

# Marching, Singing, and Road Imagery in Martin Luther King's Involvement in the Civil Rights Movement

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Raymond Blanton

In the twentieth century, millions of African Americans were actively moving, geographically and substantively, along the Upward Way, migrating from the South to the North and looking for better opportunities and living conditions (see Gregory). Such movement allows us to situate the mythic archetype of the road as a rhetorical encounter with the other in the American civil rights movement. As blacks migrated to Northern cities, not only were they met with limited opportunities for employment, but the ones they did have were reduced; in Detroit, for instance, they were consigned to the foundry, the dirtiest place at the Ford Motor Company. After Pearl Harbor, when assembly lines were finally integrated, racial tensions continued to swell, resulting in the Detroit race riots of 1943, which were eerily similar to the Tulsa race riots of 1921.

Nevertheless, many African Americans pressed their struggle for freedom by serving in the war. In fact, blacks had fought on the front lines since the Civil War, but to no avail. One visceral example of the hardships of travel in midcentury America comes in the story of Army Sergeant Isaac Woodard, who in February 1946 asked if he could use the bathroom on a bus but was denied. At the next stop, two officers beat Woodard and blinded him, driving the end of their nightsticks into his eyes. At age twenty-seven, having returned from service to his country, he was blind for the rest of his life. In his political radio broadcast, the actor and director Orson Welles asked, "What does it cost to be a Negro? In Macon, South Carolina, it cost a man his eyes. Officer X: All America is ashamed of you. If there is room for pity you can have it for you are far more blind than he" (see Bertelsen). Many African Americans, despite all of the progress they had witnessed in the twentieth century, from fame on the stage

and screen to success on the baseball diamond, still could not sit at the front of a bus or eat at a lunch counter (see Bertelsen).

In January of 1954, a young Martin Luther King visited Montgomery, Alabama, to preach for Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, which was without a pastor. In his Sunday morning sermon, titled “The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life,” King (in a version of the sermon published in 1960) instructs the Dexter congregants about the Jericho Road—a vision he would return to repeatedly throughout his public life.

### **The Road Metaphor and the Act of Marching**

As everyone knows, some of the most important features of the civil rights movement involved the literal movement of marching. Various marches are worth exploring, but here I will focus on only two: the ones involving Montgomery and Birmingham, both in Alabama. The events leading up to the Montgomery march are worth outlining. A few months after King arrived in Montgomery, after accepting the call to become Dexter Avenue Baptist Church’s pastor, a fifteen-year-old high school girl named Claudette Colvin was pulled off a bus, handcuffed, and jailed for refusing to give up her seat for a white passenger (King, *Stride* 41). Months later, Mary Louise Smith, eighteen years old, was subjected to similar abuse. Continually troubled by such mistreatment, the African American community began talk of boycotting the buses in protest. In response, a citizens committee, on which King served, was formed to discuss possible action. Such action became even more probable on December 1, 1955, when Rosa Parks, a forty-two-year old seamstress, weary from a day’s work, boarded the Cleveland Avenue Bus in downtown Montgomery and sat in the front row of the “colored” section. As the bus moved along Montgomery Street, white passengers began filling its front rows. As was customary, when the bus became full, blacks were expected to give up their seats for white passengers. “Are you going to stand up?” the driver (J. F. Blake) demanded. “No,” Park replied. Flustered, he responded, “Well, I’m going to have you arrested.” “You may do that,” Parks softly replied (qtd. in Brinkley 166). The driver instructed Parks and other black passengers to move

to the back so the white passengers could sit down. Three blacks got up and went to the back. Rosa Parks did not. The driver got off the bus, walked to a pay telephone, and called police for help. Parks was arrested. Her arrest, though now considered a key moment in the history of the struggle for civil rights, was then just a four-paragraph story on the bottom of page 9A of a Montgomery newspaper. Four days later, Parks was convicted and fined in a Montgomery city court. In response, a one-day boycott of the city buses was staged. The Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) was formed and King was elected its leader. After some deliberation, it was decided that the MIA should hold a citywide mass meeting on Monday, December 5, at Holt Street Baptist Church to express their support of the bus boycott. A leaflet succinctly stated the purpose of the meeting and the protest:

Don't ride the bus to work, to town, to school, or any place Monday, December 5. Another Negro woman has been arrested and put in jail because she refused to give up her bus seat.

