REVIEW ESSAY

BEARING WITNESS STILL: RECOVERING THE LANGUAGE AND THE LIVES THAT MADE THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT MOVE

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People had to face my son and realize just how twisted, how distorted, how terrifying race hatred could be. People had to consider all of that as they viewed Emmett’s body. The whole nation had to bear witness to this.

Mamie Till-Mobley

A strange historical accident. How else to explain that Emmett Till’s murder and Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” happened on the same August day, eight years apart? If King’s speech recently has become enmeshed in an iconographic maelstrom, Till’s killing seems more like a trickling fountain: always flowing but hard to hear, see, or remember. The death is shrouded in terrifying absurdity: The 14-year-old black boy from Chicago purportedly flirted with a white-married-Mississippi-female shopkeeper, whose husband took offense and, with the help of a henchman, decided to teach Bo (his mother’s term of endearment) a lesson. The cotton gin fan they tied around his neck was supposed to ensure his body never broke the surface of the Tallahatchie. It weighed 75 pounds. A lesson indeed.¹

Fifty years later, these details invite outrage, incredulity, and questions: Till was killed for whistling at an older white woman? What kind of country was America in 1955? In the aftermath of Till’s death, how would African Americans possibly find the resources and the courage to talk back to such a heinous crime? How could nonviolent resistance, grassroots leadership, and concerted local organizing provide the means and the stamina to conquer the systematic disenfranchisement and unmitigated brutality blacks had endured for almost a century since Lincoln’s proclamation?

And more questions: What to say that might be judged novel and interesting about a speech delivered eight years after Till’s murder, an address that has for decades stood as the sine qua non of the civil rights movement? How to make sense of political conservatives’ recent appropriation of the speech’s “content of their character” line to challenge affirmative action? What might we say to that scared 14-year-old boy, his body so brutally mutilated it was unrecognizable, he who cowers just off the stage in our collective memory? What can we learn from one boy’s murder, from a movement’s triumphs and failures, that might trump our contemporary obsession with the cult of personality and our facile homage to irony’s alluring detachments? How to recover the words and the ideas and the courage that now seem, well, quaint?²

Seven recent books that examine the people, ideas, issues, and problems that surround the content and legacy of the civil rights movement will be the focus of my essay. Taken together, they present a compelling portrait of an era whose ramifications we’re still working through. On the one hand, the language, the lives, and the legacies of the “Movement” belong to us all. On the other hand, there is little consensus as to what that language, these lives, those
legacies mean. As one critic has remarked, “[N]early 40 years after the move-
ment that redefined America both at home and abroad, we’re still in the
process of discovery.” And while the spirit of discovery should be both encour-
aged and celebrated, we know that not all discoveries are created equal. Thus,
it becomes important to reflect over how to evaluate the burgeoning historical
and critical treatments of the ideas, speeches, writings, people, and events who
made the movement “move,” to borrow David L. Chappell’s clever twist of
phrase. The picture that emerges is in places sloppy and poorly focused, in
others flush with moral clarity and scholarly insight. In the final review, it is a
portrait that demands our gaze, that won’t let us look away, that, as Mamie Till
insisted, we bear witness to as best as we know how.3

A King’s Rhetorical Triumph: What Kind of
Inheritance Is This?

I have thought about that very often—how the times change, and the same
words that carry a good many people into the howling wilderness in one gener-
ation are irksome or meaningless in the next.4

Reverend John Ames

Someday, I should like very much to write a book about the rhetoric of Martin
Luther King Jr. Like any aspiring critic, I hope such a book might make a sub-
stantive contribution to conversations about King’s public discourse. A survey
of potential book-length models leaves me feeling worried and adrift, how-
ever. The paucity of books about King’s rhetoric invites an incredulity no less
urgent from that described above. Why haven’t more rhetorical scholars taken
up King’s textual legacy as a means to ask and answer incisive questions about
social change, race relations, the place of violence in American life, or the ten-
sion between the civic and the secular embodied in King’s oratorical trap-
pings? Three recent books attempt to seize this mantle of intellectual
discovery. Collectively, their achievement is disappointing. First, however, we
would do well to examine each on its own terms.5

A Dualistic Voice in the Wilderness

I cannot fault the enthusiasm in Ring Out Freedom! or Frederick Sunnemark’s
attempts to demonstrate what he claims are two distinct levels in King’s
rhetorical discourse. One concerns religion and the ways King articulated
highly stylized notions of God and Jesus, and the ramifications these concepts
had for the civil rights struggle (9). The other, broader in scope, if more vague
in its discussion, consists of the idealism we may cull from King’s corpus.
King's aim, the author contends, "was one in which he tried to bring traditions together and, in certain instances, combine them, to be able both to speak different languages and to create one language, a single and whole discourse" (3). Specific if rudimentary questions serve as potential paths to follow from the thesis: How was King's rhetoric constructed? What kinds of meanings were embedded in these constructions, and how did these meanings inform and relate to the worldview that may be called civil rights discourse? Finally, what "happened" when King's ideas were uttered, "what ideological meaning do they come to have in and due to the contemporary situation" (1)? Writing of the challenge of interpretation King daily confronted as the movement's leading spokesman, Sunnemark maintains that

King not only had to interpret the black world to the white world; the opposite was also true. This was more than a need for someone to communicate to two worlds; there was a need for someone to create particular frames for a process of communication inside which individuals from many different worlds could find room for and be involved in an on-going exchange of meanings. (4)

This passage is indicative of the problems of tone, tendency, and misappropriation that plague Sunnemark's book. Please understand: I wanted to like this work. To his credit, Sunnemark recognizes that there remains much to say about King's speeches and writings, that this collection is ripe for examination by rhetorical scholars, a task we mostly have kept at arms length. Why the recalcitrance? The reluctance?

The book's problems are found not in its motivations, but in its execution, which reads like a collection of undeveloped, distracted answers to the questions posed. The first chapter, "A Discourse of Faith," serves as useful illustration. To Sunnemark, the chapter's ambition seems prima facie grounds for readers' admiration: He will plumb, among other things, the place of Christianity in King's rhetoric, giving attention to "an analysis of the concepts of God and Jesus as nodal points," the role of the church in King's rhetorical thinking and subsequent public performances, and "the direct relationship between religion and ideology in the civil rights movement discourse through an analysis of King's term 'the beloved community'" (9). The chapter's proposed structure should enable Sunnemark to emphasize how the aforementioned themes are "inextricably bound to and limited by the centrality of religion in a dialectical relationship of meaning" (10). Besides "nodal point" seeming a peculiar choice of phrase, students of King's discourse already are aware of theology's importance to his advocacy. In this chapter, we see too many instances where theology is plumbed to explain King's rhetorical force and the subsequent results are thin in terms of their critical insight. This is not
to say that a careful consideration of key theological ideas and their centrality to King’s rhetoric should not be undertaken. Instead, it is to wonder: How was King able to locate the invention resources needed to argue for a theological framework in which equality, dignity, nonviolent resistance, and relief from economic oppression could be seen as compelling and applicable to blacks’ struggles? Answers are found wanting.

