Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” in Context: Ceremonial Protest and African American Jeremiad

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occurring on Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday, President Clinton’s second inauguration ceremony was thick with references to King’s work and the successes of the civil rights movement. Calling the nation to a continued struggle for racial equality, President Clinton alluded to King’s most famous speech, “I Have a Dream,” and its occasion, the March on Washington.

Thirty-four years ago, the man whose life we celebrate today spoke to us down there, at the other end of this Mall, in words that moved the conscience of a nation. Like a prophet of old, he told of his dream that one day America would rise up and treat all its citizens as equals before the law and in the heart. Martin Luther King’s dream was the American Dream. His quest is our quest: the ceaseless striving to live out our true creed. Our history has been built on such dreams and labors. And by our dreams and labors we will redeem the promise of America in the 21st Century.

For President Clinton and most Americans, “I Have a Dream” sums up King’s life-work; indeed, “I Have a Dream” has become the touchstone of American memory of the struggle for civil rights. Describing the genesis of this speech, many historians attribute this remarkable speech to late-night inspiration or sun-lit rapture. For example, in his biography of Martin Luther King Jr., Stephen Oates reports that on the night before the March on Washington, King and his aides “labored on his speech throughout the night” (256). Halfway through “I Have a Dream,” Oates continues, “King abandoned his text and spoke from his heart” (260). In Parting the Waters, a best-selling, Pulitzer Prize–winning study of King, Taylor Branch claims that in mid-delivery King spurned his text. Once he began speaking “extemporaneously,” “there was no alternative but to preach” (882). These accounts complement

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contemporary news media reports that emphasized the distinctiveness of the March on Washington and of King's speech. And this is how we remember "I Have a Dream," framing it in our political discourse and our textbook anthologies as though it were a spontaneous and unique outpouring.

"I Have a Dream," however, is the product of African American rhetorical traditions of ceremonial protest and jeremiad speech-making, rituals that had crystallized long before King was born. To ignore these traditions is to misrepresent not only the African American community that shaped the rhetorical context of "I Have a Dream" but also King's message. The rhetorical context of "I Have a Dream," the March on Washington, can best be described as a ceremonial protest, a bittersweet, annual celebration that African Americans began 130 years before "I Have a Dream." Over long decades, African American preachers and political leaders, including Frederick Douglass, repeated and polished the jeremiadic components of "I Have a Dream." At the March on Washington and in "I Have a Dream," King introduced the rest of the nation to these African American rhetorical traditions that contextualize protest with long-suffering confidence that African Americans would be "free at last." Rooted in the richness of these traditions, King's message captivated his listeners in 1963 and continues to capture the imagination of subsequent generations.

CEREMONIAL PROTEST

The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom fulfilled a two-fold purpose: It celebrated the one-hundredth anniversary of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, and it protested ongoing racism in American society. In front of the Washington Monument, friends chatted while eating picnic lunches and listening to lively folk music (Branch 877). The civil rights enthusiasts, more than 250,000 strong, were orderly and polite as they marched down the mall to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, the culturally charged site of the afternoon speeches. March organizers worked with law enforcement officials and orchestrated the efforts of hundreds of volunteers who worked behind the scenes setting up portable toilets, drinking fountains, and first aid stations. At the Riverside Church in New York City, volunteers prepared 80,000 cheese sandwiches for march participants (873). The efforts of these nameless volunteers paid off. As a New York Times reporter observed, protesters came and left "in the spirit of [a] church outing" (Baker 1). In fact, many dressed formally, men in dark slacks and white shirts.

This scene contrasted sharply with disturbing images of demonstrators being pummeled by billy clubs, bitten by police dogs, washed down streets with fire hoses, attacked by white hooligans, and almost killed—familiar television images prior to the March on Washington. Why did marchers eschew law-breaking and confrontation at this march, choosing instead to stage a peaceful event? Partly because
NAACP chief Roy Wilkins and other moderate leaders disdained civil disobedience, and partly because, unlike earlier protests, the March on Washington followed the African American ritual of ceremonial protest. In previous civil rights marches, protesters engaged in nonviolent resistance to injustice. Activists committed civil disobedience, willfully courting arrest by peaceably confronting police. At the March on Washington, however, protesters gathered in a celebration of the freedom granted by the Emancipation Proclamation. Protest at the March on Washington operated within this context of celebration. Protesters adhered to African American traditions and extended the dreams of thousands who had previously engaged in this century-old rhetorical act.

