil Rights Movement were more progressive than originally perceived.

The Leftist Perspective in Historical Scholarship

Work by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall and William E. Forbath uncovers how the Civil Rights Movement was influenced by the left and compels us to consider the influence of an economic narrative that took root as early as the 1930s. Hall’s seminal essay, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” explains how the movement’s “dominant narrative” sequesters the struggle between the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision and Martin Luther King, Jr.’s death in 1968 (Hall 1234). Hall argues that isolating the movement between these years disadvantageously separates it from many other significant factors. For example, she expresses how this timeframe restricts the movement to the South and “to limited, noneconomic objectives” that were executed to galvanize the attention of the entire nation. She further explains how “Martin Luther King Jr. is this [dominant] narrative’s defining figure—frozen in 1963, proclaiming ‘I have a dream’ during the march on the Mall” (Hall 1234). This narrative ignores “King the democratic socialist who advocated unionization, planned the Poor People’s Campaign, and was assassinated in 1968 while supporting a sanitation workers’ strike” (Hall 1234). Hall further proposes that this dominant narrative that excludes its more radical
components is a fabrication “reified by a New Right bent on reversing its gains” (Hall 1235).

Furthermore, she suggests that tracing the origins of this abbreviated version of the Civil Rights Movement to its origins “that took root in the liberal and radical milieu of the 1930s” challenges this impaired, conservative narrative. Accordingly, William E. Forbath shares the same perspective that Hall advances—his description that criticizes the abbreviated narrative of the Civil Rights Movement closely echoes Hall. For example, Forbath explains:

We tend to think that the civil rights movement originated in the 1950s, in the wake of *Brown v. Board of Education*. But … the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s actually had many roots in the labor movement of the 1930s and 1940s. The industrial unions created during the New Deal era and their federation, the Committee of Industrial Organizations (“CIO”), housed and fostered a remarkable civil rights movement … Those struggles, in turn, provided the seedbed for much of the leadership and many initiatives of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. (697)

Like Hall, Forbath’s remarks illustrate how shortening the Civil Rights Movement to the 1950s and 1960s gives a skewed perception of its vision for “equal citizenship.” Forbath similarly proposes a widened perspective that acknowledges the influence of the American Labor Movement from earlier decades. In accordance with Forbath’s sentiments, Hall’s explanation that conservative political pressures captured the dominant narrative of the Civil Rights Movement begs us to consider how messages of the period expressed leftist, economic agendas. Nevertheless, these efforts by Hall and Forbath that extend the focus of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s and 1960s to previous decades remind us that King was only a
synecdochical representative for a larger cause with many broader aims—King was not the Civil Rights Movement’s single figure, and the period was not solely about race.

Along with Hall and Forbath’s consideration about how an economic narrative is vital to the Civil Rights Movement, extensive historical scholarship by historian William P. Jones depicts the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (henceforth referred to as “The March”) from the same progressive vantage that also incorporates a longer economic narrative. Jones’ “The Forgotten Radical History of the March on Washington” remarks how the protest “remains one of the most successful mobilizations ever created by the American Left. Organized by a coalition of trade unionists, civil rights activists, and feminists—most of them African American and nearly all of them socialists—the protest drew nearly a quarter-million people” (Jones 1). Another piece by William Powell Jones, entitled The March on Washington: Jobs, Freedom, and the Forgotten History of Civil Rights, is a recently released historical chronicle of The March that reminds us how the event was saturated with progressive economic goals (xiii):

Nearly every American and millions of people around the world are familiar with Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, yet most know little about the March on Washington at which it was delivered. The tremendous eloquence and elegant simplicity of the speech meant that many, then and now, came to associate the broader goals of the demonstration with King’s compelling vision of interracial harmony—a dream of a nation that would finally live up to its founders’ proclamations about the “self-evident” equality of all people, in which children would be judged “by the content of their character” rather than the color of their skin and in which citizens would “be able to work together, to pray together, knowing that we will be free one day.” Few know that King’s was the
last of ten speeches, capping more than six hours of performances by well-known musicians, appearances by politicians and movie stars, and statements of solidarity from groups across the nation and around the world—as well as an actual march. Even fewer know that it was a march “For Jobs and Freedom,” and that it aimed not just to end racial segregation and discrimination in the Jim Crow South but also to ensure that Americans of all races had access to quality education, affordable housing, and jobs that paid a living wage. (Jones ix)

The excerpt above from Jones’ analysis of The March demonstrates a radical interpretation of the event that acknowledges its focus on both race and class. Moreover, Jones enables us to realize that the event was certainly orchestrated to contend with the issue of racial discrimination, but it was originally conceptualized to address the issue of economic disenfranchisement that had plagued black citizens since the end of slavery. Consequently, orienting attention to The March’s original purpose of economic empowerment—and not simply racial discrimination—along with devoting consideration to The March’s context engenders a more dynamic view of the event that incorporates its more radical interests. As Jones delineates, by “freedom” organizers meant “that every American be guaranteed access to stores, restaurants, hotels, and other ‘public accommodations,’ to ‘decent housing’ and ‘adequate and integrated education,’ and to the right to vote” (x). By proclaiming the need for “jobs,” organizers were also demanding a federal program to equip the unemployed workforce with skills, an increase in minimum wage that promised a “decent standard of living,” and extend the minimum wage to other industries like agriculture, domestic care, and the public sector who were not originally under the oversight of federal law (x). Furthermore, Jones affirms the leftist perspective in historical scholarship by explaining that “[h]istorians have complicated the traditional narrative by tracing the ‘radical
roots of the civil rights’ back into the 1930s and ‘40s and by demonstrating that civil rights
activists of many ideological varieties always insisted that access to jobs, housing, and economic
security was as vital to their struggle as voting rights and integration,” (xiii).

**The Interplay Between Racial and Economic Narratives**

As the title of this thesis implies, I suggest that it is important to embrace the progressive,
economic narrative that historiography offers about the Civil Rights Movement and The March.
Remembering the radical, economic aims constituted by “jobs” that are not reflected by the
predominating emphasis on just “freedom” encourages us to perceive The March as a
convergence between racial and economic narratives that have defined the Civil Rights
Movement. Unfortunately, these two narratives have often been periodized in ways that compel
us to think about them as mutual exclusives. In “From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil
Rights Movement,” civil rights organizer Bayard Rustin divides the African American Civil
Rights Movement (1954 – 1968) into two phases. As he delineates, the first phase is
circumscribed by juridical advancements—it began in 1954 with the landmark *Brown v. Board
of Education* decision by the U.S. Supreme Court and ended in 1964 with the enactment of the
Civil Rights Act of 1964. Rustin proposes how the second phase features the pursuit of economic
equality for black Americans that was not achieved in the earlier phase. Rustin’s essay describes
this shift by explaining, “No longer were Negroes satisfied with integrating lunch counters. They
now sought advances in employment, housing, school integration, police protection, and so
forth” (Rustin). His remarks reveal how outlawing discrimination in public accommodations did
not directly impact the quality of life blacks in ways that would enable them gain secure
employment and better education. Moreover, Rustin notes the need for income increases in black
households by declaring, “What is the value of winning access to public accommodations for
those who lack money to use them?” (Rustin). Rustin’s assertion that the movement “was compelled to expand its vision beyond race relations to economic relations” the “minute the movement faced this [said] question” expresses that the Civil Rights Movement experienced an ideological shift between the two phases (Rustin). However, treating these phases as binaries in the manner that Rustin advances belies the fact that attaining economic advancements had already been a large part of the Civil Rights Movement’s agenda during the first phase. Hall and Forbath’s argument that the economic narrative of the Civil Rights Movement began in the 1930s directly contradicts the partitioned timeframe that Rustin proposes, which does not mention the importance of economic goals until post-1964.

This thesis—“Remembering Jobs and Not Just Freedom”—challenges how the Civil Rights Movement is periodized by questioning Rustin’s characterization of the era in two phases. Instead of treating the first phase (1954 – 1964) as a binary with the second phase (1964 – 1968), I observe how there is an overlap between the two phases by suggesting that the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom is a crossroads that showcases both legislative goals of the first phase and economic goals of the second phase. Investigating The March as a representation of both phases allows us to examine the importance of considering class and race intersectionality when analyzing the Civil Rights Movement because treating them independently undervalues how both racial discrimination and economic inequality are sometimes inextricable. Furthermore, Rustin’s own inclusion of both racial and economic goals when outlining the different stages of the movement implies that they are both vital to achieving civil rights for disenfranchised groups. However, evaluating them independently averts us from realizing the intricacies of these two narratives. Approaching these two narratives separately also distorts that fact that major civil rights leaders like A. Philip Randolph and Martin Luther King,
Jr. noted the interaction between racism and economic inequality and simultaneously addressed the importance of correcting both during The March. I analyze the interplay between racial and economic narratives to show how they were both present in the messages A. Philip Randolph and Martin Luther King, Jr. broadcasted at The March. I am not refuting the periodization that Rustin has already proposed. Instead, I am insisting that we consider the productivity of thinking about how both narratives work synchronously and inform each other by reconsidering The March as a juncture in which the two phases briefly overlap.

Critical race theorists’ notion of intersectionality provides a platform to deliberate the relationship between economic and racial narratives. *Intersectionality and Beyond: Law, Power and the Politics of Location* indicates how “the focus on intersectionality provides tools for complicating our understanding of the systems and processes that define the social: intersectionality is thus a method for interrogating the institutional reproduction of inequality” (Grabham 1). Additionally, Richahrd Delgado and Jean Stefancic’s *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* provides a definition for intersectionality:

> “Intersectionality” means the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation, and how their combination plays out in various settings. These categories—and still others—can be separate disadvantaging factors. What happens when an individual occupies more than one of these categories, for example is both gay and Native American, or both female and black? Individuals like these exist at an intersection of recognized sites of oppression. (51)

As Delgado and Stefancic spell out, economically disenfranchised blacks are situated at the convergence between two forms of oppression: race and class. Pondering both of these particularities concurrently benefits our understanding of the Civil Rights Movement because
leaders like Randolph and King remarked about how these two traits reinforced each other detrimentally. Consequently, it enhances our analysis to cast black civil rights leaders like Randolph and King as critical race theorists. While some scholars may contend that Randolph and King would be best described as idealists, a faction of critical race theorists that regards “racism and discrimination [as] matters of thinking, mental organization, attitude, and discourse,” I assert that they would be more appropriately characterized as realists (also known as economic determinists) because of their respective attention to the economic inequities between minority groups and whites (17). Realists believe that “racism is a means by which society allocates privilege and status” and that racial “hierarchies determine who gets tangible benefits, including the best jobs, the best schools, and invitations to parties in people’s homes” (17). Delgado and Stefancic expound that members “of this group point out that prejudice sprang up with slavery” (17). Racial realists also note how “conquered nations generally demonize their subjects to feel better about exploiting them” and condemn them to “backbreaking labor” like slavery (17–18). Most importantly, racial realists argue that, “civil rights advances for blacks always coincided with changing economic conditions” (18). This component of racial realism directly corresponds with Rustin’s own directives about the Civil Rights Movement that argues for necessary enhancements in the material environment of blacks.

My suggestion that Randolph and King are economic determinists that advocated for material changes in the lives of blacks also echoes Delgado and Stefancic’s illustration because of the editors’ focus on revisionist history. They explain how revisionist history—which “reexamines America’s historical record, replacing comforting majoritarian interpretations of events with ones that square more accurately with minorities’ experiences”—is a central theme of realist ideology (20). The aforementioned history by Hall, Forbath, and Jones that recasts the
Civil Rights Movement as an offspring of the earlier American Labor Movement revises history in a manner that invites a more radical comprehension of Randolph, King and other civil rights leaders and their goals for black citizens. In accordance with this revisionist outlook, the theme of anti-liberalism is another tenet of racial realism that also intends to disengage conservative narratives of the Civil Rights Movement that restrict it to just a discourse about race and perpetuate colorblindness as the movement’s only aim. Delgado and Stefancic elaborate that critical race theorists “hold that colorblindness will allow us to redress only extremely egregious racial harms, ones that everyone would notice and condemn. But if racism is embedded … the routines, practices, and institutions we rely on to effect the world’s work—will keep minorities in subordinate positions” (22). The critique of liberalism that they offer also mirrors Rustin’s sentiments, because he notes how many of the legislative achievements of the first phase inadvertently aided the detrimental belief that a colorblind society would engender social and structural changes for blacks. Consequently, recognizing how this theme of anti-liberalism functions in Randolph and King’s speeches at The March undermines the notion that the faultiness of colorblindness was only a retrospective realization by civil rights leaders. Proving that they were aware of the deception of colorblindness during the first phase of the movement further uproots the periodization that Rustin offers. Furthermore, I will examine how Randolph and King’s individual March on Washington speeches deploy economic determinist perspectives and reflect anti-liberalist sentiments at a point of overlap between the two phases that Rustin imparts to demonstrate the necessity of class and race intersectional analysis when investigating the Civil Rights Movement.
Outline of Chapters

In “Chapter 1: Dismantling the Rhetorical Situation and Adopting an Ecological Approach,” I briefly consider how discourse about rhetoric during The March has been approached. Accordingly, I explain the importance of relying on a rhetorical model that invites counternarratives, which allows the incorporation of new information, instead of reifying the same dominant narratives. More specifically, I will demonstrate how static rhetorical models like Lloyd F. Bitzer’s “rhetorical situation” are too stagnant to understand the racial and class dynamics of The March’s speeches. Bitzer’s theoretical model prevents us from fully emancipating The March’s radical message. I propose replacing the “rhetorical situation model” with a fluid “ecological model” will allow us to better understand the importance of intersectionality during The March.