On one level, there is something admirable about the audacious breadth of this opening chapter. On another level, Sunnemark’s enthusiasm for his subject and the unchecked scope this ambition assumes belie deeper problems confronting this book, and more generally that plague scholars wishing to study the rhetoric of Martin Luther King Jr. These problems stem from the adulation and admiration we have heaped upon a select few of his addresses and writings, a praise so effusive we have neglected our duties as citizen-critics to pose probing questions about how these different discourses work in the world, and about the ramifications of this work within and beyond its immediate textual context. Put another way, the first chapter reads more like an instance of a scholar letting his subject get the best of him, of forgetting his obligation to his readers to render an interpretive account sustained not only by specific questions, but also by insights that move beyond jargon and a facile fascination to “scientize” rhetorical discourse. A more detailed discussion of the book’s chapters should help to bring these concerns to light.7

Chapter 2 mines the minister’s debts to the Western intellectual tradition. Sunnemark takes readers on a tour of the thinkers King examined, scrutinized, and accepted or rejected as part of his ongoing intellectual development, and his efforts to apply those ideas to the movement. If Sunnemark’s question around which the chapter’s focus is clumsily worded—“To paraphrase Cornell West; What does it mean to subscribe to a discourse of significant signifiers in Western cultural history?”—the overarching assumption, that King’s intellectual journey “becomes the theoretical framework of the movement and this theoretical framework gives meaning and content—identity—to the civil rights movement,” is worth thinking about (79, 81).8

Readers likely will not find Sunnemark’s “greatest hits”—those key thinkers whose influence upon the young minister was significant—especially enlightening. H. D. Thoreau is here; so are Karl Marx and Walter Rauschenbusch, along with the Romantics, Martin Buber, Georg Hegel, Immanuel Kant, Shakespeare, and, of course, Gandhi. Sunnemark is not merely culling a reading list from King’s papers, thankfully. The thrust of the chapter concerns understanding the motivations behind King’s use of such diverse philosophical, religious, and literary allusions. Sunnemark’s contentions are interesting, at times, such as the assertion that the literary references King used accomplish two major functions:
One is to establish discursive boundaries within which a naming of the world takes place. The other is to manifest and consolidate religious belief in the moral universe of God. The quotes and allusions establish a particular form of understanding, a form into which the understanding of what the struggle is must also be fitted, and they also represent the content of the faith manifested in King’s rhetoric: The universe is moral, reality is ultimately spiritual, evil will eventually be defeated by the forces of good. (91)

With these insights we are closer to the mark a rhetorical study of King should hit: Words are not window dressing at all. They are the foundation for the very worldviews by and through which we judge, act, create, sympathize with, or altogether loathe the world and our fellow men. Sunnemark’s attention to King’s allusions and references reminds readers of the centrality of invention to the art of advocacy and that inventionary choices always have consequences: Some allusions could exclude certain publics from the “beloved community” (those advocating “Black Power!” for example) or frame potential solutions to specific problems and challenges as little more than fetching idealism and fancy flights of phrase.

Matters of race, international politics, the Cold War, and Vietnam are taken up in chapters 3 and 4. Sunnemark examines how King’s long-neglected sermons fostered a racial vision of assimilation, characterizing these rhetorical achievements as illustrative of a “ladder of signification.” In “Paul’s Letter to American Christians,” for example, King expounds on the tenets of a Christian faith righteously and courageously lived. This faith sees its richest enactment in America’s black citizens, and particularly those immersed in the struggle for racial justice. This coupling of faith and race, Sunnemark holds, invites some interesting conclusions:

The most obvious function of the religious quality of the positioning of civil rights workers as moral agents and defining the struggle as an opportunity for salvation is to draw a mantle of righteousness around the project of [the movement]. . . . The meaning of racial identity is an important aspect of this legitimization, and it is organized by a ladder of signification. You cannot disagree with even one rung on this ladder of meaning—if you refute the struggle, you will ultimately refute the absolute truth of God. (134)

What’s most important about Sunnemark’s critical metaphor is that it helps readers to see how King’s rhetoric danced on a stage that was not national in scope, but certainly was no less significant. King’s sermonic discourse mattered because, as Richard B. Gregg reminds us, it bolstered the commitments and courage of those women and men immediately affected by the South’s
racist hegemony. Moreover, King’s sermons show us how the minister worked out the ideas, arguments, and reasons he subsequently articulated on a broader national stage. The metaphor of the ladder serves as a gentle reminder that King’s discourse always was in the process of becoming.9

It has become easy to reduce King to a single speech. In doing so, we obscure his efforts to reconcile equality and civil rights with the realpolitick of anticolonial struggles, Cold War shenanigans, and the burgeoning costs—fiscal and mortal—of the Vietnam War. Sunnemark examines what he judges to be representative texts to infer how King did the necessary work of reflection and synthesis while he struggled with the shifting landscape of the civil rights movement as it drifted into the mid-1960s. It is in the fourth chapter where Sunnemark’s critical voice resonates. Readers will appreciate that the selected texts are not especially widely or well known, save for the April 4, 1967, Riverside Address. Moreover, some of Sunnemark’s insights make for interesting reading. Underscoring why the African leader Kwame Nkrumah is so rhetorically important to a particular sermon, Sunnemark maintains that “The quest for freedom [King well understood] needs individual acts to become actualized. Just as the decolonization movement would have been impossible without the personality and activity of Nkrumah, every struggle for freedom is impossible without a version of him. Special leadership and unique individuals are needed” (168). This last sentence is akin to sticking one’s hand in the hornets’ nest of civil rights scholarship, where we have seen emerge a deemphasis of the agency and contributions of individuals (is that you, Michel Foucault?) in favor of, according to historical datum, the will of small groups of like-minded citizens. I suppose, then, Sunnemark might be open to accusations of something like hero-worship, or perhaps he simply has a misplaced sense of agency. Regardless, the critical examination of how King appropriates Nkrumah’s legacy, of the insidious effects of Cold War ideology upon civil rights organizations’ unity, and of how King finally articulates what he judged a necessary, urgent critique of the Vietnam war are deftly handled.10

How radical was King? Based on examination of his rhetorical corpus, what may we say about the nature of that radicalism, and especially the words and arguments that gave it force? Like the overwhelming majority of his book, Sunnemark’s efforts to wrestle with these questions, while earnest, are unsatisfying. But, as with other aspects of this book, I am not altogether sure the fault is completely his. Perhaps our “trained incapacities,” to borrow from Kenneth Burke, have inhibited our attempts to think through the rhetorical inheritance King left us. His rhetorical genius, of course, was that when he walked across the public stage he did so with a Bible in one hand and the Constitution in the other; his legacy is the provocative weaving of the sacred and the secular, the religious and the political. King’s rhetoric brings us back
to questions about the common glue that might hold together our democratic fortunes and the nature and character those fortunes should assume. There are no simple answers. Perhaps the best we can do is struggle with the questions, examine them from multiple perspectives, and ask after them in different ways. If Sunnemark’s book reads in too many places like undisciplined essays placed on a weight-gain diet for book publication, we are in debt to his curiosity to ask after King’s legacy and the terms “freedom,” “race,” “democracy,” “war,” and “peace” that are so central to it.

