

OPPOSITIONAL ETHOS: FANNIE LOU HAMER AND THE VERNACULAR PERSONA

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Based on the recovery and analysis of nearly two dozen of her speeches, this essay locates Fannie Lou Hamer's rhetorical influence in the vernacular persona she constructed. Closer consideration of how Hamer strategically wove various vernacular threads into a coherent persona that worked toward her rhetorical purposes encourages a renewed appreciation of her speaking career. This article also demonstrates the fecundity of grounding vernacular analyses in texts and using this frame to better understand the rhetorical strategies of previously overlooked advocates.

“**O**nce in a while in the course of human events, comes a person, who by the sheer force of the human spirit, is able to change those events,” declared Ambassador Andrew Young as he addressed a crowd of mourners gathered in Williams Chapel Missionary Baptist Church on a crisp March afternoon. “Before there was an exertion of that human spirit,” Young reminded his audience, “nobody paid any attention to Fannie Lou Hamer. Nobody would have given her the time of day as they walked down the streets of Ruleville. Little did we realize that here among us was one of God’s chosen, who could change the lives of us all.” It did not take long for Young, trained

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in the art of Southern-style preaching, to elicit a call and response cadence from members of the audience, who reinforced his memorial refrains with shouts of "Tell the story!," murmurs of "mmhmm," and cries of "Yes!" Young was also well trained in the art of political science, a reservoir of experience he drew upon while supporting his lofty contentions with specific evidence from Hamer's activist career. He pointed to the role she played in the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, as well as the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and then linked these successes to Jimmy Carter's narrowly won 1976 presidential campaign. Young recalled both his astonishment and his relief on election eve "when they said that Mississippi went our way, I knew then that the hands that had been picking cotton had finally picked a President."¹

Yet, even as Ambassador Young offered the official eulogy at Mrs. Hamer's funeral service held in Ruleville, Mississippi, on March 20, 1977, even as he praised her contribution to each of the major social movements of the 1960s and 1970s and passionately contended that "she shook the foundations of this nation," there was a looming sense that he, and many other notable people gathered in that small rural chapel, had not fully grasped the meaning of Hamer's lifelong message.² This sentiment reverberated through the videotaped footage of Hamer's last rites, which promptly cut to static whenever a female movement leader such as Dorothy Height or Ella Baker rose to speak. It was represented in the starkly different funeral experience endured by many local people, who were left outside to stand and listen to the service through speakers, from that enjoyed by the ambassadors, congressional representatives, and former high-ranking movement members. These attendees filed past Hamer's body lying in wake, watched the gospel choirs sing, and remained comfortably seated during the hours-long memorial. Failure to preserve the female activists' speeches and displacing poor local people from the funeral service of a poor black woman who advocated the representation of diverse voices is at once ironic and emblematic of the battles Hamer fought during her lifetime.

In many ways, the interrelated battles of sexism, racism, and classism endure in the public memory of, and even the rhetorical scholarship about, Fannie Lou Hamer. Her public speeches were less often recorded and less carefully preserved than the words of the black preachers and Black Panthers with whom she shared platforms. As Young's tribute to Hamer indicates, however, her message was no less important. In light of Hamer's influence and involvement during one of the most popularly studied movements in our discipline, it is rather surprising that not one sustained analysis of her

rhetorical contribution exists in the pages of communication journals.³ There are several book-length biographies of Hamer, and a handful of scholars have published articles about her in related disciplines such as black studies and history.⁴ Given Hamer's affinity for the spoken word, her tendency to define her activism in rhetorical terms, and the lasting impact her speeches had upon those who experienced her discourse, however, it is clear that a sustained rhetorical analysis of Hamer's contribution to the black freedom movement is long overdue.

The dearth of rhetorical scholarship about Hamer might be partially explained by the fact that though both historical and rhetorical scholars have included several of Hamer's speeches in anthologies, their combined efforts over the last 40 years have yielded only four discrete texts.⁵ Before a sustained analysis of Hamer's rhetorical contribution was possible, therefore, I had to recover a representative sample of her speaking career. Working alongside Davis W. Houck, I combed ten archival collections in seven U.S. cities and culled the private holdings of Hamer's family, friends, and fellow activists. This research yielded nearly two dozen previously unpublished speeches that Hamer delivered in eight states and spanning thirteen (1963–1976) of Hamer's fifteen (1962–1977) years as a civil rights activist.

While reading through age-tinged transcriptions, listening to crackly cassette recordings, and watching rarely captured audio-visual recordings of Hamer's speeches, I discovered what about her public discourse commanded the attention of U.S. Presidents, civil rights leaders, and human rights activists across the globe. In particular, I noticed that rather than relying solely on the prior ethos afforded her by the grassroots contingent of the civil rights movement she represented, Hamer used vernacular discourse to reinvent the cultural image of black Mississippians and concomitantly to craft an authoritative persona for herself. Both to establish this authority to speak and to cultivate her various audiences' will to transform society, Hamer adapted vernacular touchstones. When speaking to black sharecroppers, for instance, Hamer used a variation of the Exodus narrative to make sense of their suffering, to prompt recognition of movement activism as the fulfillment of God's promise, and to encourage this audience to see themselves as chosen people called to rescue the nation from its fallen state. When addressing predominantly white audiences, Hamer adapted her vernacular strategy by invoking the black Jeremiadic tradition, which entailed Signifyin(g) upon dominant American mythology to elicit "perspective by incongruity." Hamer's appeals often came full circle as she challenged the nation's self-conception

by using the evidence of her oppression to expose the limit of America's foundational ideals. Converging the interests of all the country's inhabitants, moreover, Hamer's public discourse elevated the act of securing rights and entitlements to the level of a salvific imperative.

As our collection of her speeches grew, I realized that Hamer's vernacular persona was the most consistent, distinctive, and strategic aspect emanating through her rhetorical corpus. Although both the form of Hamer's activism and the tone of her rhetoric changed over the course of her 15-year career, and although she adapted the content of her message to meet regional and occasional exigencies, the vernacular quality of her public discourse remained consistent throughout time and space, and in the service of a variety of rhetorical purposes. The vernacular quality of Hamer's discourse often appeared paradoxical as she sought authority by claiming powerlessness. Analyzing her rhetoric in tandem with the various vernacular traditions upon which she drew, however, reveals that Hamer used this paradox as a trope of invention. More specifically, the vernacular persona Hamer constructed enabled her to establish the authority to speak, encourage oppressed audiences to recognize the potential for change, and challenge the nation's self-conception in such a manner that prompted both black and white audiences to work toward social transformation. Analyzing Hamer's strategic use of vernacular discourse, therefore, provides a nuanced understanding and appreciation of the paradoxical aspects of her rhetorical oeuvre. Closer consideration of the way in which Hamer strategically wove various vernacular threads into a coherent persona that worked toward her rhetorical purposes also demonstrates the fecundity of using the vernacular as an analytical lens to examine the texts of previously overlooked advocates. What's more, rhetorically based explanations for Hamer's access and her influence invite scholars to consider critically the wide variety of speakers and rhetorical strategies propelling the multifaceted black freedom movement.