After illustrating how rhetorical analyses of The March have been oversimplified, in “Chapter 2: The Randolph-Centered Narrative: Revising the King-Centered Narrative,” I exercise the ecological model that I propose in Chapter 1 by spotlighting A. Philip Randolph’s address from The March. I begin by covering civil rights historiography that reveals Randolph’s significance to the event. I then argue that Randolph’s message of democratic socialism that reawakens the spirit of the American Labor Movement from the 1930s serves as a counternarrative to conservative groups that attempt to circumscribe the moment to the racial activism and de jure enactments of the 1960s. Also, I demonstrate how Randolph offers an inclusive message that primarily advocates for citizens positioned at the intersection of racial and economic disenfranchisement.

In “Chapter 3: King’s Democratic Socialist Dream and Langston Hughes’ Submerged Voice,” I sustain the ecological approach that I present in previous chapters by conducting a
comparative analysis between King’s “I Have a Dream” speech and Langston Hughes’ poems “Let America be America Again” and “I Dream a World.” This comparative approach shows how the economic narrative deployed in King’s speech extends from the 1930s and is a progressive heirloom passed down from democratic socialist ideologies of the American Labor Movement. Moreover, King’s incorporation of both economic and racial narratives during The March reveals how we should further investigate how the Civil Rights Movement is periodized, because the mission for economic gains was present much earlier than the late 1960s as Rustin proposes.

Finally, in the epilogue, “Where Do We Go From Here?: Considerations for Future Scholarship,” I will briefly provide a few suggestions about future ways we can continue to investigate the rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement.
CHAPTER I
Dismantling the March’s Rhetorical Situation and Adopting an Ecological Approach

Introduction

As noted in the introduction, advocating for the issue of economic empowerment was a large part of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Although many examinations of King’s speech disregard how his message also intended to address this issue, one article that attempts to redress this oversight is Mark Vail’s “The ‘Integrative’ Rhetoric of Martin Luther King Jr.’s ‘I Have a Dream’ Speech.” Vail elaborates how many “rhetorical analyses of ‘I Have a Dream’ have attended primarily to the speech text, focusing on its metaphorlic, temporal, and oral dimensions” but describes how the “broader contextual forces that both constrained and shaped the speech have only been addressed tangentially” (52). More specifically, Vail uncovers how planners of the event “integrated” A. Phillip Randolph’s mission to eradicate the economic disenfranchisement of blacks by gaining more equitable labor rights through socialistic means along with King’s goal of ending racial discrimination through the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Vail accordingly suggests that both of these aims should be considered when determining the organizing principle of The March’s rhetorical situation. His observation about the composite nature of the event’s focus signals the need for the type of intersectional analysis that I am proposing and conducting because he indicates the importance of both narratives. By stressing the significance of both narratives, he also contradicts the periodization that Rustin impresses. Vail’s analysis evinces how economic goals were already important to leaders during the first phase of the Civil Rights Movement. Moreover, by “seek[ing] to augment the existing literature [through] examining how the interaction between text and context ultimately informed the text and the rhetorical situation,” Vail explains how the integrated goals and context of The March enabled King to capitalize on the event by using three rhetorical
techniques: (1) voice merging, (2) prophetic voice, and (3) dynamic spectacle (52). Vail further proffers that these techniques reflect the composite nature of the event because his speech employs “‘integrative rhetoric’ that was consonant with the integrationist aims of the non-violent direct-action civil rights movement” (52). Vail’s notion of exploring The March through an “integrative” methodology also expresses why it warrants intersectional analysis. His attention to an economic narrative in addition to the well-known racial narrative implies that The March was about more than just achieving assimilation for blacks. The economic narrative that aimed for wage increases and more employment security indicates the need for systemic changes that assimilation alone would not have engendered. Consequently, I assert that it is important to find a deeper message in the rhetoric of The March that attends to more than just the goal of desegregation that Vail advances. Fulfilling this objective will uncover a less detected economic message that emanates from the American Labor Movement that also repudiates the periodization that Rustin proposes. To undertake this task of extracting an economic narrative that renounces the stark bifurcation of the Civil Rights Movement, the first part of this chapter will explain how the “rhetorical situation” model that Vail uses is too static to realize the intersectional analysis that The March deserves. Afterwards, the second part of this chapter will advise an alternative model that makes intersectional analysis more feasible.

**Bitzer’s “Rhetorical Situation” Theory is Too Static**

In Vail’s analysis of The March, he indicates the peculiarity of the event’s “rhetorical situation” because it was integrated with an array of activism groups that varyingly focused on racial discrimination and/or economic inequity (Vail 52). Vail’s notion about the event’s integrated nature begs for a different theoretical framework rather than a “rhetorical situation” model, because the enclosed tri-angularity of the “rhetorical situation” prevents us from fully
observing the numerous influences and pressures that contributed to The March. Additionally the “rhetorical situation” model also buttresses a racial narrative that arises from King and Kennedy’s public dialogue, which I will examine more closely in the next chapter, and hampers us from embracing the economic narrative that brings us to also noticing the full complexity of The March. An ecological framework, as an alternative to the “rhetorical situation,” better serves an examination of The March because it requires us to consider other texts—like A. Philip Randolph’s address—beside King’s predominant “I Have a Dream” Speech. While King’s speech discharges a powerful economic message that encompasses the transformational ideologies of the American Labor Movement, analyses that reduce it to just a racial narrative allows it to be perpetuated in public and scholarly discourses. Contrastingly, Randolph’s unexamined speech more overtly articulates an economic narrative and delivers a racial narrative in a manner that prevents it from effectively being repurposed in conservative discourses.

Rhetorical theorist Lloyd F. Bitzer first proposed the theory of the rhetorical situation in his 1968 essay entitled “The Rhetorical Situation.” In the seminal article, Bitzer details that the “rhetorical situation” is less about rhetoric than it is about the “situation” (Bitzer 1). More specifically, Bitzer emphasizes that the situation is “the nature of those contexts in which speakers…create rhetorical discourse.” Bitzer, thus, encourages one to privilege the role of how surrounding circumstances incite a rhetorical response. He dispels conventional rhetorical theories that give priority to rhetoric as the inducer of a situation. Instead, Bitzer professes that a situation “calls the [rhetorical] discourse into existence” (Bitzer 2). By referencing some of the most notable speeches in American history—such as Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address and John F. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address—Bitzer demonstrates how a particular occurrence in conjunction with temporal conditions motivate a rhetorical response. In accordance with Bitzer’s
theory, we must dedicate thought to “persons, events, objects, relations, etc.” to discern the predetermined meaning of a situation fully. Furthermore, investing attention to the contextual framework of a speech and perceiving it as a response to a particular matter can give better insight when identifying the primary objective of a rhetorical delivery. Herein lies the issue of Bitzer’s model as it pertains to The March: Although Bitzer implores us to take into account the surrounding circumstances that shape The March, which would allow us to realize its intersectional nuances, his model itself does not permit us to undertake this endeavor because of its self-contained manner.

Bitzer outlines his theory of the rhetorical situation by enumerating its three essential components: (1) the exigence, (2) the audience, and (3) the constraint(s). Bitzer details, “the first is the exigence; the second and third are elements of the complex, namely the audience to be constrained in decision and action, and the constraints which influence the rhetor and can be brought to bear upon the audience” (Bitzer 6). The first factor, exigence, operates as a rhetorical situation’s “organizing principle…[by] specifying the audience to be addressed and the change to be effected” (Bitzer 7). For the purpose of analysis, we will evaluate each of these three components in a different order than the way Bitzer enumerates them. First, I will show how The March’s shifting focus makes it difficult to identify the targeted audience. Next, I will highlight how it is nearly impossible to distinguish between The March’s exigence and constraints based on Bitzer’s own definitions. In this regard, I underscore how the precarious elements of his theory inconveniently mesh and obstruct us from extracting the racial narrative that deserves to be dislodged.

One aspect that Bitzer offers, audience, is vital in our analysis of the rhetorical situation, although to a much lesser extent than the other two elements. Nevertheless, when considering the
March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, it is necessary for us to distinguish the audience that was intended to receive the event’s message(s). While one may readily presume that the audience was the nearly 300,000 marchers that traveled from all over the nation to participate in the demonstration, it is also plausible for us to surmise that the actual audience of the march was the U.S. Congress. Kennedy’s formulation of the Civil Rights Bill may have modified the audience from demonstrators to legislators given the fact that protestors did not have the ability to actualize the type of political change that the event eventually requested—only elected representatives possessed the direct capacity to vote. The presence of protestors on the National Mall was only meant to dramatize the need for legislative change by representatives. Consequently, the locale of the event suggests that protestors were less important in comparison to elected politicians. Also, Bitzer reminds us that it is “clear that a rhetorical audience must be distinguished from a body of mere hearers or readers,” because a “rhetorical audience consists only of those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change” (Bitzer 8). Bitzer’s assertion here suggests that both common citizens and legislators could be The March’s intended audience for different reasons. Although civilian activists may not have been the intended audience of the affair, fully disavowing their role as audience members would be deleterious. Many of the marchers attended the event as representatives of several different organizations that each possessed different interests. These groups included the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Urban League, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). All of these organizations—including a few others that were less involved in the planning and implementation of the march—fragilely consolidated for the sole purpose of the event as a single
organization, called the Council for United Civil Rights Leadership. Nonetheless, each of the groups that comprised this eclectic association maintained their particular ideologies, which often made decision making a cumbersome task. As a result, discord was frequent in the beginning of the relationship, especially when it was necessary for the coalition to select a leader. Because each of these groups had differing political beliefs and separate agendas, treating them and their respective members as the event’s intended audience allows us to observe the incongruent objectives that caused the event to shift away from its original mission of economic empowerment to the wide-ranging idea of discrimination that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 ultimately addressed.

The dilemma of determining between legislators and protestors as The March’s targeted audience is an issue that rhetorician Barbara Biesecker illuminates to convey the ineffective rigidity of Bitzer’s model. As Jenny Edbauer describes, Biesecker reminds us how Bitzer characterizes the audience component of his model as a “rather unproblematic and obvious site” (Edbauer 7). Moreover, Biesecker warns us about the treachery of viewing the audience of any event with a fixed identity because it reinforces the rigidity of the rhetorical situation model by limiting the possibility of persuasive rhetoric to influence audience members and form new identities (Biesecker 111). Edbauer and Biesecker’s assertion about the dynamic identity of an audience further reveals why Bitzer’s rhetorical situation lens is too stationary to view The March.