A Single Speech: Redemption, Recovery, and the Claustrophobia of the Critical Closet

Unlike the breadth of Sunnemark’s *Ring Out Freedom*, David Bobbitt’s *The Rhetoric of Redemption* and Drew Hansen’s *The Dream* offer specific analyses of King’s best known rhetorical performance, the August 1963 “I Have a Dream” oration. Book-length studies of a single speech are an emerging trend in rhetorical-historical scholarship, as scholars of various stripes and fancies continue to churn out sustained examinations of the fortunes, arguments, possibilities, and rough edges of individual texts. So, let us begin first by expressing gratitude to Bobbitt and Hansen for participating in this trend. Our praise must be tempered, though, for the truth is, of these two books, only Bobbitt’s merits extended comment, and of these two books, neither will prove especially useful to scholars seeking to put more flesh and insight onto the singular oration of the civil rights movement.

Readers who want to learn more about Kenneth Burke’s theory of guilt-purification-redemption will be hard-pressed to find a better guide through this intellectual wilderness than Professor Bobbitt. As he notes,

> Because of the focus by rhetorical scholars on Burke’s pentad, his redemption drama has been an often overlooked aspect of his theory. . . . Here I develop aspects of the victimage/mortification family of purifactory modes not previously noted [in the scholarly literature] and identify and develop other Burkean modes of purification—purification through transcendence and purification through images of change, movement, and dramatic catharsis. (ix)

If this preview prompts you into intellectual titillation, please read Bobbitt’s book and spread the gospel. Many scholars, I suspect, will judge the overall project wanting in terms of analytical depth, novelty of critical claims, or careful attention to questions of context, motive, or argument, to mention just a few shortcomings. Make no mistake: Like virtually everyone in rhetorical studies, I have nothing but admiration for Burke’s work. But the problem is
that, in a study like the one executed by Professor Bobbitt, Burke is given so much prominence and so much fanfare that what we get is not particularly insightful, readable, or original. Readers expecting to learn more about the rhetorical depth or risk or commitment in King’s text likely will be disappointed. And unlike Sunnemark, the blame lies entirely with Bobbitt.

Asserting that King’s address “captured the public imagination so completely that it constructed the symbolic syntax from which the nation has drawn its subsequent discourse about civil rights” (3), Bobbitt undertakes a Burkean reading of the speech as a “representative anecdote” of the “first phase of the civil rights movement” (2). Showing slight bemusement with rhetorical scholars’ general reluctance to criticize the speech, Bobbitt announces his apotastical intentions by suggesting that Burke’s critical perspective, particularly the vocabulary in the purification drama, will enable him to see the speech for “its shortcomings as a model of race relations, and . . . how its reliance on secular myth and religious imagery causes King’s vision to depend on a traditional conception of national identity and purpose that has become increasingly inadequate, since the social and cultural changes of the 1960s, to sustain communal cohesion and guide social reform” (4). The governing ethos of the study seems to be that good criticism means to find fault with particular texts. In operationalizing this ethos, Bobbitt confuses means and ends: Burke, not King, stands at the center of this book. Indeed, one wonders why King’s speech is even held up for consideration in the first place, save perhaps for the convenient leverage it provides the author to reach a wider audience.

It would be customary at this point to outline the Burkean methodology that anchors Bobbitt’s study and to underscore how this perspective may serve his interpretive aims. I am reluctant to do this for three reasons: First, Professor Bobbitt’s command of Burke is excellent, and any effort on my part to elaborate upon how Burke’s tenets lend the illusion of critical insight to Bobbitt’s analysis would, quite frankly, short-shrift this good work. If readers want to learn more about these underappreciated and underemphasized elements of Burke’s thought, Professor Bobbitt will prove a fine guide. Second, a methodological discussion seems ancillary to larger concerns that drive this review essay. (Why must we always be so deferential and timid over questions and matters of method?) And third, this discussion would be woefully boring to all but the most passionate Burkeans.

This last reason brings me to the crux of the problem with this book. While his efforts to raise interesting questions about King’s address and Burke’s neglected theories should be celebrated—because his contention that rhetorical scholarship has failed to substantively and thoroughly treat King’s discourse or its ramifications and legacy is on the mark—Bobbitt’s rendering of that address and those theories is, in the final review, rather boring. The tedium is
compounded by, among other things, expositions about Burke’s theories of guilt and redemption that seem completely disconnected from the patter and din of King’s rhetoric or the civil rights movement writ large, a cursory effort at historical contextualization that is neither thorough, original, nor novel, and a convoluted discussion of metaphoric criticism that seems layered upon the study almost as an afterthought.

If there is redemption to be found anywhere in Bobbitt’s study, I can point readers down two avenues. First, to his credit, Bobbitt is a careful, serious student of Burke. The guilt-purification-redemption drama is a form worth thinking about, for it is such a part of our collective unconsciousness that we have lost the capacity to name it for ourselves. What we have here, then, is an earnest effort to resuscitate and reaffirm Burke’s place in the broader kinds of critical conversations that give rhetorical study its pulse and vigor. Bobbitt, on this score, has done readers a good turn. The other avenue for redemption may be this: Bobbitt is not afraid, having donned the apostate’s hat, to see through to the last the principled, intriguing concerns he has about King’s oration, particularly the consequences that follow from the status and stature it has assumed in our national conscience and what we’ve failed to grasp while we lavish praise and adulation upon the text. I am grateful for Bobbitt’s gentle effort to push at King’s text; we ought to demand more from our critical engagements of him. More like this:

I have concluded that King’s assimilationist model transcended divisions, but at the expense of a realistic assessment of the sociopolitical difficulties of effecting that assimilation. The black power advocates [on the other hand] acknowledged the difficulties of overcoming these divisions, but provided no transcending vision of unification. (118)

Lest readers think Bobbitt simply is playing a game of “critical gotcha,” know this: This concluding insight and the disappointingly brief meditation that follows point out a potentially provocative direction for future rhetorical studies of King’s discourse. Bobbitt shows readers principled ways to move beyond mere praise. If the book’s overemphasis on Burke makes it difficult to hear what King still might have to say to us, Bobbitt’s insights offer a comic corrective of their own: This serious student of Burke realizes, at the conclusion of this study, not to take himself too seriously. I suspect Burke would approve.

There remains, then, Drew Hansen’s book. Published on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of King’s oration, Hansen wanted to offer a portrait of the ways King, “by telling the audience about his vision of a nation healed of the sins of racial discrimination . . . began the process of bringing that new nation
to life” (165). Played out over six chapters, the book attempts a tight, detailed portrait of the challenges and opportunities surrounding the inventional process of King’s address, its social and political contexts, and what the author describes as an effort at “recovery” (207–30). That recovery invites Hansen to pose assertions like these: “[With his August 1963 address] King began the long-overdue process of changing America’s idea of itself. He gave the nation a vocabulary to express what was happening in the civil rights revolution” (227), and “Forty years after it was delivered, the [speech] has helped to change our conception of America so completely that it is no longer possible to argue that America should be anything less than the redeemed nation King envisioned on [that August day]” (228). Unfortunately, aside from these and a few other modest insights regarding the address’s composition, its sermonic heritage, and the arc of its reception from its utterance until King’s assassination, there is little else that merits comment or recommendation. Any extended meditation over the gems and fault lines in Hansen’s book could perhaps best be explained this way: What Hansen has written is not at all scholarly, and while that is no sin, the final creation is not particularly compelling. Readers will surely appreciate the general clarity of the text, for indeed it is a quick, easily grasped little book. But if you are tempted to read this book, I would recommend instead three recent biographies of Bayard Rustin, Ella Baker, and Martin Luther King Jr.