ACQUIRING A PLATFORM

Most people were introduced to Fannie Lou Hamer through the testimony she delivered before the 1964 Democratic National Convention's (DNC) Credentials Committee. In this famous speech, Hamer testified about being fired from the plantation where she worked for trying to register to vote; she spoke of being jailed and beaten on her return trip from a voter education

workshop; and she represented both the concerns of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and the limits of American democracy when she proclaimed: "I question America. Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off of the hooks because our lives be threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?"⁶ This is the speech that sent President Lyndon B. Johnson into a state of panic, as he called an impromptu press conference to divert the media's attention away from Hamer's indictment of the nation he led. This is the speech that left most Credentials Committee members in tears and "turned the tide of the convention," forcing Johnson to negotiate with the MFDP and compelling the Democratic Party to vow never again to seat a segregated delegation.⁷ And this is the speech that television networks, made wise to Johnson's diversionary tactics, replayed during their evening programs, thereby introducing Fannie Lou Hamer to Americans across the nation.

As significant as this eight-minute testimony was and still is, Hamer's Credentials Committee address is but one speech within a much larger rhetorical career that spanned nearly 15 years and took place before audiences in every region of the country. Hamer shared the podium with Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X; she also addressed the 1968 and 1972 Democratic National Conventions. She was a featured speaker at the founding meeting of the National Women's Political Caucus, and she inspired a large crowd of antiwar protesters in Berkeley during a nation-wide Vietnam War moratorium rally. Hamer regularly spoke on college campuses including the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Harvard, Duke, and Seattle University. From 1962 to 1977, in fact, Hamer traveled from the South to the North—and even to the West Coast of Africa—advocating human rights, economic justice, and interracial cooperation.

In an era when male movement leaders, often formally trained ministers, dominated the public platform, one is led to wonder how a middle-aged woman from the Mississippi Delta achieved this level of audibility. According to those who actually witnessed Hamer's public address, the answer to this central question lies as much in what Hamer represented as in how she presented her concerns. Reflecting on the 1964 MFDP challenge to unseat the segregated delegation sent from Mississippi, the Vice President of the Party, Dr. Leslie McLemore, remembers that Hamer's involvement in that challenge was so essential because she "represented the heart and soul of the delegation."⁸ A rank and file member of the delegation herself, Dr. L. C.

Dorsey agrees, recalling that during Hamer's famous testimony she came across as the "true grit. The real McCoy." And that as a result, members of the leading civil rights coalitions, who helped organize the challenge, "successfully used Mrs. Hamer . . . in a clever way to force white America to look at what the Democratic Party was doing to women, to blacks, and to rural America."⁹ Longtime movement activist, and one of the few white members of the MFDP, Reverend Edwin King suggested more broadly that "after the convention, through 1966 Hamer probably went somewhere several times a month. And we needed her to because we still didn't have the Voting Rights Act until the end of the summer of 1965. She was the leading person we had. She was so effective a speaker."¹⁰ Reflections from Hamer's fellow Mississippi movement activists suggest that she was catapulted into the limelight of the movement—as the centerpiece of the 1964 MFDP challenge before the DNC, and as a leading speaker for the civil rights coalition in Mississippi—because she represented the failures of American democracy, the very failures that civil rights organizations came to Mississippi to correct.

In the summer of 1962, movement strategists were urging federal legislation, leading marches through Southern cities, and working to desegregate public facilities. Meanwhile members of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO)—a coalition comprised of several civil rights groups including the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)—traveled throughout the state of Mississippi canvassing small towns and rural plantations. COFO activists also held mass meetings in modest churches to inform local blacks of ways to secure their voting rights. Their mission in 1962 was an outgrowth of movement work that native Mississippian Amzie Moore and SNCC activist Bob Moses began the summer before: educating blacks, supporting them in their voter registration attempts, and empowering them to take part in the larger civil rights struggle.

One such mass meeting was held at Williams Chapel Missionary Baptist Church in Ruleville. Hamer learned about this meeting during her Sunday service, when Reverend J. D. Story notified his parishioners that the first mass meeting to be held in Ruleville would take place at their church the following evening. Before attending this meeting, 44-year-old Hamer claimed that she had never heard about voter registration and that she did not know that blacks could cast a ballot.¹¹ This particular gathering featured the SCLC's James Bevel,

a trained Baptist theologian, who primed the crowd with a sermon titled, "Discerning the Signs of the Time." SNCC's James Forman then connected Bevel's biblical message of immediacy to his secular explanation that black Americans had a constitutionally guaranteed right to vote. Hamer remembered Forman explaining to the group "that we had a right to register and vote to become first class citizens" and that with the ballot "we could vote out people like hateful policemen." The idea that through the vote black Mississippians had the power to transform the exploitative conditions surrounding them resonated with Hamer, who later characterized Bevel's and Forman's messages of hope as "the most remarkable thing that could happen in the state of Mississippi."¹² After these two civil rights workers finished speaking, in fact, Hamer was among the 18 people who raised their hands, indicating her willingness to try to register at the county courthouse that Friday.

All 18 would-be registrants not only failed to pass the registration test designed to maintain the white supremacist status quo, but the group was harassed by local police and state highway patrol officers, and some of the group members lost their jobs because of their civic assertion. For Hamer, who had lived and worked with her husband and children on W. D. Marlow's plantation for nearly 20 years, the loss was great. Although Marlow sought to deter Hamer from pursuing the vote by firing and evicting her, his actions helped bind her closer to the movement by enabling her to devote all of her energy to civil rights activity. Getting fired, explains Ambassador Young, "gave Hamer the *freedom* to become a voter registration worker and leader."¹³ In the early 1960s, Young was working as an administrator for the United Church of Christ, which had recently aligned itself with the Highlander Folk School's citizenship program. Young's duties as administrator included recruiting people for the citizenship training centers developed by Septima Clark. To find trainees, Young would drive across the South "looking for people who had Ph.D. minds, but who had never had an opportunity to get an education." "There are people like that in every community," he asserts; "there are people who are really bright that everybody looks up to for their opinions, but they may not have had any formal training or schooling. Mrs. Hamer was that way."¹⁴ Just as Hamer was searching for an opportunity to better her life and the lives of those around her, therefore, movement organizers were simultaneously seeking someone like Hamer, a leader from whom they could learn about the community's needs and with whom they could work to encourage civil rights activity.

SENSING THE VERNACULAR

It did not take long for civil rights organizers like Young to recognize Hamer's natural talents as a performer, the confidence and understanding her parents had instilled in her, and the skills of leadership and interracial communication she had been cultivating on the plantations where she lived and worked. Because Hamer's rhetorical education developed outside formalized centers of higher learning, because it grew out of and represented the community from which she came, and because this community largely existed outside of, and was often set in opposition to, institutionalized power, Hamer's rhetorical education can be considered "vernacular" in several senses of the term.

Etymologically speaking, Robert Glenn Howard notes, "the word 'vernacular' has its origins in the concept of 'the local' or 'home grown.'" In classical Greek, furthermore, the corresponding adjective is "*oikogenes* or 'home-genetic.' For the Greeks and Romans, the marks of this 'home genetic' nature were found in the language with which a person spoke."¹⁵ Describing Hamer's speech as vernacular in the sense of being "home grown" and located in the spoken word helps capture the Southern black quality of her discourse. Her clearly discernable regional accent and the phrases she commonly used, such as "raising Cain," are employed by Southerners of all races.¹⁶ The designation "black" acknowledges the aspects of Hamer's speech that reflect characteristics of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), including the consistent use of double-negation, over-pluralization, as well as use of the verbs "been" and "done" to indicate habitual or recently completed action.¹⁷ Grammatical and lexical markers such as these combine with a distinct syntactical pattern, in which there is no marked beginning or end to sentences that, instead, are commonly linked to one another in a hypotactic fashion, with an abundance of connectives like "and" as well as "but."¹⁸ These features, furthermore, support the trademark structural and stylistic elements of Hamer's discourse—including image making, testifying, mimicry, and Signifyin(g)—all commonly observed aspects of AAVE.¹⁹

From its roots in the ancient Greek and Roman eras forward, however, vernacular has always meant more than accent, colloquial phrases, speech patterns, syntactical, and stylistic features. As Howard observes, Cicero "understood the 'vernacular' as set in opposition to what he and other Roman politicians saw as the universalised and institutional elements of persuasive communication codified in textbooks." The vernacular "flavor," as Cicero

described it, “existed and was learned outside of formal Roman education.”²⁰ Because vernacular speech is learned outside of formal educational institutions, as a means of communication that is “commonplace” and “accessible to all,” its use also holds the potential to reaffirm a sense of shared knowledge and community.²¹ Hamer’s rhetorical training, gleaned as it was from her local community and subsequently used to represent that community before national audiences, was thus vernacular both in the sense of how it was derived, as well as in what it conveyed.