Similar to the dubiousness of the audience component of Bitzer’s theory, his notion about the exigence also creates trouble. We can consider the exigence the most essential determinant of the rhetorical situation because it best allows one to glean the meaning of what a rhetor intends

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1 Kersten explains how “civil rights leaders were divided over solutions and tactics to improve the lives of America’s poor
to convey. Given the Nonetheless, Bitzer warns that the “exigence may or may not be perceived clearly by the rhetor or other persons in the situation; it may be strong or weak depending upon the clarity of their perception” (Bitzer 7). Bitzer’s suggestion here about the treachery of the exigence is crucial in my effort to dismantle The March’s rhetorical situation. The exigence communicates the single factor that determined how the array of speakers might have primarily outfitted their speeches. While some speakers may have interpreted the exigence as promoting racial equality, others may have interpreted it as ending economic disenfranchisement. For example, King and Randolph both spoke about both the importance of racial equality and ending economic injustice. Relying on a sole exigence to determine which of these two facets they spoke more enthusiastically about is shortsighted because it will compel as to believe that the two leaders spoke about these issues disproportionately and disregards the fact they spoke about both issues energetically. Furthermore, in order to fulfill Vail’s use of the rhetorical situation, we must unfairly pick one over the other, and Vail’s suggestion that we integrate the two issue areas does not fit into the theoretical singularity that Bitzer’s exigence warrants. The singularity of the exigence also prevents us from attempting intersectional analysis because it enables us only to take into account one narrative. Therefore, adopting a more dynamic model will better permit us to account for the interaction of these two vying issues.

The third facet of Bitzer’s rhetorical situation—the constraint(s)—is also a necessary point of consideration because it attempts to guide our attention to the significant instances that reshaped the 1963 March on Washington. Bitzer explains that constraints consist of “persons, events, objects, and relations…[which] are parts of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence” (8). Moreover, Bitzer further elaborates that “standard sources of constraint include beliefs, attitudes, documents, facts,
traditions, images, interests, motives and the like; and when the orator enters the situation, his
discourse not only harnesses constraints given by situation but provides additional important
constraints—for example his personal character, his logical proofs, and his style” (8). Our
assessment of the event has already revealed several constraints: the various participating
organizations, racial pandemonium in Alabama and, most importantly, addresses by both
Kennedy and King. The collective operation of all of these constraints served in reformulating
The March. However, employing Bitzer’s model fundamentally requires us to reduce the
importance of one of the issues—racial equality or economic equality—as a secondary concern.
The rigidity of this sender-receiver model handicaps us from discerning the interaction of these
two issues. Consequently, I suggest that we disregard the “rhetorical situation” model and use an
“ecological” model instead.

The Need for an Ecological Approach

Keith D. Miller’s survey of scholarship about King and the Civil Rights Movement, as
reviewed in the beginning of the previous chapter, devotes particular attention to Nathaniel
Rivers and Ryan Weber for their innovative approach to examining the historical period. By
spotlighting Rivers and Weber, Miller steers future scholarship that examines the rhetoric of the
Civil Rights Movement into the direction of addressing the revisionist historiography that
reaches back to the American Labor Movement. Instead of relying on a single speech or orator as
a point of inquiry—which is a hallmark of conservative inquiries of the Civil Rights

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2 Along with Kirt H. Wilson, Rivers and Weber note how Keith D. Miller has already begun
rudimentary steps at moving toward an ecological approach by “highlighting [King’s speeches’]
intertextual relationship with already circulating sermons, biblical passages, freedom
celebrations, and African American jeremiads” in Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin
Luther King, Jr., and Its sources (196-197).
Movement—Rivers and Weber stress the importance of including both an array of speeches and orators when analyzing public rhetoric. More specifically, as Miller details, Rivers and Weber advocate for an “‘ecological’ model that can take into account discursive relationships within the rhetoric of an entire campaign” (Miller 179). This ecological approach observes “interconnected rhetoric [by including] speeches, sermons newsletters, news releases, and press conferences; the music and lyrics of spirituals, hymns, gospel songs, and repurposed pop hits; and photographs and streaming television images conveyed on nightly newscasts” (Miller 179). When considering the direction future scholarship should proceed, Miller entreats scholars to engage the “tougher challenge” that Rivers and Weber pose: employ an ecological method of analysis that engenders a more comprehensive approach to public discourse (Miller 179). Rivers and Weber’s perspective about public discourse builds off of Michael Warner’s description of “counterpublics” as a distinction between “the public” and “a public” (Warner 66). As a result, Rivers and Weber’s reapplication of Warner’s concept begs us to scrutinize the factuality of self-reifying, biased discourses that ignore counternarratives. In this regard, Rivers and Weber’s model reflects critical race theory’s concept of counterstorytelling, which is the use of “counterstories to challenge, displace, or mock … pernicious narratives and beliefs” (Delgado and Stefancic 43). Critical race theory’s idea of counterstorytelling improves Rivers and Weber’s ecological model because it illuminates how a public run the risk of exhibiting the same self-affirming narrative if the counterpublic does not embody a new counternarrative. Noting the

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3 Along with Michael Warner’s research, Rivers and Weber’s builds off of Jenny Edbauer’s “Unframing Models of Public Distribution,” which explains the inadequacy of sender-receiver models like the rhetorical situation by illuminating their paradoxical nature. For example, she explains how “sender-receiver models of public communication tend to identify a kind of homeostatic relationship, which simultaneously abstracts the operation of social links and circulation” (6). In accordance with Edbauer’s assertion, I suggest that the racial narrative that arises from King and Kennedy’s public—yet circumscribed—dialogue exemplifies the encircled abstraction that Edbauer opposes.
possible pitfall of publics that rely on majoritarian perspectives enables us to realize how the very existence of publics is paradoxical, and this circularity invites the inclusion of new information that brings a new understanding to a specified public. Furthermore, counterstorytelling allows us to see how ““ and challenge how publics can detrimentally self-reinforce and privilege a dominant ideology.

The ecological methodology that Rivers and Weber provide enables us to revise the myopic narrative that has rejected radical interpretations of speeches by Randolph and King. In “Ecological, Pedagogical, Public Rhetoric,” Rivers and Weber coalesce scholarship that has previously employed the metaphor of ecology into a comprehensive assertion (Rivers and Weber 189). The pair reveals how “[c]ultural narratives…often emerge from atomistic models that highlight isolated rhetorical acts” (196). By drawing on what Margaret Syverson has termed ‘atomistic,’ Rivers and Weber illustrate how public rhetoric often prefers an approach that ignores the intricacies of “writing environments by focusing on individual writers, individual texts, isolated acts, processes, or artifacts” (189). Accordingly, they also focus on one of the earliest moments of the African American Civil Rights Movement—the Montgomery Bus Boycott—by using it as an exemplary model. They show how the Montgomery Bus Boycott is often viewed through an “atomistic” perspective because “[t]hese narratives make it seem like

4 Rivers and Weber spotlight rhetorical scholar Kirt H. Wilson’s “Interpreting the Discursive Field of the Montgomery Bust Boycott” as a foundational text to construct an ecological model around the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Wilson argues how the “Holt Street Address,” the first oratorical act of the early movement, “constrain[ed] [the boycott’s] modes of protest” (229). Rivers and Weber explain how a rhetorical ecology can rectify the restrictive narrative that Wilson points out. For example, they show us how a rhetorical ecology requires the analysis of a myriad of rhetorical acts in order to gain a truer perspective of a movement while also cautioning us about the risk of depending on a single rhetorical act to comprehend an entire movement. The “Holt Street Address” was delivered by Martin Luther King Jr. on December 5, 1955 just moments after he was designated as the spokesperson for the burgeoning Montgomery Bus Boycott.
Rosa Parks just woke up one morning to realize the horrific justice of segregated buses” (196). By urging us to realize how “we tend to view Parks’s refusal as an autonomous action that single-handedly launched a movement,” they instead want us to consider how “this courageous act would not have enlarged into a movement without a vast rhetorical network to draw attention to her arrest and translate that attention into a sustained, coordinated public-building action” (197). As a result, they advance the notion that these types of atomistic narratives “proliferate [within the rhetoric] discipline as well,” which is best exemplified by “the ubiquity of King’s letters and speeches featured in isolation in composition textbooks and readers” (196). I intend to widen our understanding of The March by applying Rivers and Weber’s notion of broadening confined discourse. Embracing The March as radical political protest discredits periodizations of the Civil Rights Movement that ignore how economic goals were important during the first phase of the movement.
CHAPTER II
The Randolph-centered Narrative: Revising the King-centered Narrative

Introduction

In 2011, a 30-foot tall monument sculpted from white granite was erected along the National Mall’s Tidal Basin to commemorate the memory of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s enduring legacy. Inscribed on the side of the massive figure that depicts King’s likeness is a quote that originally read, “I was a drum major for justice, peace and righteousness” (Weingarten and Ruane). However, these words were revised after acclaimed poet Maya Angelou publicly criticized how the excerpted phrase mischaracterized King’s original words. The controversial quotation is paraphrased from the climax of one of King’s most popular sermons, “The Drum Major Instinct.” In this sermon, King states, “If you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice, say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness” (West 253). As Angelou observed in an interview with the Washington Post that propelled the issue to national attention, excluding the conditional ‘if’ inverts a remark that was meant to express humility into a statement of self-aggrandizement (Weingarten and Ruane). This scenario demonstrates one of the many efforts to proffer a counterfeit portrayal of King that positions him as the singular figure of the Civil Rights Movement and disguises the inclusiveness and community organizing that sustained the movement. In this chapter, I propose that dismantling the King-centered narrative is a necessary task to recognize the less-detected aims of the Civil Rights Movement involves because the forged, King-centered storyline of events buttresses a false narrative that only features a single goal of the movement: ending racial discrimination. Incorporating both of these narratives allows us to see how Randolph deployed a message that best benefited individuals at the intersection of class and racial disenfranchisement.
As referenced in the introduction, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall’s “The Long Civil Rights Movement and Political Uses of the Past” provides a sturdy platform to consider the disadvantages of adhering only to “racial narratives” about the African American Civil Rights Movement. Hall explains how “other storytellers—the architects of the New Right, an alliance of corporate power brokers, old-style conservative intellectuals, and ‘neoconservatives’ (disillusioned liberals and socialists turned Cold War hawks)” reduced the narrative of the Civil Rights Movement to a racialized outline of events:

Reworking [the civil rights movement’s] narrative for their own purposes, these new ‘color-blind conservatives’ ignored the complexity and dynamism of the movement, its growing focus on structural inequality, and its ‘radical reconstruction’ goals. Instead, they insisted that color blindness—defined as the elimination of racial classifications and the establishment of formal equality before the law—was the movement’s singular objective, the principle for which King and the *Brown* decision, in particular, stood. They admitted that racism, understood as individual bigotry, did exist—‘in the distant past’ and primarily the South—a concession that surely would have taken the Old Right by surprise. But after legalized Jim Crow was dismantled, such irrationalities diminished to insignificance. In the absence of overtly discriminatory laws and with the waning of conscious bias, American institutions became basically fair. Free to compete in a market-driven society, African American thereafter bore the onus of their own failure or success. (Hall 1237)

By detailing how a group of conservatives camouflaged as a reliable, liberal elite, Hall’s perspective exposes how the King-centered narrative relies on de jure legislative aims that were
often stripped of true effectiveness. Most surprisingly, Hall expounds how subsequent legal changes enacted during the late-1960s and early-1970s like “majority-minority voting districts, minority business set-asides, affirmative action, and two-way busing, were not the handiwork of the authentic civil rights movement at all,” which enables us to see how the Civil Rights Movement was captured by dominant ideologies (1237). Hall challenges us to consider how many of these fraudulent achievements were smokescreens designed by the New Right. These neo-conservative, crafted ploys made it seem like lawful changes would help black citizens.

This chapter will perform two tasks: Firstly, I will provide historiographic information about The March that allows us to reestablish Randolph at the center of the protest’s interworking. Observing Randolph’s participation in The March refutes the periodization that says economic objectives were only part of the second phase. In accordance with Hall’s justification about the insufficiency of racial narratives, I suggest that a better route to realizing the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedoms’ economic objective of gaining wage equality for all Americans involves revising the conservative narrative that detrimentally reinforces a false relationship between the event and the mission of only achieving an end to racial discrimination. A particular way to accomplish this goal is by dissociating the event from the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This subsequently passed landmark legislation relies on a racial narrative that prevents us from giving attention to a broader scope of legislative issues that the protest was initially meant to highlight. Moreover, this conservative perspective also diverts our attention away from the fact that labor unionist and democratic socialist A. Philip Randolph was the person who conceptualized and spearheaded The March. Replacing the fabricated, King-centered narrative with the authentic, Randolph-centered narrative will provide a sturdy platform to glean the event’s radical economic aims. Secondly, I will offer a rhetorical analysis of
Randolph’s speech that shows how he tactfully eschews a solitary racial narrative by foregrounding his commentary about race in class conflict. In this regard, Randolph observes racial issues at the intersection of class inequity. Also, insulating his remarks about racism within economic issues, which invites Americans of any race who may be financially impaired to embrace his message, grants him the possibility to circumvent the mistake of essentialism. Randolph instead takes an anti-essentialist viewpoint that focuses on the labor injustices and wage inadequacies that Americans of all races were experiencing during the 1960s. His inclusiveness perspective reminds us that some whites were also disadvantaged financially and that all blacks were not in financial need. Thus, Randolph cautions us that although racial and economic narratives intersect in significant ways and that there was considerable overlap, these narratives were not synonymous. Furthermore, Randolph’s own words challenge us to rethink the disadvantages of viewing The March from just a racialized vantage point for the very reason that Hall provides: it “ignore[s] the complexity and dynamism of the movement” (1237).