REMARKABLE LIVES: LEGACY, BIOGRAPHY, AND BEARING WITNESS FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

Amidst the chaos and rancor and horror African Americans suffered under the yoke of white racism during the mid-1960s, when leaders of the myriad civil rights organizations were pressing for new directions, slogans (“Black Power!”), and tactics to reinvigorate the Movement and recapture the moral force and clarity of Birmingham and the March on Washington, Bayard Rustin had the audacity to unveil a “Freedom Budget” in late October 1966. The professional organizer, provocateur, conscientious objector, and disciple of nonviolence had joined forces with the renown Keynesian economist Leon Keyserling and others to craft an economic plan that would provide a safety net for the most vulnerable in American society, a plan that would serve as the first real shot across the bow in the war on poverty. John D’Emilio, in this painstakingly researched, wonderfully crafted biography, described the Freedom Budget this way:

It embodied the thinking in “From Protest to Politics” [an earlier essay Rustin had authored]. By obliterating poverty, it would do much to eliminate the worst
effects of racism. It depended on the ability to build a majority coalition across race and class lines. The campaign required that mainstream liberalism and the Democratic Party commit to much more than the rhetorically inspiring but programmatically modest initiatives of the Great Society. It also required enthusiastic backing from the growing numbers of “movement” people who were both the conscience and the foot soldiers propelling Rustin’s political vision forward. The Freedom Budget was Rustin’s test case for determining whether the energy of the black freedom struggle and student activism could combine with the institutional strength of “liberals” to change the distribution of wealth and political power in America. (432)

The Freedom Budget was not Rustin’s crowning achievement, of course. Readers familiar with the peripatetic organizer know he was the critical force behind the 1963 March on Washington, and before that he injected into the incipient Montgomery bus boycott a real sense that nonviolent resistance could bring a city to its economic knees.

Although the budget’s unveiling spurred considerable enthusiasm within and without the Movement, the plan in the end went nowhere, completely failing to provoke the momentum and diligent commitment to broad-based, far-reaching reforms across racial and class lines for which Rustin had hoped. As D’Emilio writes just three pages later, the economic plan “failed so abysmally” because opportunities for broader progressive coalitions withered under the heat of the in-fighting and ego-sparring that now characterized many factions within the civil rights movement (435). These dynamics, along with the growing, menacing specter of Vietnam, assured Rustin’s budget would die a quick death. And yet the failure of the Freedom Budget to gain any traction underscores why Rustin remains such a remarkable, if underappreciated, figure: His failures were brilliant, his aims noble, his vision of a progressive politics compelling, especially when the goals that flowed from this vision upset friends and colleagues, which they often did. Rustin was a wonderful gadfly. His example is one to which we would do well to attend.

D’Emilio is a fine writer and a careful historian. His treatment of Rustin will be essential reading for students of the Movement for years to come. Here’s why: What we have in this expansive treatment of an expansive life (almost 600 pages) is a concerted effort on D’Emilio’s part to recover Rustin’s enthusiasm for ideas about social change, resistance to war, struggles against racism and racist brutality, the fruitful, sustaining succor of nonviolence, and what obligations a democratic society should have to its most vulnerable citizens. We see, too, how Rustin became the most accomplished organizer of the civil rights movement, whose only equal was the incomparable Ella Baker. A close confidant of Martin Luther King, Rustin showed the demonstrated ability to corral
ideas from across the Movement’s spectrum in order to shape policy and tactics for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. A disciple of the renown pacifist A. J. Muste, Rustin also was a courageous antiwar resister. In short, what Professor D’Emilio’s biography gives is a fuller sense of why Rustin mattered so much during what was arguably this nation’s most pivotal era of social change.

It is not easy to reduce Rustin’s complexity—both personally and in terms of his intellectual and professional motivations—into the few paragraphs of exposition a review essay requires. Here are some important details, however. First, one of the most intriguing elements of D’Emilio’s treatment of Rustin is how he is able to sensitively yet critically account for what Roy Finch, an early associate of Rustin’s during their years in the pacifist movements of the 1930s and 1940s, described as Rustin’s status as a “four-way outsider” (65). Black, an uncompromising pacifist-Quaker, a homosexual, and what Finch called “an artist,” Rustin was truly and crucially different from many of the thinkers and activists he worked with over his career.

This outsider status seemed to give him something like second sight, ways of seeing the problems and issues of social organizing, of demonstrating for peace and justice, of waging nonviolent campaigns in the throes of the unconscionably violent South, that propelled him to become among the Movement’s most elite, most respected organizers. It was a perch he was not able to hold comfortably or especially long, however, as rumors and innuendos and concerns about his sexuality and Communist ties—spread by other Movement leaders, journalists, and Hoover’s nefarious Bureau—too often left Rustin with no other choice than to assume a background role. This minor key was evident especially in the organizational efforts surrounding the Montgomery bus boycott, where Rustin was nudged out after less than an influential week on the scene. D’Emilio writes: “To his colleagues . . . Rustin’s grand manner signaled overbearance, while his sexual history generated panicked conclusions that were rarely subjected to rational scrutiny” (235).

A second aspect of Rustin that D’Emilio compellingly renders is the Quaker’s unflinching commitment to nonviolence as a way to structure one’s lived experience. Unlike more militant counterparts, Rustin always believed foremost in the integrity of nonviolence as a way of making sense of the relationships that marked the complex world of power. Thinking of nonviolent resistance as a mere tactic was never part of his political calculus; it was a point he could not compromise over, a set of principles he never conceded, even in the face of skepticism and frustration. D’Emilio explains:

For Rustin, the belief in nonviolence blended a moral imperative with a long view of how permanent change would come. Defensive violence might provide immediate satisfactions and even temporary gains; it might block for a moment
an evil that needed to be stopped. But it would also lock the antagonists in a con-
tinuing cycle of retaliation and response in which the evil to be overcome—the
rupture in the human community—remained as alive as ever before. (182–83)

It has become commonplace in contemporary discussions about the civil
rights movement to position Martin Luther King as the principal spokesper-
son for nonviolence. While King's commitment to nonviolent resistance is
beyond dispute, students of the 1950s and 1960s need to realize that it was
Rustin (along with James Lawson and James Bevel) who fervently and cease-
lessly nudged, cajoled, and exhorted the Movement to embrace the wonderful
synthesis of the examples of Gandhi and Jesus of Nazareth. Rustin, in fact, as
D'Emilio insists again and again, “was as responsible as anyone else for the
insinuation of nonviolence into the very heart of what became the most pow-
erful movement in twentieth-century America” (237).

Third, readers will glean from D'Emilio's fine work the rigorous, oftentimes
painful internal suffering Rustin endured as he diligently worked to exert his
will on behalf of causes of peace and justice. That is, what we're made privy to
is more than just a roll call of the Movement's leadership, more than just a cele-
boration of one man's courage and a movement's deeds, though certainly we
are given these. But what's arguably most intriguing and inspiring about
Rustin's life is how thoughtfully and deliberately he strived to live it. A gadfly
across his lived days, until his death in 1987, Rustin was not a gadfly for the
sake of appearances or because playing the shrew invited media attention, or
admiration (or ire) within the Movement's circles. No, Rustin's positions on
the form and content and direction that pacifism, civil rights, school reform,
and economic justice should assume were arrived at because he drew deeply
from his charged life experiences, as well as from a lively analytical mind and
a genuine thirst for ideas. These qualities endured considerable testing and
were given their most concerted demonstration with the rise of the black
power movement.