Though Hamer did not receive a formal rhetorical education, the seeds of what grew to be her remarkable rhetorical abilities—her confidence, her keen understanding of race relations, her Southern black Baptist preaching style, her mastery of Biblical allusion, and her ability to diagnose the national malaise—were sown at home, nourished within Southern black churches, and cultivated on the plantations where she labored for over 30 years. When Fannie Lou Hamer was born Fannie Lou Townsend in 1917, the twentieth child of sharecropper parents who lived and worked in the Mississippi Delta, the Townsends were grateful for another healthy child and the 50 dollars landowners typically paid sharecropping families to swell their workforce. The Townsend family moved to Ruleville from Montgomery County when their youngest child was two years old; once there, they carved out a meager existence in a dilapidated shack on E. W. Brandon’s plantation. The sharecropping system, which replaced slavery as a means of controlling the black population and securing cheap labor for white landowners, was maintained in such a way that the workers remained indebted to the landowners and, even in a good year when a large family like the Townsends could pick 50 or 60 bales of cotton, they still would not turn a profit.

As a young child, Fannie Lou recognized sharecropping as fundamentally exploitative and remembered asking her mother why their family was not white. “The reason I said it,” she explained, was “we would work all summer and we would work until it get so cold that you would have to tie rags around your feet and sacks . . . to keep your feet warm while we would get out and scrap cotton.” After all this work, she insisted, “we wouldn’t have anything; we wouldn’t have anything to eat; sometime we wouldn’t have anything but water and bread.” The white landowners, on the other hand, “would have very good food” and yet “they wasn’t doing anything,” she observed. To her child’s mind, the solution seemed simple: “to make it you had to be white, and I wanted to be white.” Her mother quickly challenged this desire, telling Fannie Lou, “there was nothing in the world wrong with being black.” “Be

grateful that you are black,” Lou Ella Townsend instructed her daughter, “If God had wanted you to be white, you would have been white, so you accept yourself for what you are and respect yourself as a black child.” Reasoning further, Lou Ella advised, “when you get grown . . . you respect yourself as a black woman; and other people will respect you too.”²²

This message of self-affirmation was reinforced by particular verses of songs and hymns Mrs. Townsend would sing to her children. Hamer remembered her mother working in the fields or cleaning their small shack while singing, “I would not be a white man / White as a drip in the snow / They ain’t got God in their heart / To hell they sure must go,” which she would follow with the related stanza, “I would not be a sinner / I’ll tell you the reason why / I’m afraid my Lord may call me / And I wouldn’t be ready to die.”²³ Beyond restoring a sense of race pride in her daughter, Lou Ella’s allusion to Divine justice left Fannie Lou with an understanding that the sharecropping system did not leave white people unscathed. Years later, Fannie Lou Hamer would draw upon this reasoning to suggest that the races were inextricably bound—both ensnared by segregation and in need of one another to liberate themselves from its effects.

Fannie Lou’s father, and his strong ties to the black Baptist Church, further reinforced the lessons of self-respect and race pride Lou Ella Townsend taught her daughter. In addition to sharecropping, James Lee Townsend also served as a local minister. As the child of a black Baptist preacher, Hamer was not unlike scores of notable male civil rights orators who were raised on lessons from the Bible and who grew up hearing their fathers preaching the Word from the pulpit. This familial connection to the church later revealed itself in her public discourse, as Hamer would often couple her mother’s transformative lesson—that God intended for her to be black and that she should not covet the station of her white oppressor—with scripture such as Psalm 37, which reads: “Do not fret because of evildoers, Nor be envious of the workers of iniquity. For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, And wither as the green herb” (NKJV). Moreover, Hamer developed an unparalleled ability to, as Dorsey describes it, “cast the struggle that blacks had against the role of the church in the human struggle.”²⁴ This competency was likely honed within her religious community, as many black Baptist preachers during this era emphasized the “practical rather than the theoretical aspect of Christian theology.” As a collective, furthermore, black Baptists are known for relating “a relevant theology to slavery in the South and white racism throughout the nation.”²⁵ Within this religious home, therefore, Hamer was likely first

introduced to the Exodus narrative and its black Jeremiadic extension—core vernacular frameworks upon which she constructed her persona.

While the church and home provided the primary training grounds for Hamer's rhetorical education—offering resources for invention as well as style and delivery—her brief time at school imbued her with a love of public speaking. The Townsend children's work on Brandon's plantation kept them from attending school for more than a few months out of the year, and for only a few years in total. Hamer made it to the sixth grade before she began working full time in the fields. Fleeting as her educational experience was, it nevertheless had a lasting impact. She excelled in reading and in spelling, and she learned that her excellence was pleasing to her teacher, Thornton Layne, as well as to her parents. The pleasure her success gave these people that she respected encouraged her to work harder. Before long, she was winning spelling bees and performing poetry for her parents and their adult friends. The pride that her performances gave her parents, who liked to show her off by setting her atop their kitchen table to sing, recite, and spell, further encouraged young Fannie Lou.²⁶ Displaying her lessons to warm receptive audiences as a child instilled in Hamer the confidence and experience needed to address large unfamiliar crowds later in her life.

After she left school at the age of twelve, Hamer's adult life proceeded in much the same way her mother's had—she labored in the fields of the Mississippi Delta, married a fellow sharecropper, and longed for a life where survival was not a constant struggle. In 1944, at the age of 27, Fannie Lou Townsend married Perry "Pap" Hamer and moved to the neighboring Marlow plantation where her husband worked. The couple grew to be well respected among their fellow sharecroppers and instrumental to the landowner, as Pap drove tractors and Fannie Lou recorded the workers' harvest. Her formal title was "timekeeper" on Marlow's plantation, and she was chosen for this leadership position, in part, because of the reading and writing skills she gained during her several years of schooling. As a plantation timekeeper she served as a liaison between the Marlows and the other sharecroppers; as such, Mrs. Hamer must have also had "trust on both sides," reasons McLemore. He explains that her position as a timekeeper reflected the confidence that the Marlows had in her, otherwise they would not have given her the job. Concomitantly, this position enabled her to help other sharecroppers, who trusted her "because they knew when Marlow was not around she would use a different kind of 'p,' [a device used] to weigh cotton, to give them a full measure for the cotton they had picked." Hamer excelled in this role,

McLemore contends, because of “her great ability . . . to talk to both the white boss man and to talk to her friends and neighbors on the plantation.”²⁷