Establishing the Randolph-centered Narrative

Martin Luther King, Jr.’s legacy is bonded to his delivery of the “I Have a Dream Speech” at the 1963 March on Washington. However, the persistent association between the march and the memory of King belies the fact that the iconic orator was not the initiator and architect of the event as many assume. A. Philip Randolph, a labor activist and preeminent civil rights leader, was the individual who engineered the event after he first conceptualized the idea while attending a convention for the Negro American Labor Council in 1961 (Kersten 92). Randolph’s motive was to confront the federal government for decades of failing to promote
education and vocational opportunities for African Americans.\(^5\) Thus, Randolph planned to challenge the federal administration to rectify the extreme disparities in employment and income between black and white citizens.\(^6\) Pursuing socioeconomic equality for blacks along with American citizens of all other races had been the then seventy-three year-old Randolph’s lifelong work. More importantly, planning marches in Washington D.C. had been a dramatization tactic that Randolph deployed many times throughout his decades of activism. Much earlier than the 1963 march, Randolph threatened President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration with a protest in Washington to contest employment inequities in 1941. During the Great Depression, the greatest economic downturn in U.S. history, Randolph did not hesitate to criticize President Roosevelt for his mishandling of the New Deal programs’ reinforcement of racial discrimination in hiring tactics of workplaces. In her survey about the paucity of racial civil rights narratives, Hall mentions the particular impact of the New Deal programs on widening the wage gap between black and white workers. For instance, she explains how black workers in southern states were specifically excluded from participating in New Deal programs, because the South’s agrarian-based economy would implode without a large supply of inexpensive laborers (Hall 1241). As a result of discriminatory stipulations, “55 percent of all African Americans workers and 87 percent of all wage-earning African American women were excluded from … chief benefits of the New Deal” (Hall 1241).

\(^5\) Andrew E. Kersten details how segregation in U.S. public schools had ironically increased in the years following the Supreme Court’s ruling in Brown v. Board of Education. Also, African American incomes had decreased during the late 1950s in comparison to the incomes of white families. Kersten further explains how learning of these concerns fueled Randolph’s actions against the federal government. Kersten, Andrew Edmund. *A. Philip Randolph: A Life in the Vanguard*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007. Print. p. 92

\(^6\) Kersten also notes how the national average income of a black worker was nearly half as much white workers. The national unemployment rate of blacks was also twice as high in comparison to whites: 10% and 5% respectively.
President Roosevelt, afraid that Randolph’s pending march would invigorate racial hatred by white supremacists against blacks, responded swiftly to extinguish the uprising by establishing the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC)—a forerunner to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission—through Executive Order 8802 (Kersten 60). The temporary agency ensured that workers in manufacturing industries for military defense could not be discriminated against on the basis of race and national ethnicity. Hall points-out how President Roosevelt’s response to Randolph’s efforts to create the FEPC was the first time “racial discrimination [was] on the national agenda…since Reconstruction” (Hall 1248).

Roosevelt’s successor, President Truman, attempted to expand the institution’s oversight by developing it into a fully endowed federal agency; however, dissonance between congressional house members and senators caused the bill to fail. As a result, many of the gains that the FEPC made were reversed during the late 1950s (Kersten 92). Nevertheless, this antecedent civil rights achievement shows how early civil rights strategies were devoted to securing legislative earnings that directly benefited the socioeconomic conditions of black citizens. Randolph’s economic approach to handling discrimination indicates the intersectional identity of many of the working class black citizens he advocated for. Moreover, the more renowned legislative enactments passed during the 1960s—which were vast, blanketed responses against discrimination—contrast the earlier legislation that explicitly grappled with race in tandem with economic matters.

After Randolph’s first threat to march on Washington was suppressed in 1941, his idea to dramatize the issues of blacks by parading protestors in the nation’s capital resurfaced two more times during the late 1950s. However, the marches actually materialized in these instances. In 1957, republican congressmen stripped a civil rights bill that was meant to possess many of the
provisions that the 1964 civil rights bill included. Randolph arranged a march with nearly 10,000 people in response to this offense by republicans (96). Soon after, Randolph and Bayard Rustin, who served as deputy organizer of the 1963 march, arranged another march together that featured double the size: 20,000 protesters (96). The second march resulted in a meeting with President Eisenhower to discuss the civil rights of blacks; however, nothing substantial was produced. Regardless, these incremental, small successes compelled Randolph to believe that a march that drew a much larger number of participants could engender the economic breakthrough that blacks had been awaiting. When conceptualizing the 1963 March on Washington, Randolph was convinced about the absolute necessity of making economic empowerment its principal concern. He was aware how previous iterations of marching on Washington conflated racial injustice with socioeconomic discrimination. Because “the old socialist wanted to make certain that economic conditions got center stage,” he decided to call it the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom to solidify his ambition (97). By including “jobs” in the title, Randolph hoped to highlight the plight of economic disenfranchisement that many Americans were experiencing. He also hoped it would generate broader enthusiasm from citizens of other races.

My survey of Randolph’s activism demonstrates two key points: (1) it is important to think of Randolph as the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom’s central figure. The fact that he considered and executed the idea of a march in the nation’s capital numerous times over nearly three decades is a testament to his central role in its materialization. (2) It is important to consider how wage inequity is almost always a signifying factor of racial inequality. Nonetheless, it would be incorrect to consider racism as the primary agent in Randolph’s fight for change. Although he was actively working to better the condition of black workers, his
policies were meant to promote fair salaries and labor rights for all citizens regardless of race. Reducing racial injustice may have been a large motivation for Randolph—however, it was not the organizing principle. Wage equality was the leading operative behind his activism. Therefore, it would be inadequate to rely on a racial narrative as a lens to interpret Randolph’s efforts. It would be more appropriate and generative rather to view The March as a moment on a longer continuum of economic activism, as Randolph’s record shows, instead of as an isolated moment of racial activism.

**How Did the King-centered Narrative Arise?**

Given Randolph’s extensive involvement in initializing and planning the 1963 March on Washington, it is important for us to consider how the event became a cornerstone in a racial narrative. The inaccurate re-characterization of the event within a racial narrative is mainly due to the efforts of conservatives. Hall’s explanation about the event provides further clarity about its place in a racial narrative:

The 1963 March on Washington, which came at the height of what figures in the dominant narrative as the good, color-blind movement, is a case in point. Today’s conservatives make much of Martin Luther King’s dream that ‘children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.’ But virtually nothing in the dominant narrative would lead us to expect an image of the march that showed women carrying signs demanding jobs for all, decent housing, fair pay, and equal rights ‘NOW!,’ thus asserting the racial solidarity their identities as activists and workers and thereby the equals of men. Nothing in the dominant story reminds us that this
demonstration, which mobilized people from all walks of life and from every part of the country, was a ‘march for jobs and freedom.’ (Hall 1252-3)

Building off of Hall’s description, I posit that the escalating racial tensions of segregated Birmingham, Alabama, which seized the nation’s attention, confined the forthcoming 1963 March on Washington into a racial narrative. Although Randolph first thought to plan the 1963 March during the final months of 1962, the great success of the Birmingham Campaign, led by King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference during the spring of 1963, emboldened the civil rights movement’s racial narrative by working to end racial segregation in the notoriously and historically divided city. Nevertheless, Randolph’s intent to make this iteration of a march on Washington much larger than before compelled him to solicit the support of other civil rights organizations throughout the country. Making it a national movement would help to amass the large support of people that Randolph hoped to gain. However, petitioning the help of other organizations came with a consequence: it compromised Randolph’s goal of making it primarily a labor rights and economic protest. Rhetorical scholar Mark Vail elucidates how the protest shifted focus:

As plans for the March matured, Randolph sought and gained cooperation and participation of a vast array of civil rights groups with varying agendas and perspectives on how to secure civil rights for blacks. As the March grew, its leaders sought to integrate disparate factions of the movement into a unified coalition. Soon the NAACP, King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) joined in the planning. As organizational support for the March spread, the event’s emphasis shifted from economic issues to civil rights concerns due in large part to
the influence of the three aforementioned groups and the Kennedy administration’s reluctant move to advance civil rights legislation. By the summer of 1963, the March’s agenda had changed so that ‘civil rights demands were given precedence over economic demands.’ (Vail 57)

As Vail highlights, President John F. Kennedy’s participation in the Civil Rights Movement and involvement in the planning of the 1963 March on Washington also derailed Randolph’s attempt to keep racial-class struggle as the event’s definitive issue. For this reason, Kennedy’s engagement in arranging the protest represents a cardinal shift in the purpose of the event to racial discrimination. Although King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference had been urging the presidential administration to introduce stronger legislation that protected the civil rights of blacks, President Kennedy had been hesitant to respond as aggressively as black leaders hoped. Ultimately, Kennedy’s strategic approach to mediate the racial tumult by introducing legislation that focused primarily on making discriminatory practices illegal nullified any chance of solely focusing the event on economic issues. Regardless, some participating leaders were cognizant of this inadvertent snub and aware that the bill was meager in regard to their true economic goals.

Kennedy’s hesitation to intervene in the social unrest dissipated when racial turmoil throughout the South, and especially Alabama, reached a fever pitch. Some accounts suggest that Kennedy finally interceded in the regional strife when the governor of Alabama, George Wallace, made a final and desperate attempt to prevent the integration of public schools by blockading the threshold of the University of Alabama with his physical body. These reports negate the fact that more than 2,000 demonstrations were occurring in over 300 cities nationally,

insisting that the federal government intervene in the exploding struggle.\(^8\) Undoubtedly, Kennedy’s early unwillingness to introduce legislation emanated from the simple fact that he knew Republican legislators—whose votes were needed if there was any viable chance of passing the bill—would never vote to pass an act that outlawed racial resistance. However, as Hall explains, Kennedy’s introduction of legislation here would ultimately work in the favor of conservatives because it aided in racializing the narrative of the Civil Rights Movement and preventing blacks from gaining quantifiable, economic changes (Hall 1245). It is important, nonetheless, to note here that even after Kennedy finally accumulated the necessary political support and courage to endorse the pursuit for racial equality by presenting the Civil Rights Act of 1964, it was not passed by congress until after his assassination. Enough congressional representatives finally acquiesced to vote in favor of the bill as a gesture of sympathy to celebrate the slain statesman’s memory. Consequently, the bill was not enacted until Lyndon B. Johnson ascended to the presidency and signed it into law—allowing him to get much of the credit for carrying the baton across the finish line (Lord 157). Furthermore, Kennedy’s unyielding attitude and eventual implementation of a myopic bill diverges from the more radical and dynamic legislation that many civil rights leaders visualized.

As noted in the previous chapter, Vail’s “The ‘Integrative’ Rhetoric of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s ‘I Have a Dream’ Speech” describes how The March’s rivaling focuses of economics and racism influenced King to integrate several rhetorical techniques that enabled him to speak to both causes. Even so, Vail remarks about how the event began as an economic protest that eventually became a demonstration about racism. He further asserts that two specific rhetorical acts indicate an essential shift in confining the event to racial matters: King’s “Letter from

\(^8\) See citation above p. 157
Birmingham Jail” and President Kennedy’s “Civil Rights Address.” Accordingly, I also advance the notion that these two rhetorical acts invoked a racial narrative into the event. Moreover, Vail elaborates how unlike “the ephemeral nature of his speeches or the selective exposure of his books, popular publication of the Letter allowed for careful scrutiny of King’s position by many in mainstream America” (Vail 58). Vail expounds that the “public was given time to contemplate King’s moral argument, warm to it, and, perhaps, gradually embrace it” (Vail 58). Written on April 16, 1963, the persuasive power of King’s “Letter,” coupled with the illegality of his imprisonment by local police officers, pulled Kennedy into the discourse of Birmingham’s racial struggle. For example, Vail tells how “the attention generated by King’s success in Birmingham, coupled with the concurrent publication and reception of the Letter, helped to trigger political action by a reluctant Kennedy Administration. Kennedy’s pursuit of civil rights legislation would contribute to the changing nature of the March and the broader integrative context” (Vail 59). While Vail focuses on the similarities, like the sustained references to the American Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, between the individual voices of King and Kennedy in the aforementioned addresses, I am more concerned with the how the language of these two respective deliveries racializes the increasing national attention of the Birmingham Campaign and the impending 1963 march.