Don't ride the buses to work, to town, to school, or anywhere on Monday. If you work, take a cab, or share a ride, or walk.

Come to a mass meeting, Monday at 7:00 P.M., at the Holt Street Baptist Church for further instructions. (qtd. in King, *Stride* 48)

Throughout December, the MIA and black citizens of Montgomery negotiated with the city on a proposal for a more reasonable seating policy. On December 13, the MIA began to operate a car pool, using station wagons and the like to transport black citizens to work. Negotiations with the city continued into January but came to a halt when Mayor W. A. Gayle ended them. Several days later, King was charged with speeding and was jailed by Montgomery police. Later the next week, his house was bombed while his wife and infant daughter were inside, though they were unharmed. On February 10, 1956, the White Citizens Council rallied in Montgomery to express its support of city officials' opposition to bus desegregation. For three hundred and eighty-one days, the black citizens of Montgomery stood their ground, walking to work or using other means of transportation.

More than a year after the first protest, on December 21, 1956, the Montgomery buses were desegregated after a thirteen-month boycott and legal action brought by civil rights lawyers. Of course, though official policies might have changed, many personal attitudes had not. For example, on Christmas Eve, five white men attacked a fifteen-year-old girl at a Montgomery bus stop. In the ensuing days, Rosa Jordan, a black woman riding a Montgomery bus, was shot in both legs; a sniper fired into a city bus just a week later; and various churches and homes were bombed or subjected to attempted bombings (for instance, a bundle of dynamite left on King's porch failed to explode).

It is important to remember that the bus boycott was a local effort. The movement King led was part of the larger opposition to a much more extensive and troubling history of segregated travel in America. The Montgomery bus boycott helped prepare the way for the modern civil rights campaign, but it did not eliminate the difficulties of bridging long-standing divisions and struggles between blacks and whites. By the 1960s, local buses had been desegregated in forty-seven Southern cities, but more than half of the region's local bus lines remained legally segregated. In the Deep South, Jim Crow transit still prevailed. In early 1957, King and others predicted that the Montgomery experience would serve as a catalyst for a regionwide movement of nonviolent direct action (Arsenault 46-47). Strategically, in the 1960s, civil rights leaders were even able to use the Cold War to their advantage by warning of the "international vulnerability of a nation that failed to practice what it preached on matters of race and democracy" (Arsenault 43).

## **Birmingham**

In the years that followed the Montgomery bus boycott, King's public persona and his role as the movement's central voice became more distinct. In many of his early speeches and sermons, he used road imagery as one means of explaining the nature of the struggle. Addressing the annual Institute on Nonviolence and Social Change in Montgomery, King noted, "The road from the Egypt of slavery to the Canaan of freedom is an often lonely and meandering road

surrounded by prodigious hilltops of opposition and gigantic mountains of evil” (King, “Address at the Fourth” 338). In an address delivered on September 23, 1959, King further accentuated this idea when he noted that “the flight from the Egypt of slavery to the glorious promised land is always temporarily interrupted by a bleak and desolate wilderness with its prodigious mountains of opposition and gigantic hilltops of evil” (“Address at Public” 281). “Keep moving,” King urged students at Spelman College in Atlanta on April 10, 1960: “Move out of these mountains that impede our progress . . . we must keep moving” (“Keep Moving” 418-19). Images of roads and movement were key to King’s understanding and explanations of the progress needed in civil rights.

Building on the momentum of the Montgomery bus boycott, protestors staged sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina, and freedom rides in 1961. And in April and May of 1963, the Birmingham marches became the “climactic moment in the history of the civil rights movement” (Selby 137). The marches challenged the city’s economic interests and its political leadership, provoking Birmingham’s racist commissioner of public safety, Theophilus Eugene “Bull” Connor. In turn, his vicious treatment of the marchers aroused the moral outrage of the nation as people watched Connor’s police force use water cannons and dogs on nonviolent protestors. Once again, King turned to road imagery, particularly by relating the modern civil rights movement to the biblical exodus. He equated the marchers’ experiences of opposition with the wilderness experience of the ancient Israelites: “You don’t get to the Promised Land without going through the wilderness” (King, “Address to MIA” 200). Selby also positions the significance of Birmingham around the theme of the journey, built around a collection of words such as *climbing*, *walking*, *rolling*, *moving*, and *going* (Selby137).