Never one to mince words, Rustin remarked in 1967, as outcries for the cel-
boration, affirmation, and declaration of black culture grew louder, that “To
talk about blackness is silly. As soon as you move into the economic struggle
you're in a totally new universal ball game with universal objectives. . . .
Anybody who talks about a black agenda is a reactionary” (449). To a writer
for the New York Times he insisted, “The alternative to politics [that the black
power movement wants to provide] is to cop out and talk about hair, about
what name you want to be called, and about soul food.” And to a correspon-
dent he wrote, “The need today is for less sloganeering and gimmicks and
more thought” (450). D'Emilio eloquently captures the motives and ideals
behind what seem, on the surface, biting criticisms of black power advocates:
Rustin’s resistance to the new militancy reflected his continuing allegiance to what might be called a moral economy of nonviolence. [His] espousal of nonviolence had always rested on the melding together of means and ends. Violence in word or deed generated more of the same; respect for an opponent left open the door for reconciliation. The discipline of nonviolence required that its advocates put aside the spontaneity of raging emotions in the interest of measured ethical reflection. (450)12

When our own age seems wanting for such measured, ethical reflection, we could do worse than ponder Rustin’s commitments to nonviolence, the arguments that bolstered those commitments, and the courage by which he lived them. Indeed, if ever there was a case for the recovery of a robust legacy, D’Emilio’s biography boldly makes that pressing case. Admittedly, while some readers may find the author’s attention to Rustin’s homosexuality to border on the tedious, the argument that undergirds this scrutiny is important: Rustin’s private life never really was his own, for reasons both within and beyond his sphere of control. He was pushed out again and again from pivotal decision-making meetings involving the tactics and direction of the movements for civil rights and peace, because a small cadre of black Southern clergy and uneasy white pacifists never could reconcile his homosexuality with his gifts for organizing, inspiring, and cajoling. These attitudes, prevalent during the heyday of Rustin’s professional life, seem today, at best, anachronistic. At worst, they seem craven and Neanderthal. Such a judgment is perhaps severe, but it is unquestionably deserving. The time has come to embrace Bayard Rustin, again.

**A Woman on Fire: Ella Baker’s Radically Egalitarian Movement**

Typically, when the civil rights movement is discussed on the public stage, that is, on the stage of popular consumption, those discussions often take the form of tales of powerful men—usually Southern black clergy—wrestling over questions of ideas and tactics, how the tactics of nonviolence and the tenets of the Christian faith, for instance, could be marshaled to desegregate a bus company or a downtown shopping center. When the oratory of the civil rights movement is celebrated, that elation typically focuses upon such prominent spokesmen as King, Ralph Abernathy, Andrew Young, Hosea Williams, or Fred Shuttlesworth, to mention but a few. Finally, when different organizations of the Movement are discussed, the character and composition of these organizations typically put front and center the men who made them shake and go: King of the SCLC; Roy Wilkins of the NAACP; James Farmer of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE); and James Forman, John Lewis, and, later, Stokely
Carmichael of SNCC. A cursory glance at the Movement seems to confirm this nearly unassailable fact: When it came to organizing and agitating for civil rights, it was raining men.

Thankfully, Barbara Ransby has written a biography bent on reconsidering and amplifying the contributions—intellectual and material—of women within the civil rights movement. If her book-length study of Ella Baker principally concerns itself with the words and deeds of its subject, Ransby nevertheless makes opportunities to cast a broader net across the social agitation for blacks’ civil rights and the significant role different women courageously played. What readers learn, then, is that, first, men alone did not make the Movement go. And second, Ransby’s Baker is a remarkable “radical humanist and a consummate coalition builder, connecting young and old, black and white, neophytes and veterans, and staunch leftists and ambivalent moderates” (11). Moreover, Baker was the principal catalyst who could convene “Ardent nationalists, orthodox Marxists, establishment politicians, and free-floating radicals—people with long-standing antagonisms, some of whom hadn’t spoken to each other in years—[to mingle] in a slow common procession” (12). And what a remarkable procession it was.

Educated at Shaw University in North Carolina, during the mid-1920s, Baker’s foray into civil rights agitation, at least properly understood, took time to develop the momentum and moral clarity that would come to characterize the zenith of her quietly effective leadership of the late 1950s and 1960s. Prior to her graduation from college, however, Baker showed the mettle that would become one of her trademarks in a lifetime spent struggling for social justice. First, there was the matter of silk stockings.

As Ransby tells the tale, a group of Shaw students approached Baker while she was a senior in high school and asked her to attempt to convince the dean to relax the school dress code prohibiting fancy, colored, or silk hose. Baker wrote a letter on the group’s behalf, which they presented to the dean, who denied the request. Ransby initially and correctly points out that the stakes around the incident and its eventual outcome were small. As Baker later related, “I felt it was their right to wear stockings if they wanted to” (60). A biographer might be tempted to dismiss the incident as no more and no less than what it appeared to be: a very modest flap over an institution’s dress code. Ransby, however, insists that there are, in fact, higher stakes at play. She sketches those this way:

[For someone like Ella, for whom the issue was purely a matter of principle rather than personal objective, there were larger things at stake. Fashion was an important cultural arena of competing gender constructs in the 1920s: the so-called flappers challenged conventional femininity. Young, single, urban women,
through their dress, dance, and demeanor, contested prevailing standards of
girlhood and morality, projecting an assertive, self-confident, and con-
sciously sexual public image. (60)

Must we really contend that issues of social justice swirl around young
adults’ insatiable desire to wear whatever they want wherever they wish?
Yesterday’s silk stockings are today’s exposed thongs. Ransby frequently
invokes feminist tenets to amplify and interpret Baker’s actions, words, and
motives. It is not clear that the fit between act and theory is as tight and seam-
less as the author would like us to think. Indeed, Baker’s own admission
quoted above gives no evidence of any grander designs than defending some
of her peers’ very personal choice to dress with the times. As she said else-
where, the young women who asked her to speak on their behalf probably
“didn’t have guts enough, or maybe a combination of gut and articulation, to
deal with [their grievance] . . . and they came to me” (59). Gumption, not
“competing gender constructs,” seemed to spur her involvement in this act of
polite resistance.

Baker committed two other acts of resistance during her undergraduate
years that merit mention. On one occasion, she refused to be part of a group
the university’s president had designated to sing spirituals to Northern white
guests visiting the campus. On another occasion, she joined over 50 fellow stu-
dents to boycott the required Bible examination as it was administered by a
particular faculty member who the students thought unfairly administered the
test. The students wrote a letter to college officials, who summarily rejected
their position and indicated that those students refusing to take the examina-
tion would be expelled. Baker relented. While these acts of protest may seem
modest, and even insignificant to contemporary eyes, Ransby suggests that
what they reveal and confirm is a reformer’s coming of age. “During her years
at Shaw,” she maintains, “Ella Baker was a rebel but not yet a radical, tactically
prepared to question but not to defy the rules, and philosophically ready to
argue against the limitations of the dominant authority but not to challenge
its fundamental validity” (62). The passage of time, coupled with its explosive
confluence of events and persons, would move Baker from rebel to radical less
than a decade after graduation. The landscape of civil rights would be perma-
nently altered.