In the “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” King spotlights the racial injustices in Birmingham that urged the SCLC to implement a nonviolent, direct-action program. For instance, King’s essay recounts how throughout “Alabama all sorts of devious methods [were] used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters, and there [were] some counties in which, even though Negroes constitute a majority of the population, not a single Negro [was] registered. Can any law enacted under such circumstances be considered democratically structured?” (King). By
illuminating the obstructions black people in Alabama encountered when attempting to exercise their right to vote, King’s repetition of the word “Negro” furnishes his essay with a racial narrative that creates a dichotomy between white oppressors and black victims. Although this racial hierarchy was undoubtedly the power structure Alabama citizens were experiencing, his continuous appeal to the region’s segregation inadvertently undermines other factors, such as economic oppression, that also contributed to discrimination in Alabama. Correspondingly, his subsequent appeal to the state’s ignored democratic ideals implies that reinforcing legally endowed and protected rights is a reasonable approach to rectifying social grievances in the area. While King’s focal point on legislation as a means to fixing racism in this particular occurrence inscribes the deleterious racial narrative that I am extricating, it is pivotal to acknowledge that King’s views about injustice were not solely restrained to legalistic intervention. The racial narrative, maintained by continuous references to juridical aims in tandem with racist acts, only eclipses his other noteworthy suggestions about how blacks can gain the material benefits that their citizenship is supposed to guarantee. Whereas my notion here about King’s less-recognized objectives will be more thoroughly developed in the next chapter, my immediate intention is to show how Kennedy’s consequentially presented “Civil Rights Address” extends the conservative, racial narrative that King uses and further deflects attention from achieving the movement’s mission of conquering economic hardship. Furthermore, King consummates the racial narrative in “Letter from Birmingham Jail” by beginning the concluding sentence of the piece with the following phrase: “Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities” (King). Although King’s ending imagery of a storm to symbolize racism unintentionally solidifies the racial narrative that I am rejecting, the silver lining of King’s
rhetoric—that accounts for the various forms of discrimination that also deserve attention—is better realized in his “I Have a Dream Speech,” which will be explored in the next chapter.

Kennedy’s “Civil Rights Address” lengthens the same racial narrative that King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” conjures. For example, Kennedy remarks, “One hundred years of delay have passed since President Lincoln freed the slaves, yet their heirs, their grandsons, are not yet fully free. They are not yet freed from the bonds of injustice. They are not yet freed from social and economic oppression” (Kennedy 83). By referencing President Lincoln and alluding to his enactment of the Emancipation Proclamation, Kennedy stresses the same deficient racial narrative as King. However, Kennedy’s use of a racial narrative is distinctively telling for two reasons: (1) Kennedy masculinizes citizenship, and (2) he conspicuously announces economic hardship as a social externality of racism. When Kennedy specifically identifies the “grandsons” of slaves as the social debtors of racial discrimination, he masculinizes the idea of American citizenship by excluding women. Inasmuch as Kennedy’s gendered slight detrimentally narrows our understanding of both racism and citizenship by implying that men were the only victims of racial discrimination and that only men should be afforded the benefits of full-citizenship, his simultaneous description of how descendants of slaves were also experiencing “economic oppression” widens the idea of how we should comprehend racism. Nonetheless, Kennedy’s characterization of racism adheres to the same racial narrative as King’s by advocating for legal enactments as an approach to combating social injustice. In his national address, Kennedy comments, “Next week I shall ask the Congress of the United States to act, to make a commitment it has not fully made in this century to the proposition that race has no place in American life or law” (83). While Kennedy advances legislation as a plausible approach to countering racism, he surprisingly also offers a concession that confesses how legislation alone
cannot fully redress all of its associated issues. Kennedy explains, “But legislation … cannot solve this problem alone. It must be solved in the homes of every American in every community across our country” (83). In this respect, Kennedy shares King’s sentiments by endorsing a racial narrative that relies on legislative changes despite understanding its limited effectiveness. Nevertheless, the Civil Rights Act of 1964—which emanated from public dialogue between King and Kennedy—is a keystone in a conservative, racial narrative about the movement. Consequently, considering how the monumental significance of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 eclipses other socioeconomic issues is a fundamental part to revising the myopic, racial narrative that King and Kennedy unwittingly bolster.

**Creating a Rhetorical Ecology Can Rectify the Racial Narrative**

As noted in the previous chapter, Nathaniel A. Rivers and Ryan P. Weber’s “Ecological, Pedagogical, Public Rhetoric” builds off of Edbauer’s suggestion about building ecological models to explain how “scholarship … could benefit from an expanded scope” (Rivers and Weber 189). Just as Rivers and Weber employ an ecological model to unpack the “cultural narratives of the 1955-56 Montgomery bus boycott [which] often emerge from atomistic models that highlight isolated rhetorical acts,” I similarly propose that orienting our attention to other rhetorical acts associated with The March will revise the racial narrative that has come to define the moment (196). Coincidentally, Rivers and Weber trace the ecology of the Montgomery Bus Boycott back to the same person that I also suggest brings a more dynamic understanding to the 1963 March on Washington: A. Philip Randolph. Rivers and Weber harken back to Randolph because they explain how his activism in Saint Louis many decades earlier primarily influenced the activism that ultimately occurred in Montgomery. As Rivers and Weber express, “Randolph, [a] well-known socialist organizer of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, gave a speech in
Saint Louis that inspired Montgomery porter Edgar D. Nixon,” who later founded the Montgomery branch of the NAACP that spearheaded the boycott (197). Unlike Randolph’s secondhand participation in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, his active participation in conceptualizing and planning The March makes him an ideal point of inquiry. Randolph’s speech at the 1963 March on Washington is a useful text to gain a better contextual understanding because he eschews the racial narrative that has come to define both the event and King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. Randolph instead deploys a message that demonstrates the leftist, economically progressive ethos that pervaded the protest. Examining his oration will reveal the economic narrative that he presented to supersede the burgeoning racial narrative that was derailing the event from also attending to labor and wage issues.

Scholars have largely ignored Randolph’s rhetoric, but he was a skillful orator like many of his contemporary activists. *For Jobs and Freedom: Selected Speeches and Writings of A. Philip Randolph* is a recently published anthology that contains noteworthy messages Randolph delivered throughout his life. Unfortunately, the anthology only re-presents his speeches and does not give his words the analytical attention they warrant. His address at the 1963 March on Washington is one of the addresses included. A short paragraph that prefaces the speech indicates Randolph’s propensity to observes race through an economic lens:

> Like those of nearly everybody else who delivered an address at the 1963 March on Washington, Randolph’s remarks have been lost in the long lost shadow cast by Martin Luther King Jr.’s oratorical masterpiece that day. This surely did not dampen the pride that Randolph must have felt as he looked out at the crowd … Civil rights are important, Randolph argues, but it must not be forgotten that freedom without opportunity is a pyrrhic victory. In this speech … Randolph
emphasizes that fair employment laws and access to education are just as important as desegregating public accommodations. (Kersten 261).

*Reframing Randolph: Labor, Black Freedom, and the Legacies of A. Philip Randolph* is another recently published, interdisciplinary anthology that rethinks Randolph’s multifaceted influence on U.S. history in the same regard that I am advancing. More specifically, the collection houses an essay, entitled, “Brotherhood Men and Singing Slackers: A. Philip Randolph’s Rhetoric of Music and Manhood.” In the essay, Robert Hawkins critiques Randolph’s creation of a dichotomy between masculine ideals and “the [often stereotyped] figure of the black musician” (Hawkins 102). Hawkins analyzes how Randolph’s speech to members of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters reveals an incongruity in Randolph’s logic about how class is characterized. Hawkins describes how an extended metaphor about black singers that Randolph uses unfairly portrays black musicians as inferior workers; although, the orator simultaneously exalts a gendered depiction of class mobility by masculinizing the image of a hard worker. While the gender and racial exclusivity that Hawkins accuses Randolph of may hold credence in this specific moment, this marginalizing rhetoric does not exist in his 1963 address in Washington, D.C. At the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Randolph advances an all-embracing message that does not divide protestors along racial, gender, or religious boundaries. However, the primary characteristic that reverberates between these two addresses is his focus on unfair class stratification due to wage inequity. Randolph’s early and much later focus on labor rights reveals the sustained economic narrative that deserves to be highlighted in his rhetoric.

As listed on the official program, Randolph delivered the 1963 event’s “opening remarks.” His brief, five-minute-long address set an overarching tone for the day’s speakers. However, as Vail highlights, Randolph’s speech—in addition to a few others—diverges from the
sacred language that many of his counterparts chose to deploy. In contrast to many of the other orators, Randolph was not there to represent a religiously affiliated organization (Vail 61). Although Randolph was a member of many of the organizations participating in the protest, he was listed as “Director March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom,” which suggests his predominating influence on the affair. Many of his fellow speakers were incongruously listed as representatives of specific organizations. Nonetheless, Randolph’s decision to abstain from speaking within the prophetic tradition like many of the event’s religious speakers gives impetus to the inclusivity that his message intends. In accordance with Vail’s claims, Randolph’s delivery of a secular message traverses the religious differences that categorically characterized many of the civil rights groups present that day. More importantly, I posit that Randolph’s presentation of a secular, inclusive message serves to oppose a singular racial narrative that would hazardously restrict Randolph’s words to just black people. Instead, Randolph inspects racism at an intersection with class.

“Fellow Americans, we are gathered here for the longest demonstration in the history of this nation—let the world know the meaning of our numbers,” Randolph says at the start of his address (Randolph 261). Discharging the all-encompassing pronoun “we” at the onset of his speech attests to the intended inclusiveness that Randolph aims to deploy. Accordingly, he sustains the inclusive “we” throughout his speech by speaking it twenty-four times in the speech’s nearly five-minute duration. Along with the inclusive “we” in his opening phrase, Randolph heightens his notion of collectivity by rupturing the boundary between the United States and the world. By indicating the significance of the protest to both the nation and the world, Randolph suggests that his message is for a cosmopolitan audience. Randolph’s stress on the worldliness of his audience attests to his perception of civil rights, which stems from the idea
that all of humanity deserves moral agency. Thus, restricting civil rights to the identity of national citizenship would undermine his notion that personhood should be privileged over socially constructed institutions. Inasmuch, Randolph’s emphasis on a worldwide audience suggests that socially constructed political institutions should value the condition of human life foremost. His implicit critique of political structures radicalizes his message. Herein lies Randolph’s militant contention with America’s socioeconomic construction that his speech begs us to consider.

Randolph’s substitution of a racial narrative with an economic narrative shifts us closer to observing how The March was based on the ideals of the American Labor Movement. Randolph repudiates racializations of The March by stating, “This civil rights revolution is not confined to the Negro, nor is it confined to civil rights—for our white allies know that they cannot be free while we are not” (261). Advocating for an interracial movement directly refutes interpretations of the event as a protest for solely racial rights. Moreover, Randolph’s adjoining use of the word “revolution” to describe the civil rights movement connotes the radical, transformational economic change that he promotes. By also expressing that the revolution he speaks of should not be “confined to [only] civil rights,” Randolph prefigures how we should instead perceive the moment more broadly by also considering other issues, like wage and labor rights, that also affect common citizens (261). Nevertheless, Randolph sustains his theme of inclusiveness in this moment when calling white people “allies” (262). Randolph’s description of the relationship between white and black citizens with amiable language further demonstrates his intent to subdue a racial narrative that would hamper him from offering a non-racial, economic narrative.
Immediately after renouncing the racial narrative, Randolph explicitly introduces an economic narrative that communicates his socialist leanings and the influence of the American Labor Movement. Randolph declares, “And we know that we have no future in a society in which 6 million black and white people are unemployed and millions more live in poverty” (262). His mention of the difficulties of a society that neglects the unemployment and impoverishment of its citizens highlights his labor rights sentiments and the precariousness of a society that overlooks the employment security of its citizens. Randolph goes on to refute a racial narrative by dismissing the effectiveness of Kennedy’s federal legislation that obscurely addresses discrimination and does not offer changes to the systematic structures that sanction racism. As Randolph posits, “Nor is the goal of our civil rights revolution merely the passage of civil rights legislation” (262). He continues, “Yes, we want all public accommodations open to all citizens, but those accommodations will mean little to those who cannot afford to use them” (262). By again critiquing the limited financial ability that often accompanies marginalized citizenship, Randolph condemns the poor logic of making businesses and establishments available to people who still do not possess the money to participate in them. This instance, consequently, reaffirms Randolph’s sentiment that economic disenfranchisement overrides racial injustice.