Hamer’s own reflections about her work as a timekeeper on the plantation support McLemore’s contentions. To one interviewer Hamer explained how she transformed her responsible position into an outlet for her rebellious desire: “I would take my ‘p’ to the field and use mine until I would see him coming, you know, because his was loaded and I know it was beating people like that.”²⁸ Through her resistive act of providing sharecroppers with a fair measure for their harvest, Hamer worked to balance the scales that had been tipped against blacks in Mississippi for hundreds of years. While Hamer’s subversive behavior momentarily helped to balance the unequal plantation scales, she declared: “I just steady hoped for a chance that I could really lash out, and say what I had to say about what was going on in Mississippi.”²⁹

The COFO activists who came into her small Delta town and gave her this chance recognized that Hamer had both the trust of her fellow sharecroppers and the confidence to speak widely about the injustices they endured. What’s more, Hamer’s discourse conveyed a “vernacular flavor,” which represented not only the speech patterns of her local community, but their shared experiences, viewpoints, and modes of reasoning as well. In these senses, the vernacular quality of Hamer’s discourse—both its surface-level Southern black features as well as its deeper representative significance—played a large role in securing an initial platform for her rhetorical expression. But what the COFO activists could not have anticipated when they began promoting Hamer as an “authentic voice” from the Delta, was what became Hamer’s rhetorical trademark and kept her in high demand as a speaker throughout her lifetime. Analysis of Hamer’s persona, the core aspect of her discourse that developed over time, across space, and in the service of a variety of rhetorical exigencies, demonstrates a final sense in which her rhetoric can be understood as vernacular. More importantly, analysis of the vernacular threads Hamer wove into the distinctive persona she fashioned fosters a greater appreciation of her rhetoric’s paradoxical quality by demonstrating how Hamer strategically employed her oppositional ethos in the service of her various rhetorical purposes.

VERNACULAR AS RHETORICAL STRATEGY

Vernacular discourse is fundamentally defined by its relationship to institutionalized power. This relationship runs deeper than the connection among, and differences between, Standard American English (SAE) and AAVE, or even than the distinction between the rhetorical training gleaned from formal institutions of higher learning and that which develops out of local communities. As Howard reminds, the Latin noun *verna* refers not only to that which is locally learned or homegrown, but more specifically to “home-born slaves.”³⁰ This oppressive relationship between the institutionalized power centers and the vernacular is the final and most rhetorically complex sense in which Hamer’s discourse can be considered vernacular. This final sense in which her rhetoric can be considered vernacular also forges links between Hamer and various rhetorical traditions in both Anglo and African American public discourse. A closer look at the Exodus narrative, the Jeremiadic rhetorical structure, and the tradition of Signifyin(g) suggests that Hamer both drew upon and subverted these cultural and counter-institutional frameworks to construct her distinctive rhetorical appeal.

Hamer made strategic use of vernacular touchstones to establish her authority to speak, to prompt recognition of the potential for social change among her most oppressed audiences, and to cultivate the will to change among their oppressors. Her advocacy of social change built upon the most archetypal Western vernacular framework. The Exodus narrative—a biblical story of the Israelites’ bondage in Egypt, their journey out of slavery, and onto the Promised Land where they enter into a covenant with God—is more than a tale of Divine deliverance. This narrative provides a resource for oppressed people to imagine overcoming the confines of institutionalized power and to see themselves as moral agents of change within a corrupt political system. In fact, the Exodus narrative has long served as a framework for connecting the political to the realm of morality in both the African and the Anglo American religious traditions. As Michael Walzer contends, “the Exodus as we know it in the text is plausibly understood in political terms, as a liberation and revolution—even though it is also, in the text, an act of God.” The Exodus narrative’s ability to serve both religious and political objectives, acknowledges Walzer, has earned it a place in the “cultural consciousness of the West,” as a generic touchstone for advocates of social change to draw upon through “analogical application.”³¹

In his study of eighteenth and early nineteenth century black American public discourse, Eddie S. Glaude Jr. explains the multiple reasons why African American activists, in particular, have found the Exodus narrative useful:

[B]lack people caught in the violence of a racist culture, struggling to find and generate meaning (possibility) for themselves, turn to religious narrative to make sense of the absurdity of their condition, to cultivate solidarity with similarly situated selves, and to develop a self-consciousness essential for problem-solving.³²

Because the Exodus narrative also plays a central role in Anglo American historical mythology—from the Puritans, “who imagined their migration from the Old World as an exodus to a New Canaan,” to the colonists’ view of the American Revolution “as the culmination of a political exodus”—African American adaptation of this vernacular narrative is always already engaged in the double-voiced practice of Signifyin(g).³³ Henry Louis Gates Jr. identifies Signifyin(g) as “*the* rhetorical principle in Afro-American vernacular discourse.”³⁴ According to Gates, black vernacular discourse is engaged in a “confrontation” with the white linguistic circle, the traces of which can be found through tropes that constitute the larger practice of Signifyin(g). More specifically, Gates defines Signifyin(g)’s revision of standard English traditions as a process by which “black vernacular discourse proffer[s] its critique of the sign as the difference that blackness makes within the larger political culture and its historical unconscious.”³⁵ This critique works through the act of adaptation and reinterpretation; a practice not unlike Kenneth Burke’s notion of “perspective by incongruity.” Burke acknowledges that this method of creating new meaning through juxtaposition can serve activist ends. Perspective by incongruity, which Burke likens to “verbal atom cracking,” is designed to “‘remoralize’ by accurately naming a situation already demoralized by inaccuracy.”³⁶ When reinterpreting America as the New Egypt, rather than the New Canaan, or characterizing American colonists as oppressors, rather than those chosen persons escaping the bonds of oppression, African American rhetors use their lived experience to elicit perspective by incongruity—Signifyin(g) upon the cultural resonances of the Exodus narrative and thereby subverting dominant American mythology to spark renewed perception.

African American rhetors’ adaptation of the Exodus narrative at once speaks to oppressed black audiences and reverses the terms of white Americans’

self-understanding. As Glaude observes, nineteenth century black invocation of the narrative “stood as a form of critique of American society for betraying its ideals as well as evidence of positive self-identification among blacks.”³⁷ This critique of white America, as David Howard-Pitney demonstrates in his analysis of African American appeals for social justice, often comes in the form of a Jeremiad—“meaning a lamentation or doleful complaint,” a term “derive[d] from the Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah, who warned of Israel’s fall and the destruction of the Jerusalem temple . . . as punishment for the people’s failure to keep the Mosaic covenant.”³⁸ An extension of the Exodus narrative, the American Jeremiad has similarly deep roots in the discursive traditions of both Anglo and African Americans. Each of these traditions features a characteristic rhetorical structure—namely, a reminder of the chosen people’s covenant with God, a critique of their failure to live up to this promise, and the prophecy that society will fulfill its promise and return to both God’s favor and their exceptional destiny.³⁹

Much like African Americans’ adaptation of the Exodus narrative, the “black Jeremiad” plays upon a familiar Western rhetorical structure to reveal the paradoxes embedded in their lived experience. In a complex twist of signification, blacks are characterized “as a chosen people *within* a chosen people.” Though intertwined, the roles assigned to black and white Americans within the black Jeremiadic framework are distinct; “by virtue of their unjust bondage,” argues Howard-Pitney, blacks claim “a messianic role in achieving their own and others’ redemption.”⁴⁰ This salvific imperative celebrates vernacularity. The notion that “spiritedness” is “bred by affliction” and the characterization of Egyptian bondage as a “school of the soul” suggest that greater wisdom and perspective is cultivated outside of—even in opposition to—institutions of power.⁴¹ The paradoxical nature of this contention is located in its vernacular quality, as Howard observes that vernacular rhetoric’s subjugated status, “its very distinction” as other, is precisely what “gives that voice the power to mean.”⁴² The “*power* to mean”—the mark of distinction that warrants notice—is, thus, paradoxically derived from the absence of power. Hamer capitalized upon the paradox inherent in these vernacular frames. Over the course of her activist career, more specifically, Hamer wove these varied archetypal and vernacular strands together in an effort to establish her authority to speak, to reveal the potential for social change to audiences of poor Delta blacks, and to challenge the self-conceptions of those who sat within America’s power centers.

