Recovering “I Have a Dream”

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In 1970, surveying the state of Soviet literary studies, Mikhail Bakhtin declared, “For a fairly long period of time we have devoted special attention to questions of the specific features of literature”—a practice that is “alien to the best traditions of our scholarship.” Bakhtin explained, “In our enthusiasm for specification we have ignored questions of the interconnection and interdependence of various areas of culture. . . .” He added,

...we have not taken into account that the most intense and productive life of culture takes place on the boundaries of its individual areas and not in places where these areas have become enclosed in their own specificity. (2)

Roughly twenty-five years after Bakhtin offered these observations, some American editors and teachers continue to ignore the “intense and productive life” occurring at cultural intersections and instead spotlight “specific features” of dehistoricized texts. Why does such an approach still obtain? Because it is deeply rooted in Euro-American thought and history. As Stephen Toulmin argues, the tendency to rip texts from their cultural and rhetorical situations springs from the advent of modernity itself, specifically from the dominating influence of René Descartes. Toulmin unmasks Descartes’s search for “timeless” philosophical truth as an attempt to transcend European military and political chaos by exalting a thoroughly decontextualized rationality. The study of “specific features” of dehistoricized literature stubbornly persists because it is firmly tied to the entire Western project of modernity.
Providing an historical analysis similar to Toulmin’s, John Trimbur criticizes textbook authors for promoting what he terms “essayist literacy and its goal of fully present meaning in a self-sufficient text” (74). Trimbur explains,

The practice of schooled reading is a profoundly arhetorical one that takes the language of textbooks as transparent and suppresses the processes of their production and use. And what our students thereby learn from their reading is not only the “content” of textbooks. They also learn to invest their textbooks with the power of the wider adult culture and the authority of fact. (83–84)

Although Trimbur writes of authored textbooks, portions of his analysis also apply to literary anthologies edited for the classroom.

Many such collections include Martin Luther King, Jr.’s, famous 1963 speech, “I Have a Dream.” For reasons offered by Toulmin and Trimbur—and for other reasons as well—textbook anthologists obscure the oratorical/rhetorical nature of “I Have a Dream.” They (mis)present it as something strongly resembling a self-contained, Western literary essay. We attempt to recover the rhetorical splendor of “I Have a Dream” by coaxing students to question four decisions that anthologists make (two of which one of us has made): printing corrupt texts, stuffing King’s mellifluous poetry into expository paragraphs, erasing his collaborative process of composing, and ignoring his political bridging of militancy and moderation. In Trimbur’s terms, we attempt to reproduce a text that anthologists have reproduced.

Printing Corrupt Texts

The first (and most disturbing) editorial choice is to publish strikingly erroneous versions of “I Have a Dream.” In a 1982 essay, “The Inaccuracies in the Reprinting of Martin Luther King’s ‘I Have a Dream’ Speech,” Haig Bosmajian details numerous anthologists’ gross distortions of King’s words. More than ten years after Bosmajian’s essay appeared, many anthologists make the same mistakes that Bosmajian noted.

For example, in one of the crowning sentences of the speech, King declared,

Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California!

Eleven current anthologies print the sentence as:

Let freedom ring from the curvaceous peaks of California!
By changing “curvaceous slopes” to the oxymoronic, geographically impossible “curvaceous peaks,” anthologists make King sound inept—or worse.

In his famous litany, King stated:

I have a dream that 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.¹

Eleven of the same collections (and one additional one) publish the sentence as:

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.²

King’s melodic lines make much more sense than does the corrupt substitution for the simple reason that humid Mississippi is not a desert state. Also, by altering King’s phrases “sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression” into the briefer “sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression,” editors eliminate the intensifying effect King sought and achieved by repeating the metaphorical phrase “sweltering with the heat.”