As Randolph’s speech continues, the socialist beliefs that underpin his implementation of an economic narrative begin to congeal. For example, he argues for a transformation in the role of the American government by proclaiming, “we want integrated public schools, but that means we also want federal aid to education” (262). Insisting that the federal government must directly invest in the public sector and the wellbeing of America’s youth conveys the economic egalitarianism that Randolph endorses. In accordance, he also comments, “We want a free,
Randolph’s claims for the need of radical modifications in American political structures is further demonstrated when he explicitly calls for structural change and when he criticizes America’s preoccupation with “private property.” For instance, Randolph argues, “Now we know that real freedom will require many changes in the nation’s political and social philosophies and institutions” (263). Randolph’s use of the word “changes” challenges the credence of America’s sociopolitical structure and its promise to promote the general welfare of its citizens. Moreover, he also comments, “The sanctity of private property takes second place to the sanctity of the human personality,” (263). In this occurrence, Randolph again hints at the need for America to adopt democratic socialism. By cautioning listeners to the insensibility of “private property”—a hallmark of capitalism—Randolph repudiates individual ownership that impedes upon the solemnity of humanity. Furthermore, he surreptitiously professes that America better realizes socioeconomic egalitarianism.
Randolph’s repeated, explicit reference to the American Labor Movement particularly tells how The March derives from the ideals and strategies of the earlier movement and promotes democratic socialism. For example, he explains, “so we have taken our struggle into the streets as the labor movement took its struggle into the streets” (263). Randolph’s appeal to the labor movement’s previous protests as a source of comparison for the 1963 March on Washington testifies to the narrative of economic objection that underpins the movement. Accordingly, Randolph subpoenas the Labor movement a second time near his speech’s end by elaborating how the “spirit and techniques that built the labor movement … and now guide the civil rights revolution must be a massive crusade” (264). His invocation of the labor movement in this instance serves as a call to action and as an appeal to logos. By closing with a citation to the labor movement along with speaking about the need for the current “civil rights revolution” to grow in size, he leaves his auditors with an understanding of where the event’s protest tactics are rooted.

The rhetoric of Randolph’s progressive labor message presents an economic counter-narrative to the dominant racialized narrative of The March. His speech signifies the importance of counterstorytelling that seeks to expand confined accounts of historical narratives. Consequently, the militancy of his speech provides an opening to perceive a similar economic message in King’s speech. By sustaining this ecological model into the next chapter, I will employ poetry by Langston Hughes that allows us to trace the origins of King’s dream metaphor to its initial, radical roots. This will enable us to witness the message of democratic socialism that also exists in King’s speech and to observe how he also overlays the racial narrative of his speech with a subversive economic narrative that blueprints the need for labor rights.
CHAPTER III
King’s Democratic Socialist Dream and Langston Hughes’ Submerged Voice

Locating the Radical King

Scholars have made continued and extensive efforts to pinpoint the moments in which Martin Luther King Jr. expressed his radical economic views. Most notably, Cornel West explains in his anthology of King speeches, *The Radical King*, how the FBI and U.S. government were very aware of the “radical King” (West x). Referencing the intense surveillance of McCarthyism that monitored many influential black leaders at the climax of the Civil Rights Movement, West reminds us that King’s notoriety coupled with his radical leanings caused the FBI to coin him “the most dangerous man in America” (West x). However, assigning King the epithet “dangerous” was certainly an overstatement of his intentions to non-violently contend with America’s disenfranchising capitalism. As West helpfully elaborates, “the radical King was neither Marxist nor communist, but he did understand the role of class analysis in his focus on poor and working people” (West xiii). In his final book—*Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*—remarks by King corroborate the sentiments that West expresses. For example, King condemns communism as an economic system that “reduces men to a cog in the wheel of the state” deficient of “inalienable rights” and “liberties” (King 186-187). However, King similarly lambasts capitalism for causing a “gulf between superfluous wealth and abject poverty” and “permitting necessities to be taken from the many to give luxuries to the few” (King186). By explaining how a “revolution of values must [occur that] go[es] beyond traditional capitalism and communism,” King provides clarity for which economic system he promoted: democratic socialism. Moreover, the form of democratic socialism that King envisioned is depicted in the excerpt below:

Truth is found in neither in traditional capitalism nor in classical communism.
Each represents a partial truth. Capitalism fails to see the truth in collectivism. Communism fails to see the truth in individualism. Capitalism fails to realize that life is social. Communism fails to realize that life is personal. The good and just society is neither the thesis of capitalism nor the antithesis of Communism, but a socially conscious democracy which reconciles the truths of individualism and collectivism. (WDW 187)

As aforementioned, dissension has existed among those who have attempted to identify moments of King’s economic radicalism. While some, like West, have suggested King’s radicalism existed as early as 1958, some argue that King was not a true social democrat until the last years of his life when he implemented his Poor People’s Campaign. In “Martin Luther King, Jr., as Democratic Socialist,” Douglas Sturm embarks on the tough journey of settling this dispute by identifying exactly when King’s radicalism manifested. He traces a continuum in King’s experiences that reveal how his democratic socialism emerged as early as his “student days at Crozer Theological Seminary” during the late 1940s. He further suggests we resist the notion that the radicalism “discerned in King’s later years was … a transformation” from his earlier adulthood (79). Sturm instead tells us that we should only look at his final years as a “refinement” of his earlier radicalism.

In contrast, Mary Sawyer’s “Legacy of a Dream” presents the idea that King “came to believe” that a more collective message of dynamic economic change needed to be presented to Americans only after the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 when King accepted “the reality that all blacks were not benefiting equally from the Civil Rights Movement” (Sawyer 262). As she notes, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 may have illegalized discrimination in public accommodations; however, “legislation and legalities mattered little to the masses of blacks in
the ghettos of urban centers suffering the ravages of institutionalized poverty” (Sawyer 262). Sawyer thus argues that we should view the years 1965 to 1967 as a “critical period of metamorphosis of his Dream” (Sawyer 262). Of course, agreeing with Sawyer’s approach would require us to negate the possibility that King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, delivered in 1963, was a radical act. Furthermore, recent rhetorical approaches, historiography, and literary scholarship align us closer to Sturm’s perspective and help us to reconsider the conservative position that has restricted us from redeeming the militancy of King’s most popular moment.

Endorsing Sturm’s idea that King’s economic radicalism only intensified overtime and rejecting Sawyer’s assertion that it transformed only in his last years of life supports my notion that we should reconsider how there is overlap between the two phases of Civil Rights Movement. Realizing how King’s radical economic beliefs animated his rhetoric at The March conveys that economic change was also a goal of the first phase and not just the second phase. Moreover, noticing how King offers an economic narrative along with a racial narrative suggests his intent to impact the lives of citizens marginalized at the intersection of both race and class.

The “I Have a Dream” Speech’s Misperceived Racial Narrative

An essential task to resuscitating King’s radical voice is regaining the speech’s racial narrative that has been circumscribed and exploited by conservative scholars. One account by historian Clifford M. Lytle shows how both King’s speech and the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom have been commonly reduced to a racial narrative. Published just three years after The March occurred, Lytle’s essay mainly serves to chronicle the history of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Unfortunately, Lytle’s documentation of the historical moment demonstrates how King’s speech has been commonly misperceived. Instead of giving a more authentic portrayal of the movement by reporting its economic aims, Lytle consents to a fabricated
narrative that extols the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as the immediate message of the “I Have a Dream” speech. For example, Lytle explains:

The summer of 1963 witnessed an example of mass interest group pressure. Over 200,000 people participated in a March on Washington to protest against the problem of discrimination. The March was climaxed with a speech by the Reverend Martin Luther King who spoke of a dream—a dream of a colorless society. But in August, 1963, it was only a dream. And while dreams provide us with a hope, too often they are momentary things which never reach fruition.

(Lytle 275)

Lytle’s analysis accommodates a conservative, racial narrative that presents legislative changes as The March’s only aim. Along with over-emphasizing the significance of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Lytle incorrectly attests that the “dream” metaphor of King’s “I Have a Dream” speech is about creating a “colorless society.” Critical race theorists have described this approach as a liberalist perspective that distracts attention away from the material, economic changes that must also be enacted to help disenfranchised citizens (Delgado and Stefancic 22). Moreover, King’s inclusion of an economic narrative along with his racial narrative suggests that the liberalist perspective of a colorless America that Lytle offers is not King’s dream at all.

King introduces an economic narrative that advocates for worker rights early in his speech. After he delivers the exposition, King constructs an extended metaphor between income and rights, which suggests that financial gain should accompany rights reinforced by the outlawing of racial discrimination. For example, he draws a correlation between a “promissory note” and foundational texts like the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence (King). However, he describes how the “citizens of color” were given a “bad check” to cash at the
“bank of justice” (King). King further develops this metaphor by illustrating how the nation’s “insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity” disproportionately affects black citizens (King). King goes on to emphasize the “urgency” of the moment to eschew the political process’ affinity for gradual change. King instead declares, “Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy.” In this instance, King hints at his democratic socialist leanings by announcing that “democracy” needs to be strengthened in a manner that also supports economic welfare. Furthermore, King renews the speech’s economic narrative later in the composition when he appropriates Langston Hughes’ voice to disguise the fact that he sympathizes with radical views.

**Voice-Merging and an Economic Narrative**

In “Voice-Merging and Self-Making: The Epistemology of ‘I Have a Dream,’” rhetorician Keith D. Miller describes his idea of voice-merging by “maintain[ing] that King’s persuasiveness stems … from the typological epistemology of the black folk pulpit and from the methods of voice-merging and self making that proceed from that epistemology” (Miller 23). More explicitly, Miller defines voice merging as a rhetorical device where preachers “create their own identities not through original language but through identifying themselves with a hallowed tradition” (24). I posit that Edbauer’s ecological theory enhances Keith D. Miller’s concept of voice-merging because his notion requires us to consider the context of the preexisting texts with which an orator chooses to merge his voice. Edbauer’s ecological theory consequently allows us to think about how voice-merging “recontextualizes [texts] in their temporal, historical, and lived fluxes” (Edbauer 9). Through King’s use of voice-merging, we similarly see how an economic narrative that extends much longer than just the second phase of the Civil Rights Movement.

Mark Vail and W. Jason Miller, who have extended Miller’s idea of voice-merging, provide an opening for us to examine how King’s use of the concept in his “I Have a Dream”
speech enables him to discharge a radical message of democratic socialism that advocates for labor rights and wage equality. Mark Vail’s reapplication of voice-merging in “The ‘Integrative’ Rhetoric of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s ‘I Have a Dream’ Speech” focuses on how King blends his voice with historic American documents and President Abraham Lincoln to convey the irony of racial discrimination when considered in conjunction with America’s foundational sentiment that “all men are created equal.” For example, King revives the voice of Abraham Lincoln with his beginning phrase, “Fivescore years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation” (Vail 64). As Vail spotlights, King simultaneously reawakens both the ‘Gettysburg Address’ and the Emancipation Proclamation to reference the century of passed time since Lincoln freed the American slaves. King thus appeals to Lincoln’s authority to dramatize the fact that racial discrimination and socioeconomic inequities have persisted for one hundred years despite Lincoln’s executive order. Unlike Vail, W. Jason Miller suggests that King does not completely use voice-merging as a conspicuous device to contend with racial discrimination. W. Jason Miller proffers that King also uses voice-merging as a subversive strategy that operates covertly. He proposes that we instead view King’s reapplication of radical texts like Hughes’ poetry as voice-submerging. Deploying a surreptitious message in this manner allows King to maneuver the tense sociopolitical climate of the time period that resulted in the blacklisting of individuals who endorsed anti-capitalistic views. In this regard, individual analysis posed by both Vail and W. Jason Miller reveals how an overt racial narrative overshadows a furtive economic narrative. Extracting this economic narrative therefore activates King’s submerged and under-recognized radical voice.