Progressively, the term *march* came to define the movement. The first official march had occurred on Saturday, April 6, and had included around thirty volunteers, all of whom were arrested. On April 7, leaders led a second march to the downtown section, where Connor’s police dogs met them, resulting in a violent confrontation that received substantial television coverage and national attention.

One of the truly defining marches of the campaign occurred on May 2, 1963, when hundreds of children, some young enough to attend elementary school, joined the marches, resulting in the arrest of more than a thousand people. The overcrowding in the jails forced Connor to desperate measures, such as using water cannons and more police dogs to turn back protestors. Selby succinctly, and aptly, describes the fortitude of the people by saying, “All told, the protestors managed to stage a march every day from the beginning of the campaign until the city leaders finally capitulated to their demands just over one month later” (142). More importantly, for Selby, the Birmingham campaign represented the defining moment in the movement’s *rhetorical* history (138). Similarly, I argue that the march, the road, was the most defining rhetorical feature of the movement.

### **Let Freedom Ring**

In addition to the marches, the soul of the movement might also be located in the freedom songs. Here I hope to illustrate how the themes of movement and the road were prominent rhetorical features of the freedom songs in a manner similar to the imagery found in old Negro spirituals. In the spirituals, which were powerful mythic tools for the slaves and which were deeply connected to themes of bondage and deliverance, the theme of movement became ubiquitous:

When slaves sang of movement, tentative or bold, they sang of moving away from the place of their slavery. The essential message was one of determination and inevitability. They sang, “I can’t stay behind,” asked “who will rise and go with me,” warned “no man can hinder me,” [and] promised “I ain’t got long to stay here,” and “I don’t expect to stay much longer here.” The message was “I’m bound to go.” Slaves proclaimed themselves willing, according to their songs, to travel under difficult conditions. (qtd. in Selby 37)

Like the spirituals, the freedom songs became a form of rhetorical resistance, the songs functioning both as individual poetic and ritual expressions of mythic meaning and at the same time as communal expressions of collective identity. The marches and the freedom

songs were synecdoche: figures of speech that use a part to represent the whole (e.g., *hired hands* to denote *workers*) or the whole for the part (e.g., “the world has mistreated me”). They were more than metaphoric or casual rituals of passing time. Similar to the mythic nature of the blues, the freedom songs were social tools, myths around which the people cohered and acted, with the road serving as an especially revolutionary symbol. King, in an interview, attributed part of the success of the movement to its music:

In a sense the freedom songs are the *soul* of the movement. Consider, in World War II, *Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition*, and in World War I, *Over There* and *Tipperary*, and during the Civil War, *Battle Hymn of the Republic* and *John Brown’s Body*. A Negro song anthology would include sorrow songs, shouts for joy, battle hymns, and anthems. Since slavery, the Negro has sung through his struggle in America. *Steal Away* and *Go Down, Moses* were the songs of faith and inspiration, which were sung on the plantations. For the same reasons the slaves sang, Negroes today sing freedom songs, for we, too, are in bondage. We sing out our determination that “We shall overcome, black and white together, we shall overcome someday.” (King, “*Playboy Interview*” 348)

There is a hint of an ultimate order in King’s reference to overcoming—a suggestion of a move from the dialectic of white and black toward a state of togetherness. Along the movement’s metaphorical route, the freedom songs functioned *psychagogically* to lead the soul toward the good—the Promised Land. In a similar tone but with different words, King further substantiated the importance of song:

In a sense the freedom songs are the soul of the movement.... I have stood in a meeting with hundreds of youngsters and joined in while they sang, “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round.” It is not just a song; it is a resolve. A few minutes later, I have seen those same youngsters refuse to turn around before a pugnacious Bull Connor in command of men armed with power hoses. These songs bind us together, give us courage together, and help us to march together. (qtd. in Morris 257)

King's language in the final quoted sentence reflects the tone of my own argument. Here, King clearly indicates the mythic role, in the sense (associated with Kenneth Burke) that I have set forth, of the marches and freedom songs. When one recalls Burke's essay "Revolutionary Symbolism in America," King's language gives further credence to the idea of the freedom songs as mythic by linking them to the mythic symbolism of marching. King notes, "They can stop the leaders, but they can't stop the people" (qtd. in Morris 258). To be more specific, I hope to demonstrate here the rhetorical significance of the road in the freedom songs, and therefore to the movement and the marches.