Long before the March on Washington, African American communities gathered on freedom holidays such as the Fourth of July, the anniversary of the liberation of the West Indies, and the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. At these celebrations, African Americans both honored the promise of freedom and protested current racist conditions. After years of this poignant celebration of freedom, commemorating a freedom holiday became a ritualized act of protest against current conditions. These ceremonial protests nourished covert political activity, demanded scrupulously decorous behavior, and gave occasion for jeremiad speeches. Most often ceremonial protest against slavery and racism remained within the borders of African American communities. Occasionally, however, well-known African American rhetors crossed social boundaries to bring their message of hopeful protest to racially mixed or even predominantly white audiences. Thus King’s “I Have a Dream” finds precedent in speeches such as Frederick Douglass’s “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?”

The history of ceremonial protest in the African American community begins with celebrations of the liberation of the West Indies. After the British liberated their West Indies slaves in 1833, African Americans staged annual ceremonies honoring that event. On at least ten occasions, Douglass spoke at such commemorations, honoring the actions of the British and protesting American slavery. For example, in 1880 Douglass spoke at an Emancipation Proclamation celebration. In that speech, he called liberation in the West Indies “the first bright star in a very dark, stormy and threatening sky.” That star served as a harbinger, “the opening wedge” to emancipation in the United States (“Lessons” 564).

Following the Civil War, African Americans annually commemorated the Emancipation Proclamation while continuing to protest deeply rooted and legally enforced racial discrimination. Because emancipation from legalized slavery did not free African Americans from the effects of racism, the events associated with these “freedom” holidays continued to be both celebrative and protest-oriented. Outstanding orators such as Frances E. W. Harper, Charles Remond, and Sojourner Truth spoke at these bittersweet gatherings that balanced joy and protest, sometimes
accentuating thankfulness and other times dissent. In 1913, honoring the fiftieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, W. E. B. DuBois wrote an ambitious pageant, *The Star of Ethiopia*, which was first produced in New York City. This dramaturgical extravaganza featured a large choir and a thousand actors who reenacted great events in black history by playing the heroic roles of Toussaint L'Ouverture, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass. Later staged in Washington, DC, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles, *The Star of Ethiopia* served as DuBois's champagne toast to the long march from bondage (see Lewis 459–61; Wiggins 51–52). By midcentury annual emancipation celebrations often took the form of holidays. Parades with emancipated slaves serving as parade marshals filled the streets of African American communities (Wiggins 114). Celebrants often played baseball, ate barbecue, drank liquor, and filled dance floors (xx). A 1947 program in Karnack, Texas, offered a softball game, a croquet match, a mule race, and a bicycle race (33). Other emancipation celebrants met solemnly in churches for special prayers, sermons, and hymns.

Celebrations of the anniversaries of the Emancipation Proclamation and the liberation of the West Indies encouraged overt political action. William Wiggins explains:

> Since their inception, emancipation celebrations have remained important, annual, grass-roots political forums for Afro-Americans. Furthermore, their persistent protest of the Afro-American's status as a second-class citizen—expressed through an unrelenting barrage of resolutions, proclamations, petitions, NAACP membership drives, militant speeches, . . . parades, voter-registration campaigns, boycotts, and numerous other political stratagems—have helped create and maintain the political climate that has spawned much of this century's political activities among Afro-Americans. (109)

Largely hidden from the view of whites, these holidays provided opportunities for political groups to challenge racist social structures and opportunities for civil rights orators to hone effective arguments about civil equality. While these protests lacked immediate impact on whites, they affirmed the possibility of someday dismantling segregation. Working the crowds that had gathered to celebrate and protest, political groups built community bonds that would last beyond the holiday. Facing supportive audiences, civil rights rhetors tested and refined the arguments, images, and phrases that would eventually move the hearts and minds of a nation. Regardless of how the community celebrated, protesting current conditions was an important part of honoring the promise of freedom.