King’s “I Have a Dream” speech unites his voice with the socialist voice of Langston Hughes because King appropriates elements of Hughes’ radical poems, “Let America be
King’s unification of their voices enables him to offer a militant message that re-envisions America’s capitalistic economic system. Moreover, King’s engagement with voice-merging as a rhetorical technique demonstrates how he resists the conservative motives that intend to confine the Civil Rights Movement to a racial narrative. By embodying Hughes’ progressive voice, King encourages an economic narrative that reaches back to the American Labor Movement and the socialist spirit of the black intelligentsia from earlier decades. Furthermore, distilling King’s shrouded voice imparts how he attended to the socioeconomic progressiveness that A. Philip Randolph intended when he conceived The March.

King and Hughes’ Ambiguity of the American Dream

W. Jason Miller’s Origins of the Dream: Hughes’s Poetry and King’s Rhetoric diverges from right-wing analyses of King’s rhetoric by revealing that his use of the “dream” metaphor originates from Hughes’ radical poetry. By turning to Hughes’ poetry, I will show how King covertly advances a leftist economic narrative that undergirds the favored racial narrative of conservative perspectives.

King’s “I Have a Dream” speech and Hughes’ “Let America be America Again” both depict how the American Dream, a capitalistic ideal of socioeconomic mobility, is less accessible to minority groups. Consequently, they both reveal the American Dream’s duality: while white Americans are afforded the social agency to participate in America’s capitalistic structure, minority Americans are hindered from fairly chasing the ideal of economic uplift because of racial discrimination. Both King and Hughes therefore demonstrate the paradox of the American Dream that ironically promises every individual the fair pursuit for happiness while ignoring how racism severs the very notion of pursuing economic gain.
King’s “I Have a Dream” stresses the American Dream’s double consciousness in its memorable phrase, “I still have a dream. It is deeply rooted in the American Dream” (King). By remarking that his “dream” is “rooted in the American Dream,” King makes an integral distinction that indicates his dream is not identical to the American Dream. I assert that probing the division that King makes reveals the democratic socialism leanings of his dream and the unfair, capitalistic American Dream that he challenges us to reimagine. Similarly, Cornel West also comments about the ambiguous nature of King’s dream that advances the same perspective that I pose:

    King indeed had a dream. But it was not the American dream. King’s dream was rooted in the American Dream – it was what the quest for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness looked like for people enslaved and Jim Crowed, terrorized, traumatized, and stigmatized by American laws and American citizens. The litmus test for realizing King’s dream was neither a black face in the White House nor a black presence on Wall Street. Rather, the fulfillment of his dream was for all poor and working people to live lives of decency and dignity. (West xi)

West’s reasoning that King was “a democratic socialist who sided with poor and working people in the class struggle taking place in capitalist societies” shows how an economic narrative, evinced by King’s progressive dream, intersects the speech’s racial narrative, marked by King’s reference to the American Dream xvi). More importantly, West reminds us that King’s goal of ending economic injustice is interwoven with his goal of ending racial discrimination.

    Political scientist Peter C. Myers maintains the same attitude as West by analyzing the American Dream reference to demonstrate the tension between economic and racial narratives in King’s speech. In “Martin Luther King, Jr., and the American Dream,” Myers explains how a
“careful analysis of King’s overall understanding of the American dream and of the specific measures required for its realization will show that the important elements of King’s thinking are indeed in tension with one another” (Myers 2). More specifically, Myers distinguishes between scholars who favor a sanitized, conservative version of King’s dream and others who praise his progressive identity:

To admirers on the political right, King’s core virtue appears in his devotion to America’s founding principles in their essential universality—a devotion that, along with his Christian faith, inspired him to become America’s preeminent apostle of moral and political ‘colorblindness.’ To those on the left, King’s virtue appears rather in his commitment to an expansively egalitarian conception of justice, yielding not only his tireless agitation against formal segregation, but also his increasingly radical critique of U.S. inequality in both racial and socioeconomic dimensions. (2)

Myers assertion suggests that viewing the breadth of King’s beliefs as binary oppositions uncovers two separate identities. In the former of Myer’s descriptions, we find the King that promotes the American Dream; however, the latter reveals the anti-capitalist, democratic socialist King that offers an altered version of the American Dream. Moreover, Myers turns to Hughes’ “Let America be America Again” as an aid to illuminate the duality that King presents about the American Dream. As Myer’s explains, “The grand aspiration to which King devoted his life is captured … by the poet Langston Hughes, written nearly three decades before [his] signature speech” (6).

“Let America be America Again,” published in 1938 by the International Workers Order, elucidates the ambiguity of the American Dream that King’s speech also possesses.
Hughes’ eleven-stanza poem presents an array of voices whose abilities to pursue the American Dream are varied because of their stratified socioeconomic, racial, and/or ethnic backgrounds. While each stanza first presents the “founding white myths of American democracy,” (Scott 89) subsequent parenthetical phrases demonstrate the voices of marginalized workers:

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free

(America never was America to me.) (Hughes 189)

The poem’s opening line showcases a dualistic posture toward the American Dream by repeating “America” twice to convey the mismatch between the nation’s reality and its idealism (189). In his first iteration of “America,” Hughes invokes an attitude of realism that suggests how the nation does not fulfill its promise of liberty; however, the following reiteration of “America” alludes to the patriotic spirit of citizens who romanticize the myth that unbridled democracy is experienced ubiquitously. Hughes’ subsequent line, moreover, compounds the distinction he makes between America’s realism and its idealism by incorporating his trademark “dream” image (189). The interplay between Hughes’ description of two different Americas and the image of the dream conveys his reference to the American Dream. Similar to his illustration of America as a dichotomy, Hughes specifies the same division in his “dream” reference by detailing that it is not what “it used to be” (189). Hughes’ proximate demarcation of the time lapse between how the American Dream was originally perceived in comparison to how it was later observed impresses how the promise of socioeconomic uplift is ideologically bound to America’s national identity. The rest of the stanza further considers how the American Dream is
conceptually rooted in the attitude of Manifest Destiny by referencing the unrealized potential of a “pioneer on the plain” (189).

The parenthetical line that Hughes immediately offers following the first stanza critiques the sentiments of the American Dream that he previously displays. Additionally, the stark shift in tone—substantiated by the brief hiatus between the stanza and parenthetical line—exhibits how Hughes presents two different speakers. While the first character has complete fidelity in the promise of the American Dream, the second speaker rebukes the validity of the American Dream. Hughes bolsters this juxtaposition between voices throughout the poem by repeating the same syntactical structure: a stanza trailed by a refuting parenthetical line. The personalities of these speakers remain mysterious throughout the poem until Hughes confesses their identities:

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
I am the Negro bearing slavery’s scars.
I am the red man driven from the land,
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—
And finding only the same old stupid plan
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak. (Hughes 189)

Hughes’ repeated use of “me” to identify the speaker in the parenthetical lines suggests that this voice is also the first-person speaker self-recognized in the repeatedly stated “I” of the later stanza (189). Thus, he divulges that the parenthetical speaker’s identity is not a sole speaker, but it is a collective voice that represents multiple marginalized identities, including “poor whites,” “Negro[es],” “red m[e]n,” and “immigrant[s]” (189). By revealing that one of the two juxtaposed voices represents the collective identity of variously marginalized people, Hughes enables us to
deduce that the identity of the oppositional first speaker who wholeheartedly espouses the myth of the American Dream belongs to a singular identity: American-born white people.

Through the sustained tension that he creates between the two voices, Hughes challenges us to consider the interaction between racial and economic narratives. For example, the first of the countering identities that Hughes offers through the collective marginalized voice is a “poor white” person “fooled and pushed apart” (189). Since Hughes marks this individual as a white person, the only distinction that Hughes offers between the patriotic voice and this said identity is that the second person is “poor” (189). Consequently, Hughes directs us to notice how economic stratification plays a role in determining if white American citizens are either fully enfranchised or segregated from other white citizens. In this capacity, Hughes denotes the second citizen as white to dissuade us from accepting the racial narrative that regularly equates blackness with poverty. Hughes also challenges us to equate whiteness with poverty in order to rupture the racial narrative that continuously codifies black people as poorer than white people. Moreover, the contrast that Hughes presents between white people comes before he mentions any ideas about the black race. Marking whiteness before any utterance of blackness throughout the poem and encouraging us to think about how he modifies whiteness through an economic narrative, Hughes displaces our expectation of a racial narrative and the validity of its commonplace function as a distinguisher between people. Hughes’ poem, furthermore, only marks blackness in the following line by identifying the “Negro [that] bear[s] slavery’s scars” (189). Nonetheless, Hughes unites the identity of the “poor white” with the personhood of the “Negro” by using “I” to preface both of their respective labels.

The other two identities—the “red man” and the “immigrant”—introduced by Hughes testify to the extreme governmental transformation that he contends with. His description of the
“red man” serves as a double entendre that references both aboriginal people who originally occupied America and individuals in America who sympathized with communist ideologies. As Hughes describes, both of these groups of people were “driven from the land”—natives were removed forcibly through military intervention and communist affiliates were either deported or willingly expatriated (189). The commonality that Hughes’ combined reference to these two groups of people evokes is the notion of ownership. While his allusion to native people arouses the idea of land ownership rights, his simultaneous allusion to left-wing associates summons the concept of shared ownership by governmentally guided redistribution of wealth. Regardless, both instances compel one to consider the role of material allocation. The collection of identities Hughes offers along with his final reference to “immigrant” people who come with the “hope” of pursuing the American Dream urge us to think about how a government’s sociopolitical and transnational tendencies affect various groups’ individual identities.

In Socialist Joy in the Writing of Langston Hughes, Jonathan Scott remarks how Hughes’ poem reflects Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s theory about the “double-voicedness” of African American texts (Scott 89). As Scott explains, “it is not enough [for Hughes] to assert the ethnic plurality of U.S. society; to fully grasp what we mean by ‘multicultural America,’ he suggests, it is first necessary to link diversity with its own objective. Thus, his strategy in [Let America be America Again] is to have the mestizo express itself through the self-emancipation of labor” (Scott 89). King’s “I Have a Dream” speech employs this same strategy as Hughes by speaking from the vantage point of people with intersectional identities who are disenfranchised. In this capacity, King’s speech also showcases Gates’ theory of double-voicedness. Just as Hughes submerges the voices of marginalized people, King’s “I Have a Dream” submerges Hughes’ radical voice by acknowledging the ambiguity of the American Dream in the same fashion as
Hughes. In this manner, King’s use of voice-submerging as a rhetorical strategy urges us to contemplate how he speaks of disenfranchised people’s economic plight when remarking about the American Dream’s ambiguous nature. The same inclusiveness that Hughes endorses in “Let America be America Again” can be gleaned from King’s speech when we trace the idea of the American Dream’s double consciousness back to Hughes. After delivering his speech’s well-known “I have a dream” anaphora, which I will soon explore more thoroughly, King intensifies the inclusive tone of his speech as he approaches its end:

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; ‘and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.’ … With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day. (King)

The offered excerpt from King’s speech follows the same structure as Hughes’ “Let America be America Again.” Just as Hughes’ poem begins by exploring realism and idealism in the American Dream, King employs the dream metaphor while simultaneously observing the American Dream as an ideal in comparison to how it manifests in reality. King quotes Isaiah 40:5 to explain the mismatch between the American Dream as an ideal and how it actually occurs. By achieving the inclusive society that both he and Hughes advance, King asserts that the “‘glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together’” (King). Appealing to the
Bible expresses how King’s belief about the equity between people to pursue the American Dream is rooted in God’s law. Embedding the American Dream into the law of God showcases King’s idealistic view of the concept; although, King also emphasizes how it can be realized materially by explaining how “all flesh” will be able to “see” it (King). Thus, King underscores the corporeality of the American Dream and stressing that it can be witnessed physically. King relies on this realistic aesthetic to convey the American Dream becoming an actual reality for minority groups.

By suggesting that King’s idea of economic uplift is also rooted in a sacred text and emanates from the moral law of God, my perspective diverges from Mark Vail’s analysis of voice-merging in King’s speech. Vail proffers, “While King raises the issue of economic justice for black Americans…, he avoids any overt attempt to link the economic to the sacred” (Vail 72). Vail also expresses that King reserves his use of sacred language only to comment about racial injustice. Unfortunately, Vail undermines his own proposed theory of “integration” by making clear-cut distinctions between an economic-secular narrative and a racial-sacred narrative. It is important for us to notice that King does not segregate these narratives because making a distinction between the two narratives inadvertently diminishes King’s speech to partitioned narratives when King’s intent is for us to contemplate how these narratives coincide.