In another sentence of the litany, King explained:

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 black girls will join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.³

The same twelve anthologies misprint the line as:

I have a dream that one day the state of Alabama, whose governor’s lips are presently dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, will be transformed into a situation where little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers.⁴

The mangled passage adds a verb in passive voice—“will be transformed”—with no agent in sight and an equally pointless nominalization—“situation.” The bungled construction also omits King’s charge that Alabama contains “vicious racists,” a strong phrase signaling that the governor is not acting in a vacuum. Also erased is a phrase—“one day right there in Alabama”—that King repeated in the middle of the long sentence to prevent listeners from getting lost.
Other significant errors occur in the twelve textbook anthologies and in three others as well. Only six textbook anthologies that we examined include fully or virtually accurate representations.7 Corruptions also surface in works about King, including Stephen Oates’s popular 1982 biography, which also has King mislabel Mississippi as “a desert state” (259–62). Joining two other anthologists, James Washington, editor of A Testament of Hope, the standard collection of King’s works, inserts the following sentence into “I Have a Dream”:

This offense we share mounted to storm the battlements of injustice must be carried forth by a biracial army.8

King clearly failed to include these stilted words in “I Have a Dream,” and we doubt that he ever uttered anything so awkward. Any responsible reconstruction of “I Have a Dream” must be made from audio and audiovisual recordings made at the scene. The written copy that King held in his hands that day has been lost; even if it were available, the speech itself consists of what King said, not what he wrote. Because certain egregious errors appear over and over, it appears that a group of anthologists treat written reproductions of the speech as authoritative, no matter how botched they happen to be. If these editors were representing “I Have a Dream” as an oration, rather than an essay, they would certainly transcribe their texts directly from one of the widely available recordings.

Jamming Anaphoras into Paragraphs

Although some anthologists print linguistically accurate renditions of “I Have a Dream,” like James Washington they consistently box the address into bellettristic paragraphs (albeit occasionally featuring one-sentence paragraphs). This decision squashes rhythms, parallelisms, and other rich oral qualities. Paragraphs flatten his seven sets of anaphoras by failing to align the repeated, rhythmical words. For example, consider the usual format:

I have a dream that this and this. I have a dream that this and that. I have a dream and so forth and so forth and so forth and so forth. I have a dream and so on and so on. . . .

As an alternative one easily could set each anaphora into Walt Whitman’s form of long lines:
I have a dream

I have a dream

I have a dream

thereby emphasizing King’s parallelisms instead of burying them. But editors rarely choose an alignment like this one.

Omitting Participants’ Contributions

Again like Washington, anthologists without exception obscure King’s process of collaborative composition by printing his words while excluding listener/participants’ interjections (e.g., “Amen,” “Tell it!”), many of which are clearly audible in tapes of “I Have a Dream.” Following his normal practice, King expected the crowd to punctuate his cadences and organized his rhythms accordingly. And, like folk preachers before him, he sometimes adjusted speeches on the spot in response to listeners’ participation. In the case of “I Have a Dream,” while he was speaking, gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, who was sitting behind him, shouted, “Tell ’em about the dream, Martin!” (Branch 882). Whether King heard her or not, he proceeded to do just that. Later he seemed to attribute the most famous passage of his oratory to the reactions of his listeners/collaborators:

I started out reading the speech.... The audience response was wonderful that day, and all of a sudden this thing came to me that I have used. I’d used it many times before, that thing about “I have a dream,” and I just felt that I wanted to use it here. I don’t know why. I hadn’t thought about it before the speech. (qtd. in Garrow 283)

Unlike the first two choices, the decision to ignore participants’ interplay—the call-and-response dynamic of folk preaching—results not from editors’ failure to recognize “I Have a Dream” as a speech, but from their refusal to identify it as African-American folk oratory. Eliminating interjections means creating the appearance of overly familiar, transparent, self-sufficient discourse.

Such elimination also obscures listeners’ role in the long, collaborative process of composing King’s oration, a process prompted by the electrical charge between pulpit and pew that inevitably occurred when King spoke to either African-American or racially mixed groups. In his sanctuary, the electricity ran both ways: like other black ministers, not only did he provoke vocal reactions, he also heeded them both
immediately and later. Using congregations and conventions as sounding boards, he repeatedly tested material out loud, honing and replaying passages that received enthusiastic responses and dropping those that did not. His speeches and sermons typically served as drafts for future speeches and sermons.

King began rehearsing material for "I Have a Dream" in his first civil rights speech, "Address at Holt Street Baptist Church," which he gave in December 1955 at the initial rally of the Montgomery bus boycott. A double metaphor from "Address at Holt Street"—"long night of captivity" and "daybreak of freedom"—resurfaces in "I Have a Dream" as a "joyous daybreak to end the long night of... captivity." In the same speech he tested a metaphor from the Book of Amos ("justice rolls down like waters") that reappears in "I Have a Dream." He previewed many other tropes for "I Have a Dream" as well. In a 1957 sermon he recited metaphorical lines from the Book of Isaiah that climax the "I have a dream" litany ("Birth"). In 1962 he criticized the governor of Mississippi, whose lips were "dripping" with the word "'interposition'" ("Who?"). By the time of "I Have a Dream," the lips of the governor of Alabama were dripping with the word "'interposition.'" The metaphor worked just as well with either state.