After college in North Carolina, Baker moved to Harlem, where her real
education in radical politics and social organizing began. In Ransby’s chroni-
cle we are introduced to a fascinating array of social, cultural, and political fac-
tors that moved Baker to question the foundational assumptions of the
American experiment. Immersed in a community of like-minded thinkers,
writers, and activists, and hungry to examine the myriad of resources at the
Harlem library, Baker began to make connections between people’s lived experiences and the ways in which ideas might sustain or retard their social circumstances. Always a curious student, she underwent an intellectual transformation as she began to see the material reciprocity between the ideas she discussed with friends and the organizing tools she worked to make available to the surrounding Harlem community. “Baker’s involvement in the Adult Education Experiment [at the Harlem library],” Ransby writes,

was evidence of her profound interest in African American social and political history and of her commitment to spreading that knowledge to as wide an audience as possible. Up to this point in her life, knowledge had been a source of personal empowerment; now, as she became more political, she came to see education and knowledge as tools in the struggle against oppression. (70)

These commitments to ideas and the tools social organization could provide against economic and racial oppression also moved Baker into a wide web of engaged activists. She developed deep, lifelong friendships with many of these people. Those networks also enabled her to find sustainable employment and, even though many positions were more temporary than she might have liked, she used these jobs to hone her activist skills. Consider this partial list of groups she worked for over the two decades between 1930 and 1950: The American Labor Party, Harlem’s Own Cooperative, Inc., National Urban League, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), The Rand School, Works Progress Administration-Workers Education Project, Young Negroes Cooperative League, Young Women’s Christian Association (Harlem Branch), and the Youth Committee of One Hundred against Lynching. What’s important to remember about all of these avenues of engagement is that Baker was not merely building a résumé; indeed, the cataloging of professional achievements on paper was of little concern to her.

Harlem during the Great Depression significantly and permanently altered Baker’s understanding of such things as human nature, the relationship between politics and ideas, and the very integrity of America’s character—a character long soiled by, among other things, the inhumanity and exploitation suffered by blacks and the impoverished. The Depression confirmed for Baker that, as Ransby quotes her, “there were social forces over which the individual had very little control. It wasn’t an easy lesson” (104). Ransby follows up, noting that Baker’s realization constituted “a turning point in [her] life. After nearly a decade in Harlem . . . she rejected much of the middle class ‘grooming’ she had received at home and at Shaw and instead became a radical activist and grassroots organizer,” turning her focus to ways in which her edu-
cation and her talents could be used “to struggle on behalf of the oppressed” (104). Her contributions to these struggles reached their zenith with the creation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

Perhaps greatest among Baker’s many gifts as an organizer-activist was her relentless intellectual flexibility, the willingness again and again to insist upon the involvement of the people most affected by the cancers of racism, poverty, or disenfranchisement, and to listen to their proposed blueprints for cures to their ills. This kind of leadership depended, in no small way, upon a fluid thought process; an openness to alternatives, suggestions, and criticisms of proposed solutions; the sort of chaos that leads to what at least one contemporary author has co-opted and marketed as “synergy” in business organizations. But long before the putative wisdom filtered into a mere “seven habits of highly effective people,” Baker worked on the front lines of social change to cross the wires of authority, control, leadership, and group identity. In so doing, she contributed to the creation of perhaps the greatest, most democratic catalyst of the Movement, the SNCC.13

Baker’s genius rested in her willingness to share leadership with others, to insist that local people could do for themselves, and in the recognition that no number of orations could supplant developing personal, lasting connections in the places and circumstances where people struggled to live their lives (though it should be noted that Baker herself was a fine orator, schooled by her mother from an early age in what we’ve come today to denigrate as “elocution.”) Today, we might call this “bottom-up” leadership or the “de-centering of hierarchy.” These labels, while accurate I suppose, fail to capture the power of Baker’s example and how that example helped to mold a new generation of activists, an army of warriors who marched through the South against an onslaught of verbal intimidation, physical assault, and murderous machinations to work with local persons to assert their dignity and control over their own communities. Students of the civil rights movement will recognize myriad people Baker’s quiet leadership affected: Diane Nash, Bob Moses, Charles McDrew, Eleanor Holmes Norton, John Lewis, Bernice Reagon Johnson, Charles Sherrod, Bob Zellner, and countless others.

SNCC’s power as an organization resided in its ability to question, contest, and rebut the more conventional modes of leadership provided by groups like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the NAACP. What Baker helped establish was a community buttressed by ideas, deeply invested in nonviolent resistance (at least as a tactic, if not always as a set of foundational principles), and committed to the notion that there ought to be, as Ransby relates, “no distinct intellectual leadership; rather, thinking and analysis should be incorporated into all aspects of movement work” (271). These and SNCC’s other commitments and practices forever changed the direction
and achievements of the Movement. Ransby’s account of this particular phase of Baker’s life is a wonderful chronicle and readers will learn a good deal from her meticulous research and clear prose.

A brief note, finally, regarding the potential weaknesses of this study. Three come to mind. First, one sees throughout this chronicle of Baker’s life and legacy what can only be described as peculiar tangents into the personal lives of Baker and the other reformers Ransby discusses, particularly with regard to matters of marriage and friendship. In her discussion of pivotal couples’ involvement in grassroots organizing in the South, for example, Ransby almost without exception mentions the trying effects organizing acts of resistance and protest had on their marriages. Of Louisiana’s C. O. and Dorothy Simpkins, for example, we learn that, after decades as “rough-and-tumble fighters with the battle scars to prove it,” they eventually “separated and amicably divorced” (223–24). While I suppose these mentions underscore that the personal always is affected by the political, I am unclear as to how such details make the narrative or analysis stronger.

Second, Ransby’s commitment to feminist scholarship sometimes seems to take her down rabbit holes that distract from the force of her overarching claims concerning Baker’s radically egalitarian leadership. These discussions and descriptions, which pepper the book, sometimes are simply hokey, such as when Ransby describes Baker’s convalescence from eye surgery in the summer of 1960 and makes readers privy to an intimate moment between Baker and her friend Anne Braden, an accomplished, committed activist in her own right, as the two sat on Braden’s porch sipping whiskey and wine: “[They were] two women warriors [who] were refueling themselves physically and emotionally for the battles that lay ahead” (254). Other times, the feminist distractions are nonsensical. Consider, for instance, Ransby’s contention that, as young activists participated in the “transformative process of involvement in a democratically constituted social change movement,” they began to question the labels they applied to themselves and one another (294). Many of the young men in the SNCC in particular began to “reject conventional notions of gender in the process of reconsidering the meanings of race and class and redefining their own identities” (295). Of Charles McDew’s reflections on his involvement in the movement’s halcyon days, Ransby relates that he

recalled that he embraced his male comrades and told them that he loved them in a way he could not have conceived of doing before he entered the movement. It was not a conscious decision to transgress gender roles; instead, it came somewhat organically out of the situation he found himself in. The ethos of heroism, combined with humility bred such displays of warmth and affection. It was a different time, and McDrew was consciously becoming a different kind of man. (295–96)
The author seems to want to have it both ways: McDew’s masculine evolution was both unconscious and purposeful. Surely one’s gender development is more complex and subtle than Ransby has accounted for here and elsewhere in her book. I don’t doubt that the experience in the SNCC for many young women and men was indeed transformative, especially where questions of race, gender, and identity were concerned. In her ambition to make connections in the name of feminist theory, however, Ransby errs too much on the side of the biographer’s happily unsubstantiated imaginings.