After referencing the Bible, King subsequently begins to use inclusive language in a similar fashion that Hughes deploys a collective voice to account for the injustices of marginalized groups. King’s repetition of the phrase “we will be able” and the word “together” suggests the actualization of a more inclusive nation that attends to the needs of minority groups. Additionally, a critical phrase in this excerpt is “beautiful symphony of brotherhood” because King deploys a metaphor of a musical orchestra to illustrate the assemblage of all groups he
hopes America will achieve. More importantly, King prefaces this metaphor with another crucial phrase: “transform the jangling discords of our nation” (King). His use of the word “transform” hints at the extreme structural change that is necessary to generate the type of inclusive developments that he mentions. Furthermore, King sustains Hughes’ submerged-voice by reasserting the ambiguity of the American Dream soon after the excerpt above. King again shows the distinction between reality and idealism by remarking, “And if America is to be a great nation, this [inclusiveness] must become true” (King). Consequently, King begins to close his speech by emphasizing the same ambiguity that he introduces earlier.

**King and Hughes’ Dream Metaphor**

In addition to King’s recapitulation of Hughes’ “Let America be America Again,” King’s speech also submerges the dream anaphora and other elements from Hughes’ “I Dream a World.” W. Jason Miller notes the close resemblance between the two pieces by detailing how “King’s famous refrain echoes the [poem’s] cadence, theme, and structure” (Miller 196). Miller’s comparative analysis of the two compositions primarily serves to establish the connections and similarities between them and to affirm that “I Dream a World” indeed inspired King. King’s adaptation of the dream metaphor does not solely bolster the liberalist idea of the United States becoming either a colorblind or a multicultural society. Close-reading Hughes’ poem demonstrates how King appropriates its original meaning to propose how democratic socialism as an alternative to capitalism can rectify America’s racial woes. Offering economic opportunity as a racial corrective illustrates King’s intersectional and economic determinist perspectives. King fundamentally interweaves an economic narrative with a racial narrative by explaining how an increase in socialism can help to remedy racial injustice. Accordingly, both
King and Hughes make us think about slavery as an unjust capitalistic institution. The beginning of Hughes’ poem reads:

I dream a world where man,
No other man will scorn,
Where love will bless the earth
And peace its paths adorn
I dream a world where all
Will know sweet freedom’s way,
Where greed no longer saps the soul
Nor avarice blights our day (Hughes 311)

Hughes showcases a tension between individual ownership and communal ownership to emphasize the consequence of excessive gluttony. The conflict between men that Hughes condemns at the onset of the poem suggests the unjust competition men are willing to undergo for material gain. Instead of causing each other “scorn,” Hughes expresses the need for people to “bless” each other through “love.” His use of the “earth” as an image to capture the idea of community that he is proposing conveys how this spirit of generosity should not be restricted within national borders. Accordingly, his use of “earth” as an image also evokes the idea of colonialism that has enthused men to steal from each other throughout the world. In this capacity, Hughes also calls our attention to the international exchange of slaves. Hughes criticizes the slave trade as a “greed[y]” act that “saps the soul” and an act of “avarice [that] blights our day.” Hughes further castigates slavery by commenting that he dreams that “all / Will know sweet freedom’s way.” Similarly, the famous part of King’s speech that uses the “I have a dream” anaphora in a comparable structure to the way Hughes presents “I dream a world” also
denounces slavery. For instance, King says, “I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood” (King). By invoking the intergenerational legacy of slavery in the Southern region of the United States, King echoes the notion of freedom and collectivity that Hughes imparts by describing how descendants of slaves and slave owners can engage in fellowship. King’s regionalization of Hughes’ cosmopolitan poem does not abandon the notion of unrestricted giving that Hughes originally proposes. King relies on the image of the world to create a tension that shows the peculiarity of the racial discrimination that exists in the southern states of America. Although King conjures the image of southern states broadly at the beginning of his anaphora, he begins to name them explicitly in subsequent lines. For example, he mentions “Georgia,” “Mississippi,” and “Alabama,” which demonstrates the pervasiveness of discrimination in the South. Explicitly calling these states by name also serves to emphasize the juxtaposition he creates between the region and the rest of the world.

The remainder of Hughes’ poem also mirrors the anaphoric section of King’s speech because they both continue to characterize slavery as an economic institution. For example, King’s speech remarks:

I have a dream the one day even the state of Mississippi, a state

Sweltering with the heat of injustice,

Sweltering with the heat of oppression

Will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation

Where they will not be judged by the color of their skin

but by the content of their character.
I have a dream today! (King)

In this part of his speech, King maintains a racial narrative by describing how he hopes his “four little children” will not be judged by “color” but instead by “character.” However, he also develops his theme of economic transformation by speaking about the “injustice” and “oppression” that exists in Mississippi. By describing the need for the state to be “transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice,” King alludes to more than just changes in racial dynamics but also in the socioeconomic structure. Similarly, Hughes introduces a racial narrative interwoven with an economic narrative just like King:

A world I dream where black or white,

Whatever race you be,

Will share the bounties of the earth,

And every man is free,

And joy, like a pearl,

Attends the needs of all mankind-

Of such I dream, my world! (Hughes 311)

Hughes introduces a racial narrative by marking race for the first time in his poem when he specifies that his dream pertains to the “black” and “white” races. However, he expresses that his dream is not only for them to be “free” but also for them to “share the bounties of the earth.” By incorporating the idea of how resources should be allocated fairly, Hughes words intimate his socialist leanings. King’s interpolation of Hughes’ poem imports the same socialist underpinnings that fuel his words. Furthermore, King and Hughes not only arouse thoughts of slavery by forging a racial narrative—they also summon a revisionary economic narrative that compels us to think about slavery as an economic institution of inhumane capitalism.
Adopting an ecological approach that takes into account allows us to trace the origins of King’s dream metaphor to its progressive roots. It also enables us to witness the message of democratic socialism that his speech advances and to observe how he also interweaves the racial narrative of his speech with an economic narrative that derives from the American Labor Movement. Most importantly, it reveals how King advocated for the rights of all citizens, but especially for citizens at the intersection of class and race disenfranchisement.
“The real cost lies ahead. The stiffening of white resistance is a recognition of that fact. The discount education given Negroes will in the future have to be purchased at full price if quality education is to be realized. Jobs are harder and costlier to create than voting rolls. The eradication of slums housing millions is complex far beyond integrating buses and lunch counters.”

- Martin Luther King, Jr. *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community* (1967)

The 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom is most notably—and understandably—remembered for Martin Luther King, Jr.’s iconic “I Have A Dream” speech. The cultural vitality of King’s address has endured and strengthened over the half-century since it was delivered. Nevertheless, the everlasting zeal of King’s speech is not a surprise to the event’s planners who are still living today. Clarence B. Jones tells how King was granted more time to speak than the “uniform time limit of five minutes” for every other speaker on the event’s program because his “national stature” justified more time (Jones 24). As a result, the other speeches are much shorter in duration than King’s. His celebrity appeal and prominence as a gifted orator was a leading incentive for so many travelers to attend and participate in the demonstration. Jones affirms that the organizers’ decision to give King more time “paved the way for a chapter in American History” (Jones 27).

Unfortunately, the bright radiance of King’s speech has outshined many other culturally significant speeches spoken that same historic day. For example, labor unionist A. Phillip Randolph gave opening remarks that highlighted the significance of the occasion by referencing how the labor movement advocated for many of the same changes several decades earlier and similarly used mass protests as a tactic to gain the federal government’s attention. He also deployed inclusive language to remind listeners that The March intended to improve the social condition of all citizens regardless of race. Another speaker, John Lewis of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), delivered a spirited speech that showcased a more
radical tone than King’s by urging citizens not to wait to act against oppression. Despite being tapered to remove any inflammatory remarks just minutes before he delivered it, Lewis’ message was still controversial enough to capture the attention of the national media. Social strategist and organizer Bayard Rustin impassionedly recited a list of demands that enumerated ten objectives that The March hoped to achieve. Many of the commands that Rustin spoke were additional to President Kennedy’s pressing civil rights bill: the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Nonetheless, Rudolph, Lewis, and Rustin all advocated for Kennedy’s civil rights bill in their respective messages while also emphasizing that the bill would not cure all of America’s racial and socioeconomic woes.

The primary motive of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was to illegalize discrimination of any kind—whether based on race, gender, nationality, etc.—in public accommodations. This aspect of the legislative document caused immense controversy and most polarized the nation. The measure also ultimately prevented discrimination in federally funded programs and in employment associated activities. However, the bill did not engage issues like raising and guaranteeing a national minimum wage and implementing a federal work program that would train all unemployed Negroes. Gaining fair income rights was also a primary intention of the event’s organizers. As William Powell Jones recounts, marchers “wanted to pass that bill, but they believe[d] it was far too limited” (x). These unacknowledged aims would have required the federal government to actualize a socialistic agenda uncharacteristic of American policy and even more progressive than President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s unprecedented New Deal program. Furthermore, to reconcile the divergence between the broad range of economic and racial discrimination goals that defined this event, I suggest treating it as a crux that captures the ethos of the legislative phase and the ethos of the subsequent economic phase.
In his final book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community*, Martin Luther King, Jr. acknowledges claims that the Civil Rights Movement was experiencing a crucial moment of desperation as violent protests in Chicago and Los Angeles began to overshadow the fundamental philosophy of non-violent protest established in Southern cities like Selma, Birmingham, and Montgomery (5). King evinces how the “irrational burst of rage” and shift towards radicalism by some blacks were due to “white backlash” (3). He further explains that despite major legislative advancements, many middle-class whites maintained an indifference to the plight of blacks. He proposes that whites’ “limited degree of concern…reaffirms the status quo,” which prevents true systematic change from occurring (5). Most poignantly, King enthuses his commentary with monetary-related imagery when declaring that the “practical cost of change for the nation up to this point has been cheap” because whites have not actually incurred any true inconveniences in the pursuit for full-citizenship by blacks (King 5). King subsequently tells that America’s racial hurdle will not be surmounted until white citizens readily sympathize with the aggravations blacks regularly experience. However, by employing words like “cost” and “cheap” to characterize the social insensitivity of whites, King constructs an extended metaphor that highlights the historical economic class difference that separated, and still separates today, the vast majority of blacks from many whites.

I have chosen to close by echoing King’s final book because it demonstrates the nuances of class and racial intersectionality while underscoring the importance of an economic uplift in the pursuit for racial equality. King shows how the class divide among various races creates unique complexities that often compound the difficulty of uniting Americans on common class ground. King’s focus on class dynamics during the year this book was published in 1967 fits into Bayard Rustin suggestion that economic concerns only became a primary concern post-1964.
However, this thesis has shown that there is overlap between the phases that Rustin outlines because King advocated for economic rights—although varyingly—throughout his career as an activist. The speeches delivered by A. Philip Randolph and King at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom prove the significance of an economic activism during the first phase.

To elucidate the advantages of considering the 1963 March on Washington as an intersection, this thesis is an interdisciplinary approach that draws on theoretical concepts from various disciplines including civil rights historiography, critical race theory, rhetorical theory, and literary studies. Accordingly, the interdisciplinary nature of this project presents multiple avenues for future scholarship to consider. Civil rights historiography will most likely be crucially important to any proposed project—newly constructed counternarratives that have given us a platform to reimagine the Civil Rights Movement is the primary inspiration behind this project. Similarly, critical race theory gives a theoretical framework to interpret the complex racial, class, and gender dynamics of marginalized citizenship. One direction that blends all of the lenses that I have used throughout this thesis, but maintains my focus on language, is a project that explores how the rhetoric discharged to black working class citizens was distinctly different than the rhetoric deployed to black middle class citizens. This avenue may lead to other questions that expose how periodizations of the Civil Rights Movement may be drastically different for particular classes. For example, the Civil Rights Movement may have always been about legal rights for black middle class citizens; however, the movement may have always been about economic rights for black working class individuals. Additionally, regional location further compounds how certain messages were broadcasted to citizens. Furthermore, continuing the
ecological approach that I have started by considering more mundane speeches not delivered on
a national stage provides ample space to contemplate the observations that I have posed.
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