King tested not only metaphors and Biblical citations, but also major themes, including the crucial argument that, in his words, "unearned suffering is redemptive"—an appeal that explained and justified the pain his followers experienced when facing billy clubs, police dogs, fire hoses, and jail. He made the argument throughout his career, using the phrase at least as early as 1957 ("Fragment") before incorporating it into his most renowned oration.

Earlier in 1963 he previewed the entire "I have a dream" passage in speeches given in Birmingham and Detroit (Garrow 283; Fairclough 155).

In a number of perorations, beginning at least as early as 1956, King projected a utopian future by quoting lyrics from "America" followed by a multisentence metaphor extending the last line of the patriotic anthem ("Let freedom ring") (see "Desegregation," "Annual Report," and "Facing.") He borrowed this entire conclusion from black pastor Archibald Carey's speech at the 1952 Republican National Convention. Like dozens of King's other perorations, the ending of "I Have a Dream" reflects his constant process of sifting and refining material.

King's composing process also reflected his aides' advice. According to Stephen Oates, on the night before the talk, Walter Fauntroy and King's other lieutenants urged him to exceed the eight-minute time
limit granted to each speaker (256). Together with the response of the crowd, his assistants’ counsel may have prompted him to exceed the designated eight minutes by adding the “I have a dream” and “Let freedom ring” segments to his prepared text.

The resplendent reception of the address encouraged King to embed its phrases, metaphors, and themes in future talks. Early in “I Have a Dream,” he described Negroes as isolated “on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.” Over the next four years, as he watched Americans ignore the poor while pouring funds into a ghastly war in Vietnam, he grew increasingly radical. To define his change of mind, he played with, extended, and reiterated earlier metaphors:

In 1963... I tried to talk to the nation about a dream that I had had.... I watched that dream turn into a nightmare as I... saw black brothers and sisters perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.... I saw the dream turn into a nightmare as I watched the war in Vietnam escalating.... (Qtd. in Cone 213)

These metaphors linked the more radical King of 1967 to the more familiar King of 1963.

King also borrowed substantial portions of published sermons by Harry Emerson Fosdick and other ministers, which they had already rehearsed with both listeners and readers (Miller).

Clearly, although editors ignore King’s listeners’ responses, King himself sought their reactions. By preaching back, listeners told him what they wanted to hear and contributed to his ongoing process of composing.

Bridging Militance and Moderation

In their introductions to “I Have a Dream,” editors generally define its meaning as self-contained by ignoring the political division between militance and moderation that King negotiated as he spoke. As Robert Hariman observes, even at the time of “I Have a Dream,” King was “struggling against more radical speakers for continued control of his movement” (206). Tired of waiting for federal authorities to intervene decisively for civil rights, many activists had already grown skeptical of the federal government—a pessimism evident in the speech that their representative John Lewis had prepared to give at the March on Washington prior to “I Have a Dream.” On the day of the March,
Table 6.1 Orientational Metaphors in “I Have a Dream”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UP Metaphors</th>
<th>DOWN Metaphors</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>high plane of dignity</td>
<td>dark and desolate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>majestic heights of meeting</td>
<td>valley of segregation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>physical force with soul force</td>
<td>quicksands of injustice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hew out of the mountain of despair</td>
<td>valley of despair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a stone of hope</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Let freedom ring from</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>every mountainside</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mighty mountains of New York</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>snow-capped Rockies of Colorado</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>curvaceous slopes of California</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stone Mountain of Georgia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lookout Mountain of Tennessee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hill of Mississippi</td>
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One could add to this list King’s Biblical metaphors—“justice rolls down like waters” and “every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low”—which are complex tropes of transformation as well as orientation.

having read Lewis’s prepared text, officials from the Kennedy Administration pressured Lewis to censor himself. Archbishop Patrick O’Boyle, scheduled to give the invocation, threatened to walk off the platform unless Lewis softened his tone. Wanting to present a fictitious public image of civil rights solidarity, King and other March leaders urged Lewis to moderate his speech, in part by withdrawing his explicit refusal to support Kennedy’s civil rights bill (Garrow 281–83; Branch 868–80).