Finally, Ransby’s last chapter is another example of her peculiar desire to paint Baker into an intellectual corner crowded with imposing theorists from other countries. Thus, we’re invited to share Ransby’s conclusions that “Although they never met, and there is no evidence that she was familiar with his writings, Baker’s teaching style very much resembled that of the Latin American educator and activist Paulo Freire” (359); that her “approach to learning and teaching was consistent with that of the Italian Marxist and theorist Antonio Gramsci” (359); and that, finally, “Ella Baker was Edward Said’s kind of intellectual. . . . [one whose role it is, as Said wrote,] to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than reproduce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose raison d’être is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug” (363).

I’m all in favor of making connections between and among persons and ideas, and far be it for me to attempt a flogging of the comparativist ethos, or the aforementioned thinkers, in these pages. But alas, if Baker wasn’t sui generis, it strikes me that her life and legacy do not require what reads more like genuflecting toward these thinkers, the discussion of whom add little to what really is a fine biography. It is too bad that the study’s last chapter and all its pretension (“A Freirian Teacher, A Gramscian Intellectual, and a Radical Humanist: Ella Baker’s Legacy”) read like a capitulation to what I can only imagine was some nervous editor’s demand that Ransby “beef up” the biography for an intellectual audience. She would have done well to remember that Baker had all too little patience for the pretentious or the conventional or the orthodox. Genuflecting never made a racist mayor shake in his shoes.

Putting on God’s Armor: How Faith Made Martin Luther King Jr. Move

Stewart Burns’s biography of King in To the Mountaintop is a vivid portrait of the mere 13 years King stood as the most prominent spokesman for civil rights. Of the three biographies discussed here, Burns’s undoubtedly will appeal to the widest audience: the prose is both lean and colorful, and like a good novelist he has an eye for the small details that give a moment its
poignancy. Additionally, Burns’s book takes up with the utmost seriousness the place of faith in King’s quest to pull America back from the abyss of racial polarization. This observation in no way is meant to shortchange D’Emilio’s or Ransby’s work. Instead, it is to suggest that the intrigue and novelty readers may find in Burns’s work has everything to do with the ways he puts religion at the center of King’s struggle to lead America toward its best self. Of the Montgomery bus boycott, for example, Burns, shunning recent sociologists’ penchant to bleed faith from this movement in favor of descriptions of disembodied grassroots organizing and networks of resistance, contends that Montgomery’s black citizens would learn that

democracy was more than a right, more than a responsibility, but a pantheon of hope and faith. These citizens’ reach for democracy was rooted in the churches, scriptures, and spirituals that tied them to their divinity and to generations past and not yet born. They would make Montgomery a praying movement, a testament to their faith in God and, through God, faith in themselves. A testament to God’s grace. (28)14

Admittedly, Burns’s language might make some scholars uncomfortable. His esteem for the place of religion in the Movement notwithstanding, religion has a checkered past in world history. And too, there’s the dilemma of writing about faith and religion in ways that embody the analytical rigor we all aspire to, and which stands as our god. My hope is that, to those who may feel slight discomfort over the framework Burns has built around this book, you will find the stamina to see his narrative to the end. You will not be disappointed.

Divided into three books, To the Mountaintop is concerned foremost with the place of religion in the machinations of the Movement, how it was that struggling civil rights workers found in prayer, scripture, and song the wherewithal to stare into the soulless eyes of vicious racists and not blink. Burns also is invested in another idea, the notion of what he calls the “divided” Martin Luther King Jr. (x). These divisions are encapsulated in the tensions between King’s global vision and his unquenchable love for blackness; in his lofty faith in America’s richest ideals and his smoldering sense of realism where the pragmatics of social change were concerned. As Burns puts it, he was King “the rock of faith, beset by the sands of doubt” (x). The larger work generally unfolds chronologically, and readers familiar with the works of David Garrow, D. L. Lewis, Taylor Branch, and, most recently, Marshall Frady’s richly crafted, slim volume will find few surprises here.15

But if the narrative is predictable, it also is well told, and Burns’s insistence that we view King in all his flaws and doubts and vacillations means as well that we must come to terms with this idea: Self-doubt is not the enemy but the
ally of social agitation. Where today we see in our public discourse cries of disdain against “waffling” and a pseudo-righteous certainty that completely closes down opportunities to see grace in our opponents, it was perhaps King’s inner demons that made him such a compelling leader, even as he mightily strived to keep those demons from parading across the public stage. Consider Burns’s description of the immediate aftermath of King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” arguably his finest rhetorical achievement:

The power of King’s epistle came from the rawness of his conversion, in the bleak blackness of his dungeon, to nonviolent extremism. Yet it was one thing to articulate the word, his unique talent, another to make it flesh. Released from jail, he seemed to lose the flame of his captivity. One might suppose that the children’s crusade would have been just the type of creative extremism he had called for from his dark cell. But in the comfort of his motel room he wavered and wobbled until the spirited youngsters were led by their feet, and perhaps a nudge from God. (222)16

If Burns’s is not the most original and deeply researched of King biographies, its achievement is that it challenges the reader on nearly every single page to confront the flawed King’s vulnerable humanity, and the humanity of the women and men with whom he locked arms in the moral, and mortal, struggle for dignity, equality, and justice. Burns understands well that the best biographers get out of the way of their subjects, letting a life unfold in all its vagaries, details, and tangents, but make sure that the narrative always returns to an unshakeable core. For Burns, as for King, religion—and its attendant seeds of certainty and courage, fear and doubt—gives this book its core. The result is that we are invited to peer into King’s tortured eyes, to read and judge his words and works, and the words and works of those who would just as soon have seen him dead, and to realize this: The work of the Movement is far from over. Bobby, Martin, Malcolm, Michael, James, Andrew, Medgar, Emmett: This is a woefully incomplete list of martyrs, a list of men who understood that change required courage, and that courage was a quality that simply could not be contrived. Perhaps the greatest service of Burns’s book is that it may remind us that such courage is not beyond our reach.