The character of ceremonial protest in the African American community continued essentially unchanged through the 1960s. As a college student, Martin Luther King Jr. participated in a freedom celebration. In 1945 Atlanta, King's hometown, celebrated the Emancipation Proclamation by resolving to register thousands of new voters, expanding the reach of the NAACP, protesting unequal schooling, and
attacking “the whole fabric of discriminatory segregation” (Wiggins 112). In 1957, in the wake of a triumphant bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, King provided an oration for emancipation festivities in Atlanta. A year later he spoke at a similar gathering in Virginia. After gaining prominence as a leader in the civil rights movement, King accepted awards at emancipation commemorations (136, 137).

While overtly political, African American ceremonial protests nevertheless featured decorum. In fact, decorous behavior became a hallmark of these gatherings and a source of pride in the African American community. At an 1857 commemoration of the liberation of the West Indies, Douglass explained the importance of the peaceable nature of these commemorations:

I like [these annual celebrations] because they call us to the contemplation of great interests, and afford an opportunity of presenting salutary truths before the American people. They bring our people together, and enable us to see and commune with each other for mutual profit. If these occasions are conducted wisely, decorously, and orderly, they increase our respectability in the eyes of the world, and silence the slanders of prejudice. (“Significance” 198–99; see also “Strong” 217)

Douglass’s demand for decorum, repeated by other ceremonial protest organizers, indelibly marked the peaceful gathering that was the March on Washington.

**African American Jeremiad**

Speech-making by political or religious members of the African American community has always been an important part of ceremonial protest. In his 1895 address, William Crogman, an African American professor of Greek and Latin, noted the enormous popularity of emancipation celebrations and the widespread speechifying at such events: “And so, while I am here to-day endeavoring to address you, Negro orators are discussing the same subject elsewhere, not now in the large cities only, but also in the more remote towns and villages of the rural districts” (315). Often these speakers relied on the jeremiad. The jeremiad fit ceremonial protests because it too framed dissent within a celebration of past promises and hope for future fulfillment of them.

In a jeremiad, the speaker adopts the stance of a prophet-outcast, evoking Old and New Testament prophets such as Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, and John the Baptist. These prophets went into the wilderness to discern God’s voice and returned to communicate that message to the rest of the community. In African American jeremiads, the speaker signals this position of alienation through metaphor and scriptural allusion rather than through social isolation.

The rhetorical structure of African American jeremiads is threefold: a consideration of the freedom promises in America’s founding documents, a detailed criticism of America’s failure to fulfill this promise, and a prophecy that America will achieve its promised greatness and enjoy unparalleled happiness (Howard-Pitney 8).³ Thus
in a jeremiad, orators follow the structure of promise, failure, and prophecy of future greatness found throughout the Bible. The jeremiad structure appealed to African American preachers and abolitionist orators because African American slaves often compared themselves to the Israelite slaves of the Old Testament, awaiting their exodus to the Promised Land of a socially equitable America (11). Even after the Emancipation Proclamation, orators continued to use the image of slavery to characterize life in racist America. For example, delivering a jeremiad at an emancipation celebration in 1880 Douglass declared, “By means of the shot gun and midnight raid, the old master class has triumphed over the newly enfranchised citizen. . . . [T]he chain gang has re-appeared in those [Southern] States and persons of color, for the most petty offenses, are put in these gangs and made to work the farms of their former masters under the lash” (“Lessons” 565). Five years later, at a joint observance of West Indies and American emancipation, Douglass complained again about Southern actions directed at “reducing” blacks to “semi-slavery” (“Great” 199).

The first structural element of a jeremiad, a consideration of the freedom promises in America’s founding documents, relies on standard citations from these documents, the so-called sacred texts of American civil religion: the Bible, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Emancipation Proclamation. Long before the Emancipation Proclamation, African American abolitionists claimed the bright American promise by soaking their discourse in the Bible and by citing the Declaration of Independence (especially the phrase “all men are created equal”), a document which they sometimes conflated with the Constitution. For example, in 1813 African American James Forten cited Thomas Jefferson’s affirmation that “all men are created equal” to argue the equality of all races, including “the Peruvian and the Laplander, the white man and the African” (42). Leading white abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, in the first issue of The Liberator, contended that this phrase called for the immediate end to slavery (24). In fact, upon analyzing a large sample of abolitionist rhetoric, Celeste Condit and John Lucaites discovered that one-third of the documents they examined referred directly to the promises contained in the Declaration of Independence (85-89, 288).