The impulse to unite black and white radicals, liberals, and moderates under a single banner prompted not only King’s advice to Lewis, but much of the strategy of “I Have a Dream.” King expressed his militancy by leading boycotts, demonstrations, marches, and—especially—massive civil disobedience. Though his speeches explain his “street rhetoric,” they also seem moderate, establishing him, in August Meier’s phrase, as a “conservative militant.” While King uses “I Have a Dream” to oppose his segregationist opponents, the speech
Table 6.2  Light and Dark Metaphors in “I Have a Dream”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LIGHT Metaphors</th>
<th>DARK Metaphors</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>great beacon light of hope</td>
<td>long night of captivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>joyous daybreak</td>
<td>dark and desolate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sunlit path of racial justice</td>
<td>valley of segregation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bright day of justice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

also serves, in Kenneth Burke’s words, as a “bridging device” or “symbolic structure whereby one ‘transcends’ a conflict” (224).

King did so by following Burke’s principle: “if the excommunicated would avoid the corner of negativism, he must recruit a group who steal the insignia of the orthodox” (223). King delivered “I Have a Dream” from what he called the “hallowed spot” of the Lincoln Memorial one hundred years following the Emancipation Proclamation. He brandished orthodox insignia by echoing well-known phrases from Lincoln, Jefferson, Amos, Isaiah, and “America”—words that help constitute our civil religion.

King also developed his “bridging device” to moderates by structuring “I Have a Dream” through three metaphorical systems—Up/Down, Light/Dark, and Temperature. In the Up/Down system, anything low, such as a valley, must be bad, and something high, such as a mountain, is almost always good. In the Light/Dark system, light, of course, is positive, and darkness is negative. King builds “I Have a Dream” with sixteen Up/Down metaphors and six Light/Dark metaphors (see tables 6.1 and 6.2). While these two metaphorical systems might seem independent, they mesh seamlessly, as when King urges Americans metaphorically “to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice” (our emphasis). In the eight examples of the third metaphorical system—temperature—extremity, such as “sweating heat,” is invariably bad, and moderation, such as an “invigorating autumn,” is almost always good (see table 6.3).

The Up/Down, Light/Dark, and Temperature tropes seem reassuringly “logical” and “natural.” Everyone would rather climb high than low, see sunlight rather than clouds, and bask in a climate of seventy degrees. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson explain, these metaphorical systems are deeply embedded in our everyday language. King chose these (and other) metaphors because their sheer, even clichéd familiarity (e.g., “sunlit path”) made him seem far less
radical and threatening, especially when combined with his pleas for nonviolence and genuflections to the Bible, Jefferson, and Lincoln.

Constructing the other side of his bridge, King voiced frustration and preached resistance, not simply through street rhetoric, but also within “I Have a Dream.” He sketched the abject horrors of segregation against the backdrop of the grand promises made by the national founders. He celebrated the “marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community” and claimed that the “whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation” until justice arrives. Because the promises of the Bible and the founders are secure, however, and because “unearned suffering is redemptive,” that day, prophesied by the conservative militant, will certainly come.

The project of enshrining King’s speech as a variation of a Western, bellettristic essay is consistent with a longstanding but fruitless claim that King’s ideas and language were inspired by prestigious Euro-American thinkers whom he studied in graduate school. Like John Ansbro and others who make this argument explicitly, anthologists obscure King’s rhetorical practices and the most important sources of his intellectual and rhetorical prowess—his father and other preachers, both black and white (Miller).

Further, stripping off the rhetorical/African-American dimensions of the oration helps in the larger effort to monumentalize King as an icon of (often nonexistent) racial progress and harmony. Hariman argues that, in relation to “I Have a Dream,” “we need to beware of the alternative inducement to substitute the satisfactions of the text for the labor of working in the world it supposedly describes” (213). Such substitution often occurs when Americans celebrate King’s birthday
while in virtually every American city spotless limousines glide past squadrons of the wretched and the homeless. While our politicians extol King, they simultaneously reject the vision that King expressed in a 1963 sermon: “We can use our vast resources of wealth to wipe poverty from the earth” (Strength 53).