AN ELEGY FOR EMMETT TILL

On judgment day, all the slain bodies from the fevered and silted Mississippi waters will rise as one.17

Paul Hendrickson
Taken together, the books reviewed to this point offer readers an interesting look into the civil rights movement, as that movement's ideals, values, and commitments might be recovered through attention to the words and lives that helped to drive it. From Sunnemark's efforts to discern the shift in King's rhetoric after 1965, and the seeming loss of common ground and common purpose that shift precipitated, and from Bobbitt's and Hansen's examinations of the singularly historic “I Have a Dream” oration, we glean a richer sense of how much language mattered in King's struggle to exhort, challenge, embrace, and forgive America's citizens—black and white—over questions of human dignity, social justice, and universal equality. While at least one scholar has insisted upon the silly notion that a 10-year moratorium be placed over any public discussions of King's August 1963 address, these three books remind us why we must continue to push the speech into the center of our national conversations about race, equality, and the hope and possibility of oratory. Moreover, they remind us why language matters so much, even if oratory's place in our contemporary popular culture is more often the object of parody and ridicule instead of esteem and a crucible for deep reflection. If the former characterization has us walking around in a kind of stupor, perhaps the latter might be available to us still.18

Likewise, while it is not good practice to reflect on the meanings and achievements of the Movement solely through the crucible of individual lives, the biographies of Rustin, Baker, and King all confirm that serious individuals made serious, far-reaching contributions to the direction, tenor, and tone of the civil rights movement. If Aldon Morris and other scholars insist that scholarly investigations of the Movement take more seriously a so-called “bottom-up” paradigm as their starting point, D'Emilio, Ransby, and Burns offer richly textured counters to this orthodoxy. While biographies too often can be reduced to extended meditations of hero-worship, these narratives of individuals who struggled to live lives of integrity and difference might encourage us to seek out the lives of lesser-known women and men whose examples of commitment and courage made real difference in the fight against racial hatred, even if the stage on which they acted was smaller and more provincial.19

As with all good works of scholarship, these books also invite us to ask additional questions and to consider future avenues of research. Because this potential list could be long and varied, I will limit my observations to three. First, collectively, these studies make clear that, as an aggregate, rhetorical scholars' contributions to the literature on the civil rights movement have been woefully thin, timid, and conspicuous by their general absence. This observation is not meant to serve as an indictment or dismissal of our extant literature. Instead, I hope my observation might be taken up as a kind of invitation. Renewed popular interest in the Movement, along with recent and
upcoming Movement anniversaries calling for sustained reflection, suggest that the soil of ideas is particularly fertile for a sort of renaissance in rhetorical studies where civil rights rhetoric is concerned. Simply put, the time has come to stop fixating on the kinds of theories and frameworks that ought to guide our investigations of the civil rights movement and to begin in earnest to undertake the sustained, rigorous study of the ways in which language, ideas, and contexts intersected and exploded to give the movement its tone and tenor. We should be less interested in the definitional criteria that make a social movement than in the rigorous analysis of particular persons, campaigns, or ideas and how these were given their rhetorical force in the world through their rhetorical manifestation.

Second, rhetorical critics and theorists are well positioned to take up one of the many legacies the Movement left to us: public conversations about the legacy and ramifications of racism in this country, and ways in which we might move forward toward meaningful reconciliation. Not sure what we might study or how to spur such conversations? Consider this: Over the breadth of the twentieth century three presidents created commissions to study questions of race in America. None of these, to my knowledge, has been subjected to the rigorous questions rhetorical scholars might bring to bear upon them.

Third, these books underscore that there remains so much left to say about the Movement, the ideas it struggled to advance and the ideals it struggled over, and how these might speak to generations not yet born. Permit me to borrow once more from an earlier review essay published in this journal just over a year ago. Of the rich intellectual opportunities for discovery that might still be mined from the civil rights movement, Davis W. Houck wrote, “The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s moved a nation (and a world) toward change by the power of its speeches and speechmakers, the moral force of redemptive suffering, the righteous anger of repudiated American ideals, and its political savvy and organizations.” To this insight I would add only that the moral force of the movement was not located solely in the high-minded values and subjects reflected in Houck’s list, a point I’m sure he would readily affirm. The movement’s capacity to move a nation (and a world) was aided in no small part by the unrelenting horror of protestors who endured grave physical harm; of bodies of women, children, and men that were burned, beaten, and brutalized; and of corpses like Emmett Till’s, his face so bloated and rotted from the river water that he appeared almost more monster than young man. What we can never forget, of course, is that men, not monsters, killed him. Future scholarship must ensure we not forget the causes and the consequences of Till’s murder and the urgency it spawned in the struggle for civil rights. I hope such scholarship will not be without humility, though, for
in the end, I think us wrong to assume that the gulf between Bryant and Milam and us is all that wide.

The anniversary of Emmett Till’s gruesome murder is one-half of the reason for this special issue of *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, of course. The one book not yet recounted in this essay is the one that most starkly and movingly relates the brutal details of his lynching, and a mother’s courageous efforts to make a life after the terrible, senseless death of her only son whom she loved so much. Mamie Till-Mobley and Christopher Benson have written a book remarkable in its candor and thoroughly powerful in terms of the raw emotion of Mrs. Till-Mobley’s recollections. Yet these emotions, interestingly, never bend toward the kind of sentimentalism Edwin Black warned us about. As Till’s story is retold by the woman who knew him best, we neither drown in the excesses of character nor does virtue carry us away.25

I had thought, in fact, when I first began to read this book, that the sentimentality would be overwhelming (how could it not be?), that I would not be able to endure the pathos that would surely scream off the pages in the voice of a mother forever haunted by the loss and memory of her murdered son. Yet Till-Mobley and Benson do not give in to the didacticism that typically burdens the form, nor are we presented here with a consuming character study that attends so much to questions of a young boy’s inner life that we lose sight of the morality of behavior.26 Their refusal not to let their tale devolve into maudlin sentimentality is perhaps best conveyed in the book’s 14th chapter, where we read of Mamie Till’s painful, painstaking viewing of Emmett’s mutilated body upon its return in a sealed casket from the forsaken Tallahatchie River in Mississippi. Here is how she recalled that moment:

I had examined every part of him I had ever loved, every part of him I had nurtured and helped to mend. I looked deeply at that entire body for something, anything that would help me find my son. Finally, I found him. And I lost him. . . . I kept looking at him on the table and I thought about what it must have been like for him that night. I studied every detail of what those monsters had done to destroy his beautiful young life. I thought about how afraid he must have been, how at some point that early Sunday morning, he must have known he was going to die. . . . And I can never forget the complete devastation I experienced when I realized for the first time something that would haunt me for such a long time to come. At some point during his ordeal, in the last moments of his precious little life, Emmett must have cried out. Two names, “God” and “Mama.” And no one answered. (136–37)

That silence is our inheritance, too. May it haunt us all of our days.
NOTES


2. On questions pertaining to the civil rights movement’s legacy and its appropriation in contemporary culture, see Dyson, “I May Not Get There.”


5. For an account of and comment about the book-length studies, of which there is only one—an edited volume at that—on King’s discourse, as well as articles on Malcolm X, see Houck, “Ed King’s Jaw,” 88, note 12. See also the collection of articles devoted to King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” in the special issue of *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* in which his review essay appeared.

6. See note 5 above.


13. See Stephen R. Covey, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989). In no way do I mean to denigrate Dr. Covey’s work or his ideas. Instead, I mean only to speculate about how we have arrived at this place in our history where, while Ella Baker’s marvelous example beckons us, we are unable to see and appreciate it for ourselves, relying instead on a mass-marketed juggernaut to inculcate how we might live with character and integrity.

14. Morris, Origins of the Civil Rights Movement, is perhaps the precursor for these insights of Burns’s, but what’s important to underscore is that the two books are differences of kind, not simply degree.


16. Frady maintains, quite convincingly, that the Birmingham letter is indeed King’s greatest rhetorical achievement. See Frady, Martin Luther King Jr.


18. This idea is discussed, with what seems the utmost seriousness, in Dyson, “I May Not Get There,” chapter 1.


22. Doxtader, “Reconciliation.”

23. The three presidents, respectively, were Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson, and Bill Clinton.