### **Moving and Singing**

Stand up and rejoice! A great day is here! We're fighting Jim Crow and the victory is near! Hallelujah! I'm-a-travelin', Hallelujah, ain't it fine. Hallelujah! I'm-a-travelin' down freedom's mainline!" (qtd. in Arsenault 61)

During the sit-ins in Greensboro, songs like "Moving On" made it clear that "Old Jim Crow's moving on down the track, he's got his bags and he won't be back" (qtd. in Carawan and Carawan 36). On the freedom rides, songs like "Freedom's Comin' and It Won't Be Long" declared, "On to Mississippi with speed we go, Freedom's comin' and it won't be long" (Carawan and Carawan 41). In Albany, Georgia, protestors sang "Come and Go with Me to That Land" and "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around." In Birmingham, a turning point for the movement and the nation, they sang "Guide My Feet While I Run This Race," "Hard Travelin'," and "Ballad for Bill Moore," the last of which was based on the same tune used in "You've Got to Walk That Lonesome Valley." The adapted "Ballad" was sung in honor of Moore, a native Mississippian who had been journeying on Highway 11 to present his personal plea for civil rights to Governor Ross Barnett, when he was gunned down. Other freedom road songs included "Traveling Shoes," "Freedom Train A-comin'," and "Murder on the Road in Alabama." In perhaps the most prominent anthem of the civil rights movement, "We

Shall Overcome,” the protestors sang, “We’ll walk hand in hand” (Carawan and Carawan 8-9).

As Selby argues, the language of the biblical exodus pervaded the movement’s music, providing a framework of meaning for the movement’s primary modes of collective action, the march:

Complementing this use of the journey motif to frame events in the protest was the music that played a central role in the campaign’s daily mass meetings. The “freedom songs,” as they were called, powerfully heightened participants’ sense of emotional involvement in the movement’s symbolic world of ideas, participation reinforced by the interactive character of traditional African American preaching and worship. (Selby 153)

What each of these songs reveals is not only the central importance of the march and the freedom songs but also, more importantly, how the theme of the road, actual and anagogical, rhetorical and mythical, was its ultimate inspiration. Put differently, and in more theoretical language, just as the Hebrews turned to the “Songs of Ascents” while they moved, quite literally, upward toward Jerusalem (the Upward Way, where their encounter with the divine Other inspired the mythic ideal beyond ideas), so too the people of the civil rights movement turned to freedom songs on their own Upward Way toward the Promised Land.

### **Making a Way Out of No Way**

As I conclude my metaphorical journey through the history of the African American civil rights experience, I turn our attention to other roots of King’s civic and sermonic discourse, which will occupy my attention for the remainder of this essay. I conclude this section by focusing on how the road functioned rhetorically in King’s civil rights orality, particularly in his speeches and sermons. The themes of the freedom songs typify the themes of the marches, particularly the road motif. Here, I focus on how orality worked in conjunction with song, spirituals, and freedom songs, for instance, and the rhetorical significance of road imagery in and to both.

One challenge we face as rhetorical critics is how we account for oral discourse, a challenge Walter Ong elucidates in *Orality and Literacy*:

Formulas help implement rhythmic discourse . . . as set expressions circulating through the mouths and ears of all. . . . Fixed, often rhythmically balanced, expressions of this sort and of other sorts can be found occasionally in print, indeed can be “looked up” in books of sayings, but in oral cultures they are not occasional. They are incessant. They form the substance of thought itself. (35)

African American orality, for instance, is often defined by its communal nature in call-and-response exchanges. Robert and Linda Harrison argue that a failure to recognize the importance of call-and-response results in a “failure to account fully for the way in which King’s presence as an orator animated his listeners to participate in his message as active performers and thus to become one with the message he presented.” They note that in some traditional African American religious services, the

power of music is enhanced by interaction between group members and the audience. A lead singer provides the calls, while the group members’ responses are repetitive and supportive, often reflecting the tone and intensity of the lead singer. The power or impact of the communication is affected by this interchange. (163-65)

The congregants, then, both physically and emotionally, are prepared through song, making the congregation more cohesive. The preacher sets the process in motion and directs its progress, while the congregation provides the energy to sustain the process. This tradition had a significant impact on the style of Martin Luther King Jr. within the tradition of Southern Baptist ministers. He knew the timing and cadences of the call-and-response method, which he learned from his father and other ministers. Coretta Scott King writes that the “feeling [the congregants] had of oneness and unity was complete” (240). They experienced it in their churches. They sang songs together while marching together in the streets.