ESTABLISHING THE AUTHORITY TO SPEAK

Although civil rights organizations like SNCC, COFO, and MFDP championed Hamer as an “authentic voice” from the Mississippi Delta, Hamer did not rely on this prior ethos as the sole source of her authority to speak about the national malaise. In fact, she was conscious of derogatory stereotypes about poor black Mississippians, and she worked to reverse these preconceptions during her various speaking encounters. Through the act of reversal, furthermore, Hamer used vernacular discourse to reinvent the cultural image of poor black Mississippians and to craft an authoritative persona for herself.⁴³

The image of herself that Hamer constructed within her speeches is best described as a persona because it is a mediated implied presence—“a rhetoric,” as Thomas B. Farrell describes it, “not of being but of becoming.”⁴⁴ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell posits that the “culturally available subject-positions” rhetors occupy are themselves “constituted and constrained by externals that are material and symbolic,” and thus the notion of “*personae* . . . comes closest to capturing this concept of the shifting but central character of the roles that we assume in the plays in which we participate.”⁴⁵ In a similar vein, Judith Butler reminds us that even when we are giving an account of ourselves, we are doing so through a language system in a social context, neither of which are of our own making.⁴⁶ Like ethos, furthermore, which rhetorical scholars from Aristotle on have recognized largely as a symbolic construction, Hamer’s persona is not a static given; rather, it is continuously built, reiterated, and reinvented through speech.⁴⁷ Hamer does not merely rely on small-scale grammatical indicators, or larger-scale stylistic patterns, or even upon her previous reputation to reveal her position as vernacular. Instead her status as an oppressed other sitting outside of, and in opposition to, formalized institutions is something that she repeatedly defines and reconstructs for her audiences during their speaking encounter. What’s more, Hamer links this subjugated status to the deeper cultural resonances of the Exodus narrative and its Jeremiadic extension in a manner that transforms the experience of powerlessness into a source of moral authority and experiential wisdom.⁴⁸

This central reversal subverted both the middle-class logic of respectability, which privileges the voices of well-educated black leaders, as well as the logic of white paternalism, which assumes that well-connected white sympathizers can best represent the concerns of blacks to mainstream audiences. Hamer accomplished this subversion by first demonstrating that she was of the most oppressed class of people in the United States—excluded from the realm of

politics, economically exploited, and educationally deprived. She went on to reason that this exclusion imbued her with a unique vantage point from which to judge the institutionalized power centers. Being excluded also left Hamer free from the taint of those exploitative bastions and, thus, in a superior position both to recognize the need for change and to outline the form this change should take.

Drawing a parallel to the Israelites' bondage in Egypt, Hamer often reminded her audiences about African Americans' enslaved past. This connection conveyed African Americans' vernacular status in the United States as "in, but not of"—as "strangers in a strange land"—and thereby functioned as a starting point for Hamer to establish her rhetorical authority through "symbolic reversal."⁴⁹ Addressing a primarily white audience in Kentucky in 1968, for instance, Hamer characterized the present state of blacks in America as "no longer slaves but not yet free." Reciting a poem she found in *Freedomways* magazine, Hamer lamented: "'This is a story of folks black like me—no longer slaves but not yet free / told what they can do and told what they can't, told what they should do and told what they shant / Told what to do and told what to don't, damned if we do and damned if we don't.'"⁵⁰ She characterized the relationship between whites and blacks as a "pattern" of control that began during slavery and continues to divide the nation.

Drawing upon her familial lineage to demonstrate her connection to the class of people she represented, Hamer personalized this larger pattern of exploitation in several speeches. "My grandmother was a slave—Liza Bramlett—Liza Gober Bramlett. She had twenty boys and three girls," she told an audience gathered at the University of Wisconsin—Madison's Great Hall. Given this familial connection, Hamer posited with conviction, "I know what has happened to us in the past."⁵¹ In a speech delivered in New York City in 1971, more specifically, Hamer exposed the legacy of division among the NAACP members seated before her. "The special plight and the role of black women is not something that just happened three years ago," Hamer argued, "We've had a special plight for 350 years. My grandmother had it. My grandmother was a slave." But the legacy of oppression continued long after the abolition of slavery, Hamer informed white women in the audience: "you worked my grandmother, and after that you worked my mother, and then finally you got hold of me. . . . So we was used as black women over and over and over."⁵²

Hamer coupled the historical pattern of exploitation with daily tribulations of modern-day segregation to separate herself from institutionalized power

centers and to account for the source of her experiential wisdom. Captive life in the American South, like the Israelites' bondage in Egypt, functioned as a school for the soul wherein perspective was "bred by affliction."⁵³ Hamer often began her addresses by simply stating: "My name is Fannie Lou Hamer and I exist at 626 East Lafayette Street in Ruleville, Mississippi." At Williams Institutional Christian Methodist Episcopal Church in Harlem, where Malcolm X had invited her to speak in 1964, Hamer explained the wording of her humble introduction. "The reason I say 'exist,'" she clarified, is "because we're excluded from everything in Mississippi but the tombs and the graves."⁵⁴ During some speaking occasions, Hamer would use verbal wit to further articulate her exclusion. Within her 1969 testimony before the Democratic Reform Committee, for instance, Hamer declared: "I know it's people have talked about . . . me as being from the far left. One man told me, he said you will admit 'you are from the far left.' I said 'I admit I'm from the far left. To be exact I am four hundred years being far left. I don't think it could be any further.'"⁵⁵ In other speeches, like the one she delivered on the Tougaloo College campus in 1971, Hamer was more somber about her life-long exclusion: "I was born and raised in a segregated society, beaten for trying to act like all people should have a right to act, denied access to the ballot until I was fifty years old."⁵⁶ As these routinely evoked elements of Hamer's experience emphasized, she was left behind and violently prohibited from the political process in the staunchly segregated state of Mississippi—a place, Hamer reminded, where blacks who "tried to go into the regular Democratic Party . . . had the doors locked in our face."⁵⁷

A legacy of oppression from slavery to modern-day segregation resulted in political powerlessness for Hamer and those she represented, which in turn left them both economically dependent and educationally deprived. "My family was some of the poorest people that was in the state of Mississippi," Hamer would often proclaim, "we were sharecroppers." She explained how this system of farming perpetuated economic stratification between the races. "Now sharecropping is really something," Hamer exclaimed. "[W]hat I found since I been old enough, it always had too many 'its' in it. Number one, you had to plow it. Number two, you had to break it up. Number three, you had to chop it. Number four, you had to pick it. And the last, number five, the landowner took it!" Though Hamer delivered the last line with a punch, which elicited laughter from an audience of mostly well-educated Northern whites, she soon made it clear that there was nothing funny about the exploitation

she endured. The system “left us with nowhere to go; it left us hungry . . . I know what the pain of hunger is about,” she informed them.⁵⁸ In fact, Hamer’s knowledge of poverty was quite exceptional, hailing as she did from Sunflower county, which she often referred to as “one of the poorest counties on earth.”⁵⁹ The exceptionally impoverished aspect of her identity was rarely overlooked in the construction of her oppositional ethos. “It’s what you call the ruralest of the ruralest, poorest of the poorest, U.S.A.,” she’d ironically boast. “This is the home of Senator James O. Eastland that in 1967, received \$255,000 to let his land waste, while people on the plantation suffered from malnutrition.”⁶⁰ Being barred from the political process, Delta blacks were at the mercy of landowners for their livelihood, and those landowners were the voters who elected representatives to further entrench the racial divide.