The second element of the African American jeremiad, a detailed criticism of America’s failure to fulfill this promise, sometimes includes a threat or warning of cataclysmic consequences if America fails to alter current racist social practice. Often the orator appeals to the audience’s emotions through graphic descriptions of American racism and matches that emotional appeal with a logical contrast of the promise and the reality of contemporary social injustice. Frederick Douglass detailed the structure of the logical appeal in an 1846 rally of British supporters: “Hold up before them [Americans] their inconsistencies. Tell them to look at their Act of Declaration—to contrast that with their conduct. In that Declaration we have these truths . . . ‘That all men are born free and equal’. . . . Ask them to give up slavery and stand by that Dec-
laration. Demand this in the name of consistency” (“Horrors” 374). The combination of emotional and logical appeals thoroughly describes America’s failure.

The third element of the African American jeremiad is a prophecy that America will achieve its promised greatness and enjoy unparalleled happiness. Affirming the eventual fulfillment of the promise, orators often use patriotic anthems such as “America” (“My Country ’Tis of Thee”) and “The Star-Spangled Banner” to describe this happy scene. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who led a contingent of African American soldiers in the Union army, recalls a service celebrating Lincoln’s signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. The chaplain’s speech was interrupted by the lyrics of “America”:

Suddenly . . . a strong male voice began singing, “My country ’tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing!” Two women’s voices instantly blended with the first one as if by an impulse that could no more be repressed than the morning song of a sparrow. . . . Everyone knew what songs and speeches had been included on the program and no mention had been made of “My Country ’Tis of Thee.” But the voices sang on. Others of the colored people joined in. Then still others. . . . I never saw anything so electric. It made all other words sound cheap. It seemed the choked voice of a race at last unclosed. (31-32)

Because of their sacred status in American civil religion and their confident descriptions of America’s promise, patriotic songs express the passion of renewed hope in the American dream.

This third element of the jeremiad has created memorable rhetorical moments. In 1899 Francis Grimke, a preeminent African American minister, protested the segregation of railroad cars, hotels, and restaurants. After refuting racism through biblical exegesis, he turned to the words of another authority, the Declaration of Independence, and to patriotic lyrics to strengthen his attack and to sketch the fulfillment of the promise of a land free from racial oppression:

The principles of the Declaration of Independence will be no longer glittering generalities, mere empty sentiments, but realities, living, vitalizing forces in the life of the nation; America will be no longer, in name only, as we lyingly and hypocritically sing today, “The land of the free, and the home of the brave,” but in reality. . . . Its citizens, white and black alike, will be free, in the enjoyment of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. . . . (333)

Orators also use the image of a massive, integrated choir to symbolize the promised harmony of a racially inclusive society. For example, in a speech before Congress, Richard Cain railed against segregated restaurants and trains, concluding with a plea for the passage of the 1875 Civil Rights bill and with a prophecy of the social harmony that would result from racial equality:

Let it be proclaimed that henceforth all the children of this land shall be free; that the stars and stripes, waving over all, shall secure to every one equal rights, and the nation
will say “amen.” Let the civil-rights bill be passed this day, and five million black men, women, and children, all over the land will begin a new song of rejoicing, and the thirty-five millions of noble-hearted Anglo-Saxons will join in the shout of joy. (336–37)

Likewise, in her well-known 1893 jeremiad “Lynch Law in All Its Phases,” Ida B. Wells ends her otherwise grim speech by predicting the triumph of racial justice, merging her voice with the Bible and the lyrics of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” “America,” and Reginald Heber’s “From Greenland’s Icy Mountains”:

I long with all the intensity of my soul for the Garrison, Douglass, Sumner, Whittier, and Phillips who will rouse this nation to a demand that from Greenland’s icy mountains to the coral reefs of the Southern seas . . . equal and exact justice be accorded to every citizen of whatever race, who finds a home within the borders of the land of the free and the home of the brave.

Then no longer will our national hymn be sounding brass and tinkling cymbal, but every member of this great composite nation will be a living, harmonious illustration of the words, and can with all honesty and gladly join in the singing:

My country! ’tis of thee, Sweet land of liberty
Of thee I sing.
Land where our fathers died, Land of the Pilgrim’s pride,
From every mountainside, Freedom does ring. (186–87)

In 1952 the African American pastor Archibald Carey provided a similar ending to his address to the Republican convention, a speech carried live on television and reprinted in at least two influential black newspapers:

We, Negro-Americans, sing with all loyal Americans
My country, ’tis of thee, Sweet land of liberty
Of thee, I sing
Land where my fathers died, Land of the Pilgrim’s pride
From every Mountain side, Let freedom ring!