In “I Have a Dream” King urged listeners, “Go back to Alabama. Go back to Mississippi. Go back to the slums and ghettos of our Northern cities.” While we admire his speech, most of us don’t want to go to the Third World slums and ghettos of our cities. We do not want to initiate or join the “whirlwind of revolt” that can shake our national foundations “until the bright day of justice emerges.” We prefer to study a classic.

Paradoxically, if we rehistoricize and recontextualize this classic, perhaps we can learn to heed it. Before examining King’s traffic across what Bakhtin calls “the intense and productive life of culture on the boundaries,” teachers should ask why anthologies omit John Lewis’s speech, both the censored and uncensored versions. They should wonder why anthologists ordinarily exclude both speeches by Malcolm X and his reaction to the March on Washington, which he ridiculed as the “Farce on Washington.”

For that matter, teachers should ask why, except for “I Have a Dream,” speeches and overtly political writing generally fail to materialize in English anthologies. Where are Tom Paine and Thomas Jefferson? Are their texts not worth studying as texts? What exempts “I Have a Dream” from the general policy of excluding overtly political discourse? Did King reinforce the moderate end of his bridge too strongly? Are we nostalgic for a day when civil disobedience could create the shock of the new? Or does “I Have a Dream” qualify as literary mainly because we have canonized King as well as his speech?

When presenting the address, we first play a tape for students. Then they read published texts. We play the tape again, asking them to read along to check for accuracy. We encourage them to examine not only linguistic corruptions, but other editorial decisions and the rhetorical assumptions underlying them.

We hand out Carey’s “Let freedom ring” peroration, asking students to compare Carey’s conclusion to that of “I Have a Dream.”

After students analyze the cornucopia of schemes and tropes in “I Have a Dream,” we wonder aloud whether the oration crosses a cultural boundary into poetry. Though it is rarely, if ever, viewed as poetry, we ask whether our poetry curricula exclude it merely because it does not conform to modernist conventions and instead resembles the more
oral poetry of Homer or Whitman. Is it not a poem because editors package it into an essay? Or because, unlike most modernist verse, it is overtly political and fails to express twentieth-century alienation? Or because King reached a mass audience instead of the intellectual elite defined and nurtured by Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot?

Following this discussion, we ask students to brainstorm methods of printing "I Have a Dream" and note their suggestions. On the following class day, we hand out another textual representation, which is linguistically accurate but arranged in an oddly jumbled way. In different sections of this text, we incorporate as many student suggestions as possible. For example, we alternately capitalize listener/participants' responses, underline them, and omit them. We set passages into standard paragraphs and others into Whitman's long lines. Still others we display in the staisstep lines that William Carlos Williams sometimes favored:

I have a dream
and so forth . . .
and so forth . . .

After discussing larger rhetorical and political issues, we ask students to edit (or, in Trimbur's term, reproduce) the text themselves, using whatever fonts, italics, capitals, spacing, or other typography they deem appropriate. We tell them they might format certain segments (e.g., the anaphoras) one way and other passages another. Because King's crowd sometimes reacted in midsentence or midphrase, some of the interjections present an intriguing problem: how does one include them without visually interrupting King's lines? Then students write essays defending their arrangements.

Although students might defend the standard paragraph format, so far no one has done so. Some experiment with wild typography and spacing. Most struggle to include participants' interjections, but a few omit them entirely on the grounds that no pattern can include them without visually distracting the reader. One student made short lines from fairly brief phrases, lines roughly parallel to those that Langston Hughes developed to align his poetry according to blues rhythms.

The chief goal of this assignment is to expose a now sacred American text as culturally misrepresented, problematic, and yet-to-be-determined. So far, no one, least of all the three of us, has created a model text of "I Have a Dream" and resolved the textual issues that it raises. For that reason, students, although they are not professional editors, face an actual editorial problem—not a simulated one in which they seek to mimic someone else's solution.
Another goal is to help students, in Trimbur’s words, “to unlearn the authority and autonomy they habitually ascribe to textbooks” by teaching them “to re-materialize the circumstances of text production” (85) for at least one text.

Because students can come to see “I Have a Dream” as a fluid, intertextual text-in-process, we can fantasize that the assignment may help them accept the fluidity and complexity of their own writing processes, which, we hope, also transgresses cultural boundaries while refusing any attempted escape from history and politics.