Some Northern onlookers, surmised Hamer, mistook Delta blacks’ desperation for ignorance and contentment. She used this common stereotype as a fulcrum point for her strategic reversal, maintaining that although Mississippi blacks were excluded from formal institutions of learning, they were better educated in the school of the soul. “People have said year after year, ‘Those people in Mississippi can’t think.’” Not true, Hamer told her Harlem auditors. “we have been thinking a long time. And we are tired of what’s going on.”⁶¹ She even personalized this critique, acknowledging, “[S]ome say that, ‘Well, she doesn’t talk too good.’” Connecting with audiences closer to home, Hamer reasoned, “The type of education that we get here, years to come you won’t talk too good. The type of education that we get in the state of Mississippi will make our minds so narrow it won’t coordinate with our big bodies.”⁶² As she explained it, the constriction of Delta blacks’ minds was an institutionalized mechanism of control. During her 1964 congressional campaign against U.S. Representative Jamie Whitten, for example, Hamer argued that her opponent blocked federal funds because “he’s afraid if federal money comes in to help Mississippi people get educated, it won’t take them long to learn that they don’t want the likes of him representing them in Congress.”⁶³ After all, she pointed out, “we’re the only race in America that had one man had to march through a mob crew just to go to school, which was James H. Meredith.”⁶⁴

Black people were not only barred from attending institutions of higher learning; Hamer acknowledged that all races were kept in the dark about the achievements and contributions of African Americans. “[K]ids are saying to you throughout the country,” Hamer contended at Chicago’s Loop College in 1971,

[W]hy didn't you tell us that we have the longest history of civilization of mankind? And why didn't you tell us it was a black man that made the alphabet? And why didn't you tell us it was also a black man that discovered science? And why didn't you tell us something about Dr. Drew, the man that learned to save blood plasma that died out in a hall because he couldn't get a blood transfusion?⁶⁵

What the youth of all races “want to know now is all that stuff that you've had hid from us.” “[T]his is where your children is rebelling,” Hamer alleged, “because you told your children that we were dumb, we were ignorant and we couldn't think. And you see, honey, we would be in your house thinking!”⁶⁶ The more Hamer thought about what those institutions of learning did and did not teach, the more she began to wonder: “[D]o I want the kind of education that's going to really rob me of having real love and compassion for my fellow man?” and “Do I want my child to go through a system and then come out to be ashamed to be yourself?”⁶⁷ So “sick as it is,” Hamer would argue that she was proud that she “wasn't fit” to get “the kind of education to fit into this society.”⁶⁸ In so doing, she echoed the Israelites' movement from lamenting their subjugated status as strangers in a strange land to willfully rejecting the corrupt culture that left them so deprived.

Hamer both acknowledged her lack of education and reminded her audiences of that fact. This aspect of her persona fit well with the image she constructed of herself as the granddaughter of a slave who merely existed in a segregated society—punished for trying to participate in the political process, kept hungry and economically exploited because she lacked access to representative government. These aspects of Hamer's biography also marked her as vernacular in the sense that she sat in opposition to all major forms of institutionalized power, demonstrating that she was both well schooled in hardship and immune from the corruptive influence of America's sick society. Hamer's training in the school of the soul, combined with her distance from the centers of power, imbued her with superior perspective and, hence, the credibility necessary to address authoritatively both local and national audiences.

RECOGNIZING THE POTENTIAL FOR CHANGE

Hamer's strategic reversal—turning her absence of institutionalized power into the primary source of her rhetorical authority—built upon her ethos as a

representative of the country's most oppressed people by suggesting that those furthest from the center hold valuable insight regarding the national malaise. To encourage other oppressed blacks to recognize this unique perspective and assume an active role in their own liberation, Hamer continued to utilize the Exodus narrative and the black Jeremiadic tradition. In particular, she suggested that blacks represented a special class of chosen people within a chosen people. As such, they had a moral imperative to liberate themselves, free the nation from its affliction, and restore America's covenant with God. Combining these rhetorical traditions with the dominant black vernacular trope of signification enabled Hamer to imbue the suffering of African Americans with meaning and purpose, while simultaneously encouraging them to join the struggle for social change.

The argument that the oppressed, by virtue of their subjugation, possess unparalleled wisdom is tied to the belief that the bondage in Egypt provided a training ground for the Israelites. Walzer acknowledges that Egyptian oppression has also been characterized as an "iron furnace," which is interpreted in the rabbinic tradition as "a cauldron for refining precious metals: what emerges . . . is pure gold."⁶⁹ Hamer shared this biblically rooted conviction that "unearned suffering is redemptive" with generations of African American activists who made sense of enslavement and subsequent discrimination by championing the "social messianic" potential of the "rejected" and "disinherited."⁷⁰ Through countless examples of exclusion from institutionalized power centers, Hamer made it clear that blacks in America have endured unjust treatment for generations. She coupled this historical fact with the biblical promise that God is on the side of the oppressed. Preaching to an audience of Delta blacks, for instance, Hamer proclaimed: "[T]he fifth chapter of Matthew said: 'Blessed are they that moan, for they shall be comforted.' We have moaned a long time in Mississippi." Hamer made this biblical connection even more lucid, arguing: "[H]e said, 'The meek shall inherit the earth.' And there's no race in America that's no meeker than the Negro."⁷¹ This widely accepted truth functioned as a first premise in the case Hamer built for blacks to join the civil rights struggle.

"Can't you see the fulfilling of God's word?" Hamer further challenged her audience of Delta sharecroppers. "When you see all of these students coming here to help America to be a real democracy and make democracy a reality in the state of Mississippi," she prodded, "can't you see these things coming to pass today?"⁷² If Mississippi blacks needed additional encouragement to recognize the civil rights movement as a harbinger of the change they had

prayed for, Hamer shared the connection she saw between the Israelites' struggle in Egypt and African Americans' campaign for civil rights in Mississippi. "God made it so plain," Hamer would often contend, "He sent Moses down in Egypt-land to tell Pharaoh to let my people go. And He made it so plain here in Mississippi the man that heads the project is named Moses, Bob Moses. And He sent Bob Moses down in Mississippi, to tell all of these hate groups to let his people go."⁷³ By linking black Deltans' struggle to the familiar Exodus narrative, Hamer began cultivating the will to change among an audience who had been subjugated for centuries. Assuring Mississippi blacks that God was on their side and imbuing their fight with biblical significance, moreover, Hamer encouraged her audience to see liberation as imminent.

Although God was on the side of oppressed blacks, Hamer was always careful to note that their liberation would not come without collective effort. "You can pray until you faint," she declared while promoting voter registration, "but if you don't get up and try to do something, God is not going to put it in your lap."⁷⁴ Effort was necessary to bring about the hopes and desires of the oppressed, but more than that: their action was instrumental to fulfilling God's will. By this logic, Hamer managed to elevate the act of voter registration to the status of following God's commandments. "[Y]ou have a responsibility," she instructed her local audience, "[I]f you plan to walk in Christ's footsteps and keep his commandments," then "you are willing to launch out into the deep and go to the courthouse . . . to do something about the system here."⁷⁵ If her oppressed audiences were not persuaded to join the struggle through the biblical parallels Hamer drew, or through the Divine promise of liberation manifest in these comparisons, the moral imperative to keep God's commandments may have convinced some—especially once Hamer characterized their action as the only hope for the nation's salvation.