That’s exactly what we mean—from every mountain side, let freedom ring. Not only from the Green Mountains and the White mountains of Vermont and New Hampshire, not only from the Catskills of New York; but from the Ozarks in Arkansas, from the Stone Mountain in Georgia, from the Great Smokies of Tennessee and from the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia—let it ring . . . may the Republican party, under God, from every mountain side, LET FREEDOM RING! (153–54)

Obviously an antecedent of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream,” Carey’s conclusion calls up a vision of a racially harmonious choir praising American liberty and those who crafted that liberty: the nation’s founders and the Pilgrims. Evoking the patriot passion roused by the song “America,” Carey, King, and the others build the claim that overturning socialized slavery is patriotic.

Delivered on July 5, 1852, Frederick Douglass’s “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” marshals all the elements of an African American jeremiad as prac-
ticed by abolitionists. At the outset, Douglass focuses on the promise through a long tribute to the nation’s framers and the nation’s sacred documents. Then, reversing directions, he twists this tribute to underscore American hypocrisy by piling on excruciating examples of slaveholders’ cruelty. In his conclusion, Douglass moves past this consideration of America’s failing to a prophetic vision of the future, of a racially integrated American society enhanced by the social and scientific contributions of her African American citizens.

Douglass begins by distancing himself from his mostly white audience by defining America’s freedoms as “yours” rather than “ours”: “This... is the birthday of your National Independence, and of your political freedom” (“What to the Slave” 1819). Through this rhetorical move, Douglass adopts the stance of the Hebraic prophet-outcast and prepares the way for his subsequent jeremiad. In fact, Douglass evokes the memory of the Old Testament prophet Elijah, who had fled into the desert before the wrath of King Ahab’s wife, Jezebel. God spoke to outcast Elijah in a small, still voice, but only after he had first sent wind, earthquake, and fire to ensure Elijah’s complete attention (I Kings 19:9–18). Douglass yearns for these godly methods of persuasion: “At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. O! had I the ability, and could I reach the nation’s ear, I would, to-day, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake” (1826). And in his description of contemporary racism in America, Douglass adopts these bold measures. In a manner typical of the jeremiad, Douglass moves first to an extended consideration of the promises found in the nation’s history.

Douglass argues for the wisdom and heroism of the nation’s founders, authors of the sacred freedom documents: “like men of honesty, and men of spirit, [they] earnestly sought redress. They petitioned and remonstrated; they did so in a decorous, respectful, and loyal manner. . . . They saw themselves treated with sovereign indifference, coldness and scorn. Yet they persevered” (1820). Interestingly, Douglass portrays the national founders protesting in the same manner he prescribed to those protesting slavery. Douglass relies on biblical imagery to describe the value of the Declaration of Independence: “The principles contained in that instrument are saving principles. Stand by those principles, be true to them on all occasions . . .” (1821).

After describing America’s heroic past and rich promise, Douglass, like the prophet Elijah, blasts contemporary American society for endorsing slavery:

What to the American slave is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty
and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass-fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade, and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud and deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. (1826)

Douglass concludes this tirade by comparing America to the rest of the world and concluding that “for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without a rival” (1827).

In typical jeremiad fashion, Douglass describes in moving detail the inhumanity of slave trade and calls his audience to a shameful consideration of how they have failed to live up to their national heritage. He appeals to his listeners’ sympathy by describing a group of slaves being herded to slave market: “Cast one glance, if you please, upon that young mother, whose shoulders are bare to the scorching sun, her briny tears falling on the brow of the babe in her arms. See, too, the girl of thirteen, weeping, yes! weeping, as she thinks of the mother from whom she has been torn” (1827). Douglass continues his emotional assault, next appealing to his audience’s civic pride by resurrecting the heroism of the nation’s founders:

Is this the land your Fathers loved,  
The freedom which they toiled to win?  
Is this the earth whereon they moved?  
Are these the graves they slumbered in? (1829)

Douglass next restates his argument as a logical analysis of the havoc wreaked by slavery on all aspects of American society. As he concludes this logical appeal, Douglass again rebukes his audience through an extended consideration of the effects of slavery, reinforcing his emotional appeal:

The existence of slavery in this country brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretense, and your Christianity as a lie. It destroys your moral power abroad; it corrupts your politicians at home. It saps the foundation of religion; it makes your name a hissing, and a byword to a mocking earth. It is the antagonistic force in your government, the only thing that seriously disturbs and endangers your Union. It fetters your progress; it is the enemy of improvement, the deadly foe of education; it fosters pride; it breeds insolence; it promotes vice; it shelters crime; it is a curse to the earth that supports it. (1833–34)

And Douglass concludes his litany of evil consequences with a chilling image of mortal danger: “Oh! be warned! be warned! a horrible reptile is coiled up in your nation’s bosom; the venomous creature is nursing at the tender breast of your youthful republic; for the love of God, tear away and fling from you the hideous monster . . . ” (1834). This dramatic warning fittingly concludes Douglass’s exhaustive assault on slavery.

Having assured his audience’s complete attention through the rhetorical whirlwind, earthquake, and fire of jeremiadic condemnation, Douglass quietly and confi-
dently prophesies that the industrial revolution and scientific advancement will usher in a new era of justice:

Allow me to say, in conclusion, notwithstanding the dark picture I have this day presented of the state of the nation, I do not despair of this country. . . . "The arm of the Lord is not shortened" and the doom of slavery is certain. I, therefore, leave off where I began, with hope. While drawing encouragement from the Declaration of Independence, the great principles it contains, and the genius of American Institutions, my spirit is also cheered by the obvious tendencies of the age. (1835)

Following these comments, Douglass extends the traditional jeremiad prophecy of future peace and prosperity by claiming that Africans and African Americans have an as yet unfulfilled role in bringing about this future happiness.

For more than 130 years, African American ceremonial protest and the African American jeremiad have animated discussions of slavery and the effects of racism. Of all the protest occasions and all the jeremiads, none has captured the American imagination more than the March on Washington and Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream." In his speech, King slightly alters the traditional jeremiad form: He presents a series of abbreviated contrasts of the promise and the failure to meet that promise. These abbreviated jeremiadic segments culminate in a rousing version of the traditional vision of a redeemed nation singing in choral harmony.

"I HAVE A DREAM"

As Martin Luther King Jr. stepped to the podium to address those gathered for the March on Washington, he placed himself between the promise of racial equality symbolized by the statue of Lincoln and the reality of racial inequality that had propelled hundreds of thousands of people to travel long distances and peaceably crowd the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in the hot sun on August 28, 1963. The climate of racial politics had forced the federal government to intervene in race relations in a way it had not since the passage—and unequivocal failure—of the Civil Rights Bill of 1875 (see Howard-Pitney 151). Now that race relations had captured national attention and a new civil rights bill was about to be debated by Congress, ceremonial protest of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was no longer the exclusive commodity of the African American community. The March on Washington introduced the nation to the emotion, the singing, and the jeremiad speech-making typical of these celebrations. CBS broadcast live coverage of the entire event, and NBC and ABC joined for live coverage of the last speeches, including King's (Branch 881). For most of King's television audience, this was the first emancipation celebration they'd ever witnessed. And most remembered it for the rest of their lives.

As the last, and certainly the best-known, speaker of the day, King faced a live and televised audience that numbered in the millions and that included President
Kennedy. Adopting the prophet-outcast stance as Douglass had, King describes himself and other African Americans as "exile[s] in [their] own land" ("Dream" 2530). King explains that he and the other marchers have come from far-flung places to the nation’s capital to gain national and international attention for their just demands. Later, King builds on the prophet-outcast image: “Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive. Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our Northern cities . . .” (2532). King encourages his listeners to renew their work as outcast prophets in the deserts of American society.

As is typical with jeremiads, King’s address begins with praise for the nation’s founders and the sacred documents they drafted. Beginning with the giant statue of an American saint brooding behind the stage, King echoes Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address to remind his audience of Lincoln’s great promises in the Emancipation Proclamation: “Five score years ago a great American in whose symbolic shadow we stand today signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice” (2530). After this glowing praise, King juxtaposes the hope inherent in that decree with the reality of one hundred years of history, using a series of abbreviated promise-failure sequences: “But one hundred years later the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination” (2530). Using the images of manacles and chains to describe the effects of slavery and discrimination, King equates life in racist America with life under legal slavery. King extends this comparison later in “I Have a Dream” when he attributes to Governor Wallace, whose vocabulary was simple and homespun, the sophisticated words and doctrines of John C. Calhoun, the eloquent defender of slavery: “I have a dream that one day down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, one day right there in Alabama little black boys and little black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers” (2532). Conflating Wallace and Calhoun into a single character, King represents life in the South as unchanged since the days of slavery—an argument that Douglass made in 1880 and 1885.