They used call-and-response in everyday communication. The congregants were creating *with* King. “The [call-and-response] occasion marked a kind of cultural sharing with people from other cultures participating in the experience” (Harrison and Harrison 177). In other words, call-and-response required a give-and-take language that united the rhetor and the audience as one (Mieder 6). In *The Land Where the Blues Began*, Alan Lomax writes:

During the last two hundred years, . . . black ministers created a highly dramatic order of service and a style of oratory of unmatched eloquence. Its beauty sheltered and consoled its hearers. Their orally composed folk sermons, which far outdo those of Reverend King, likened their oppressed congregations to the children of Israel and to the heroes of the Old Testament, thus thrilling and heartening their listeners, particularly the women. The art of the black sermon flourished especially during revival services. (103)

### **Call-and-Response, Proverbs, and King’s Use of Road Imagery**

To illustrate the relationship between call-and-response orality and the songs of the movement, Keith D. Miller argues that King, like other folk preachers, traditionally ended his oral sermons (and almost every major speech) by merging his voice with the lyrics of a spiritual, hymn, or gospel song (121). One of the most persistent themes in these songs is the road. For instance, consider how each of the following speeches concludes by using the underlying imagery of the road. In King’s “Our God is Marching On!” and “I See the Promised Land,” he quotes from “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” a marching song (see Washington, 230, 286). In King’s “If the Negro Wins, Labor Wins,” “The American Dream,” and “I Have a Dream,” he punctuates the address with the spiritual “Free at Last” (see Washington 207, 216, 220). In “Give Us the Ballot—We Will Transform the South,” King recites James Weldon Johnson’s poem: “Though who has brought us thus far on the way; . . . Keep us forever in the path, we pray” (see Washington 200). And in “Where Do We Go From Here?” King ends by alluding to “We Shall Overcome” (see Washington 252).

As Mieder argues, this blending of song and sermon helps give discursive power to King's discourse. When we consider that by 1957 King had delivered more than two hundred speeches and sermons a year, and then delivered even more as the movement progressed, it is no wonder that King's sermonic discourse was preeminently concerned with the archetype of the road: he himself was constantly, and quite literally, on the road and on the move, and his speeches and sermons were filled with references to the road. He used these references rhetorically to persuade, but he also used them, more importantly, *psychagogically*, to lead souls toward a more just society along the Upward Way.

To demonstrate this claim, I look to Wolfgang Mieder's *Making a Way Out of No Way*, which examines King's proverbial rhetoric and aptly frames the central theme of the movement's discourse—*making a way out of no way*. (Likewise, one can also see King's concern with road imagery in some of the titles he gave to his own works, such as *Stride Toward Freedom* and *Where Do We Go from Here*). Mieder, in his analysis of six thousand pages of King's published texts, finds that proverbs about the road are quite common, including “have a long way to go” (which appears 14 times), “have come a long way” (14 times), “on the move” (8 times), “making a way out of no way” (5 times), and “to go down the line” (3 times), not to mention various other examples. Although King draws upon the past in many of his images, he is often explicitly focused on the future. As Mieder puts it, “Realizing that the end of the road towards racial justice is still far off, King exhibits an incredible faith in the future, with his strong belief in a benevolent God giving him the strength to continue on the long and treacherous way that lies ahead” (174). As he once told his followers, “We have come a long, long way in the struggle to make justice and freedom a reality in our nation, but we still have a long, long way to go. And it is this realistic position that I would like to use as a basis for our thinking together” (qtd. in Mieder 528). Imagery of the road appeared often in his works, whether he was citing such imagery from proverbs, using it in titles, speeches, or sermons, or singing about it as he led both a literal and metaphorical movement.

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