From abolitionism on, advocates of social change in the United States have featured the messianic characterization of American blacks to establish a moral imperative. "Messianic themes of coming social liberation and redemption have deep roots in black culture," observes Howard-Pitney, who also notes that for generations blacks have championed their unique role in bringing about larger national redemption.⁷⁶ Hamer was, thus, following in a long line of activists when she imbued Delta blacks' participation in the civil rights movement with salvific significance: "We are not fighting against these people because we hate them," she clarified, "we are fighting these people because we love them and we're the only thing can save them now." Building upon her characterization of African Americans' superior perspective, Hamer

reasoned: “We are fighting to save these people from their hate and from all the things that would be so bad against them. We want them to see the right way.”⁷⁷ In this manner, Hamer celebrated her audience’s vernacularity to encourage Delta blacks to stand up against the system of discrimination that bound their potential for centuries. Convincing this particular audience that they “don’t have anything to be ashamed of” because God is on the side of the oppressed, that superior perspective is born from affliction, and that their perspective is needed to save a crumbling nation, at once reversed the “slave mentality” bred by exclusion and concomitantly affirmed the counter-institutional community’s value.⁷⁸

REDEFINING THE NATION’S SELF-CONCEPTION

To promote systemic change among those who sat within and benefited from the nation’s institutionalized power centers, Hamer expanded her vernacular rhetorical strategy. She held fast to the comparison between African Americans and the Israelites as God’s chosen people, but Hamer had to explain one obvious difference: African Americans’ decision to remain within the land of oppression. Unlike the Israelites who departed from Egypt in search of the Promised Land, Hamer laid claim to the United States—a country, she argued, that was built by the “blood and sweat” of her ancestors.⁷⁹ In so doing, Hamer departed from the Exodus’ narrative framework and adapted the Jeremiadic rhetorical structure. She argued that America was, in fact, the Promised Land. Anglo Americans, however, had failed to live up to their founding principles and the covenant they held with God. As a result, African Americans, those chosen people within a chosen people, had been called upon to reveal Anglo Americans’ declension from the promise and reinstate their commitment to the country’s espoused values. Such claims were an adaptation of American mythology, which Hamer utilized to disrupt dominant cultural conceptions and provide “perspective by incongruity” for her white audiences.

Hamer built her appeal to white audiences upon the foundation she had laid by establishing her own authority to speak and empowering the dispossessed to action. More specifically, Hamer relied upon the personal and community-oriented pride she conveyed to develop arguments about the rights and entitlements held by those within the vernacular community she represented. Before an audience in Chicago, for instance, Hamer recalled: “I remember . . . the mayor [of Ruleville] told me one time, said, ‘Fannie Lou, if you’re really tired of what’s going on in Mississippi,’ said, ‘you ought to leave.’”

To which Hamer responded, “Well, I’ll tell you what, mayor, if you sick of looking at me in Ruleville, then you pack your ass up!”⁸⁰ Hamer delivered messages with similar gumption to all those who suggested that dissatisfied blacks return to Africa. After receiving such instruction while representing the MFDP in Atlantic City, Hamer made a point of affirming her claim to this nation whenever she spotted white faces in her audience. “I don’t want you telling me to go back to Africa,” she informed those of European descent, “unless you going back where you come from.”⁸¹ “I’m not going anyplace; I’m going to fight for my right in the state of Mississippi, and by getting my right,” Hamer argued further, “I won’t only free myself, but I will help to free the white man” too.⁸² She reasoned plainly, “as we all here on borrowed land, then we have to figure out how we’re going to make things right for *all* the people of this country.”⁸³

Insisting that blacks shared the same entitlement to this country as whites helped reaffirm the dignity of her vernacular community, even as it conveyed Hamer’s national allegiance. This allegiance was far from uncritical acceptance. Hamer’s pride in America—her advocacy of staying and making this country right—was a sentiment that revealed the depth of her faith in moral suasion. As her friend and fellow activist, Reverend Edwin King, explained, Hamer believed that the white Americans she addressed had “souls that could be saved, that white America would listen and that together we could do something.”⁸⁴ Like scores of African American activists who came before her utilizing the Jeremiadic structure in their appeals for social justice, even Hamer’s most confrontational speeches included a glimpse of hope. For African Americans activists to “choose America,” rather than promote an exodus to a more promising land, reasons Glaude, “is not to choose the nation as it is or as it was but, rather, as we hope it to be.”⁸⁵

The “shared myths, symbols, and rituals” that constitute America’s “civil religion” supported African Americans’ hope for the nation, as well as their belief in Anglo Americans’ receptiveness to moral suasion. As Howard-Pitney describes this creed, the country’s civil religion rests upon “the idea that Americans are in some important sense a chosen people with a historic mission to save and remake the world.”⁸⁶ This concept of American exceptionalism is codified in such founding myths as the story of the New England Puritans, who escaped a “hopelessly corrupt European religious and social establishment” to “found a holy society in the American wilderness.”⁸⁷ American leaders like Washington and Lincoln are praised as “patriarchs and saviors” within this pervasive mythology, and founding documents

such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are revered as “scriptures.”⁸⁸ The widespread promotion of America’s civil religion creates and sustains a “flattering self-image” for its empowered inhabitants, who take pride in their national identity and see themselves and their country as fundamentally moral.⁸⁹ This principled self-conception makes those in power particularly susceptible to Jeremiadic appeals; what’s more, the myths, symbols, and rituals that perpetuate the nation’s self-conception provide ready-made rhetorical resources for those who sit outside institutions of power to reveal the distance between the country’s professed values and the nature of their oppressed existence.

Fannie Lou Hamer, in particular, used her vernacularity to measure the nation’s commitment to the values that ostensibly constitute America’s national identity. Having previously established her distance from the major centers of power in the United States, Hamer now appropriated dominant American mythology to make manifest the nation’s fundamental contradictions. “I can’t stand today, not with dignity, and sing the national anthem. ‘Oh say can you see by the dawn’s early light what so proudly we hailed’ . . . Poor oppressed people throughout this country don’t have anything to hail,” Hamer told an audience at the University of Wisconsin.⁹⁰ While visiting another college campus, she acknowledged: “I’ve heard several comments from people that was talking about with the people, for the people, and by the people.” Exposing the limit of this democratic ideal at a Vietnam War moratorium rally in Berkeley, Hamer continued: “Being a black woman from Mississippi, I’ve learned that long ago that’s not true; it’s with the handful, for a handful, by a handful”⁹¹ By invoking refrains from American scripture and then subverting these ideals either through dismissal or rhetorical punning, Hamer encouraged her audience to confront the illegitimacy of their sacred values. Essentially, Hamer invented her appeals to white Americans by Signifyin(g) upon their hallowed maxims in such a manner that they disrupted the nation’s fundamental self-conception.

Hamer’s strategic use of the vernacular did more than reveal America’s failure to embody the tenets of its civil religion. Consistent with the black Jeremiadic rhetorical structure, she did not merely remind white Americans of their professed values and use her lived experience to brand these principles void; Hamer also used the gap between principle and practice as a space to advocate a particular type of alteration. In this regard, Hamer engaged in the practice of Signifyin(g) to elicit perspective by incongruity. Repeating celebrated American refrains and marking them with the difference of her

experience, Hamer's rhetoric challenged the nation's self-identity in an effort to remoralize that which has been demoralized through oppressive action.