After this emotional image, King approaches his subject logically, choosing the metaphor of a bank draft to describe the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, the Emancipation Proclamation, and other national documents that guarantee freedoms just as a check guarantees payment. Again King uses an abbreviated jeremiad to describe the sweetness of possibility and the bitterness of unjust denial:

When the architects of our Republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which
every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men—yes, black men as well as white men—would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note as far as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked “insufficient funds.” (2530)

Confident of the limitless funds in the “great vaults of opportunity,” King argues that his country has wealth enough to fulfill its sacred obligation, guaranteeing the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to all citizens regardless of color.

At this point, King breaks into the most notable feature of the jeremiad, a condemnation of current social practice. It is interesting that in this section King also includes a warning of dire consequences if America fails to alter its evil ways. One of these consequences is a continuation of the “whirlwinds of revolt,” the same biblical image used by Douglass: “It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment. . . . The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges” (2531). Just as Douglass warned of the snake at the bosom of the nation, King reminds his audience that civil rights protests will continue until all people receive equal freedom promised in the founding documents and demanded by law.

Continuing his critique of contemporary American society, King describes in emotional detail the effects of America’s racism: “We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. . . . We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating ‘For Whites Only’” (2531–32). He concludes this extended anaphora with his most damning criticism. According to King, institutionalized racism has extinguished African Americans’ hope in the promise of the democratic system detailed in the Constitution: “We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and the Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote” (2532).

Like other orators delivering jeremiads, King counters his dark descriptions and cataclysmic warnings with bright promise for the future, basing this promise on his belief in the American dream, “I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up, live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal’” (2532). Like hundreds of African American preachers and abolitionist orators before him, King calls on the assertion of the Declaration of Independence—“all men are created equal”—to usher in his prophecy of America fulfilling its sacred promises.
Prophesying future harmony, King compares America's social salvation with the Christian story of redemption. The gospel writer Luke claims that prophet-outcast John the Baptist fulfills Isaiah's prophecy of one who was to precede the Savior:

A voice of one calling in the desert,
Prepare the way of the Lord;
make straight paths for him.
Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low;
The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.
And all mankind will see God's salvation. (Luke 3:4b–6)

King blends his voice with Luke's to proclaim the arrival of new hope, an all-inclusive social redemption. “I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, 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. This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with” (“Dream” 2532).

As Cain, Wells, and so many others had, King describes the social harmony in the redeemed America in terms of choral harmony. Echoing Carey, he chooses to envision this choir singing the words of “America,” a familiar theme in African American jeremiads: “This will be the day, this will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning, ‘My country ’tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring’” (2533). In subsequent phrases, King builds on the idea of inclusiveness of “all God's children” with an extended anaphora of “let freedom ring” that geographically crisscrosses the nation. King's dream culminates in the words of a spiritual: “that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, ‘Free at last, Free at last. Thank God a-mighty, We are free at last’ ” (2533).

After watching King perform “I Have a Dream” on live television, President Kennedy turned to his aides and commented, “He's damn good” (Branch 883). “I Have a Dream” is good not only because King was a skillful orator but also, and perhaps more important, because King speaks with the power and persuasion of traditions, voices, and ideas familiar to him and to the African American members of his audience. “I Have a Dream” resulted from words and ideas that had been with King so long that they had become a part of him. The man who delivered “I Have a Dream” was absolutely an oratorical conservative. He spoke at the centennial anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation because African Americans had annually celebrated West Indies and/or American liberation. Celebrating this anniversary, King endeavored to inspire his audience to improve the slaverlylike conditions for African Americans just as Frederick Douglass and other rhetors had done for 130 years. King
structured elements of his speech according to the familiar promise, failure, and eventual fulfillment framework of the jeremiad that Douglass used for his speech in 1852. King argued from the authority of the Bible and the Declaration—touchstones of the abolitionists—and from the authority of the Emancipation Proclamation, another touchstone that speakers at ceremonial protests added after the Civil War. King announced that slavery had not ended, just as Douglass had done in 1880 and 1885. King concluded with the lyrics of “America” and with the metaphor of the nation as a choir, just as others had done earlier. King made each of these rhetorical moves precisely because they followed the well-established African American traditions of ceremonial protest and jeremiad speech-making.

It is these traditions, voices, and ideas that echo down the decades to President Clinton and contemporary Americans, shaping our memory of King’s lifework and of the entire civil rights movement. As scholars and teachers, we misrepresent both “I Have a Dream” and African American rhetoric if we fail to acknowledge these traditions. We can do justice to “I Have a Dream” only by presenting it as the diachronic interargumentation of a massive African American community. Participating in annual observances for 130 years, literally hundreds of thousands—if not millions—of people honed the ritual of ceremonial protest and nurtured the freedom dream. Year after year, the orators kept coming. While only a tiny fraction of their speeches survive, these orators wove the diachronic interargumentative tapestry that became “I Have a Dream.” To ignore their contributions is to perpetuate the prevailing and extremely debilitating illusion that African Americans dozed silently through decades of oppression before a solitary genius awakened them. To acknowledge these orators is to recognize a community whose persistent demand for freedom created “I Have a Dream.”

Notes

1. Especially for African Americans, the very steps of Lincoln’s memorial symbolize victory over bigotry. The dedication of the Lincoln Memorial in 1922 left a bitter taste in many African Americans’ mouths. Presiding over the ceremonies, Chief Justice William Howard Taft and President Warren Harding ignored race as much as possible, hailing Lincoln as the National Hero, not the Great Emancipator (Sandage). African Americans attending the dedication were segregated to the rear. One historian remarks, “A few of the black guests left the ceremony in disgust . . . others stayed on, embarrassed and angry” (Bruce 250). For many, Marian Anderson redeemed the meaning of the Lincoln Memorial in 1939 when, prevented by the Daughters of the American Revolution from singing at Constitution Hall, she enthralled seventy-five thousand people assembled before the Lincoln shrine. Standing down the steps from Daniel Chester French’s oversized, brooding marble statue of Lincoln, she sang Schubert, spirituals, and “America” (Sandage). Five years later, a fifteen-year-old King won a contest with a speech that recapitulated Anderson’s triumph: “She sang as never before with tears in her eyes. When the words of ‘America’ and ‘Nobody Knows de Trouble I Seen’ rang out over that gathering, there was a hush on the sea of uplifted faces, black and white, and a new baptism of liberty, equality, and fraternity.” But to this comment about spiritual awakening, he quickly added racial protest: “Miss Anderson may not as yet spend the night in any good hotel in America” (“The Negro” 110).
2. Leaders of all the major African American organizations collaborated in this effort: Wilkins of the NAACP, A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, King of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), James Farmer of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), John Lewis of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, and Whitney Young of the Urban League (Branch 447).

3. According to Sacvan Bercovitch, the American jeremiad traces its roots to the Puritan ministers who first shaped public thought about the great experiment in the new world. Almost immediately the jeremiad speech form began to animate American political culture as well. As Bercovitch explains, the jeremiad situates a political argument within a larger, spiritual typology and imbues a political issue with religious fervor: “[T]his effort to fuse the sacred and profane... shapes the American jeremiads. Their threats of doom, derived from Christian tradition, imply a distinction between the two realms; their language itself, expressing their special sense of mission, incorporates the threats within the broader framework of the absolute” (29). Not surprisingly, authors of jeremiads often “blur the distinction between the historical, moral and spiritual levels of meaning” for their own ends (46). Bercovitch argues that Protestant jeremiad typology works as follows: Just as the Hebrews were chosen by Jehovah to effect the redemption of the world through Jesus Christ, so America was chosen by God to redeem the failings of the rest of the world. Applied to civic ends, this typology replaces God-chosen Hebrews with God-chosen Americans who are destined to redeem the world. God the Father and the Holy Bible find correspondence in the Founding Fathers, who authored sacred civic documents such as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Gettysburg Address. And civic songs such as “America” (“My Country 'Tis of Thee”) take the place of religious hymns (see Howard-Pitney 8–11).

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