Although white Americans seated more securely inside the nation's institutional power centers are more inclined to feel satisfied with their country's moral identity, Hamer's mother had taught her long before that the system of oppression did not leave its beneficiaries unscathed. Once she gained a national platform, Hamer began sharing this childhood lesson of interconnection: "I want you to know . . . white America: you can't destroy me to save your life without destroying yourself."⁹² As Hamer reconstructed the Exodus parallel and its black Jeremiadic extension, the races were inextricably woven together, the actions of both were needed to repair the torn nation. She commonly invoked Jesus Christ's house divided refrain, which was famously appropriated by Abraham Lincoln, thereby imbuing her demonstration of black and white America's mutually intertwined destinies with both religious and political backing. "A house divided against itself cannot stand," pointing to segregation as evidence of America's fundamental division, Hamer continued "America is divided against itself and without their considering us human beings, one day America will crumble."⁹³ Hamer further illustrated this principle of interconnection by invoking the Proverb: "'Who so diggeth a pit shall fall down in it.' Pits have been dug for us for ages," Hamer admitted to the black members of her audience, while also issuing an indirect warning to whites: "But they didn't know, when they was digging pits for us, they had some pits dug for themselves."⁹⁴

To climb out of the ditches discrimination dug, Hamer proposed one final reversal. "[T]he reason we are going to survive," she explained to white Americans, is "because I see what hate had done to you. And I am going to do good, where you have done evil about me. I'm going to do good."⁹⁵ As Hamer envisioned it, love between the races was the only antidote to the sickness bred by hatred. "I refuse to hate a man because he hate me. Because if I hate you because you hate me, it's no different: both of us are miserable." Instead, Hamer promoted the transformative power of loving one's enemies: "I can love you if you hate me," and therein lies the possibility that one might "change a man's mind by not hating."⁹⁶

Hamer's final strategic reversal, urging love in the face of hatred as a return to God's covenant with his chosen people, was a fondly remembered aspect of her larger rhetorical appeal. At her funeral, white Mississippi native Hodding Carter Jr. acknowledged, "Mrs. Hamer did a lot of freeing in her lifetime." Carter, then the Assistant Secretary of State, testified to the success

of Hamer's moral suasion. "I think that history will say that among those who were freed more totally and earlier by her were white Mississippians, who were finally freed . . . from themselves, from their history, from their racism, from their past."⁹⁷ Hamer's ability to cultivate this will to change, even among those who ostensibly benefited from the system of oppression, was accomplished through her adaptation of fundamental American mythology. Exposing the contradictions between America's espoused values and black Americans' lived experience grounded Hamer's contention that "God is not pleased." To return to God's favor—"if there's going to be any survival for this country"—reasoned Hamer, the chosen people must make "democracy a reality for all people and not just a few."⁹⁸

Hamer's rhetorical strategy to promote change among terrorized black sharecroppers and white supremacists alike was rooted in the vernacular persona she crafted from the traditions of the Exodus narrative and the Jeremiadic framework. Coupling these larger American traditions with the particular African American trope of signification enabled Hamer to empower her oppressed community, while sparking perspective by incongruity among her white audiences. The vernacular thus proved useful to Hamer in achieving her rhetorical purposes of establishing the authority to speak as a representative of the nation's most oppressed people, prompting this oppressed audience to see themselves as agents of change, and redefining core American mythology in such a manner that encouraged social transformation.

THE LIMITS OF VERNACULARITY

Although the vernacular persona Hamer constructed distinguished her from other movement speakers and thereby secured a national platform for her rhetorical expression, and although she used this rhetorical construction to cultivate the will to change among both black and white audiences, the success of her strategic self-presentation was not boundless. The oppositional ethos Hamer constructed, for instance, adversely impacted both the institutionalized preservation of her words and the public promotion of her legacy.

Part of the reason why public memory of Hamer is foggier than that of other civil rights activists is because of exclusive class- and gender-based conceptualizations of whose voice should represent the concerns of African Americans and how radical those concerns can be. Because Hamer's vernacular persona broke with the tradition of "respectability"—the public image of blacks

as dignified, competent, and similar to whites—that African American activists, scholars, and clubwomen had been carefully crafting since Reconstruction, far fewer of Hamer’s speeches were recorded, transcribed, and anthologized than those of more well-connected male movement activists alongside whom she regularly spoke.⁹⁹ Because Hamer presented herself humbly, preferring to speak without a manuscript and proclaiming to simply “tell it like it is,” furthermore, not even college campuses like Harvard and Duke—generally proficient record-keepers—preserved her frequent addresses for posterity.¹⁰⁰

Beyond the failure to capture the public addresses she did give, the very nature of her vernacular persona led some more mainstream activists to try to silence her rhetorical expression in the first place. For example, Roy Wilkins, Executive Secretary of the NAACP, recognized the way in which Hamer’s persona breached the African American activist tradition of respectability and chided her for the disruption. Hamer told one interviewer that Wilkins ordered her, and the MFDP coalition she represented, to leave the convention, and Reverend Edwin King recalled Wilkins lamenting the “ugly dress” that Hamer wore the day she testified.¹⁰¹ Although he was highly critical of Wilkins’s remarks, King later tried to contextualize the offensive comments, maintaining that Wilkins had spent his whole life telling “white middle-class Americans that blacks are middle class, too” and then Mrs. Hamer, “who’s a stereotype,” came along and threatened to undermine Wilkins’s claim to equal rights rooted in the similarity of the races. “Because of 200 years of white racism,” which propagated the perception that “all blacks are backwards” as evidenced by the fact that “they can’t speak the language, don’t know how to dress” and would therefore “embarrass you if they came to your church, much less your country club, especially your political party,” King reasoned that Wilkins was anxious about catapulting someone like Hamer into the center of the struggle.¹⁰²

Just as the power of Hamer’s vernacular persona failed to resonate with Wilkins at the 1964 DNC, when Hamer received an honorary doctorate from the historically black Tougaloo College, she faced similar scorn from alumni who objected to the accolade because she was unlettered.¹⁰³ Not even SNCC, an organization that eschewed hierarchical structure and exercised considerable disrespect for respectability, could escape the vestiges of intra-racial classism that plagued the black freedom movement. During a heated organizational meeting, for instance, Hamer opposed the expulsion of whites from SNCC, whereupon several black staffers remarked that her comments held little weight because she was not “at our level of development.”¹⁰⁴

Although Stokely Carmichael was not among the group of SNCC staffers to utter this sentiment during the mid-1960s, his remarks at Hamer's funeral service advanced an equally one-dimensional view of her intelligence. For as much as Carmichael praised Hamer's strength, consoled the audience through words of rejuvenation, and urged them to imitate her life of conscious struggle on behalf of the dispossessed, aspects of his address advanced many of the same classist misconceptions that excluded Hamer during her lifetime and stunted public memory of her. In his zest to represent Hamer as an ordinary person, one that even those who were left to listen from outside the church could imitate, Carmichael essentially reiterated the SNCC staffers' mid-decade characterization of Hamer as ignorant and underdeveloped. "Who is Mrs. Hamer?" Carmichael asked her close friends, family members, and fellow activists. "Mrs. Hamer is just a woman just like anybody else. . . . This is Mrs. Hamer who can't read or write. . . . This is Mrs. Hamer who is not intelligent," he continued, "this is Mrs. Hamer who sweats and sweats . . . and everything she produces goes into the pockets of Mr. Eastland." The argument Carmichael intended to support with this derogatory, and at times blatantly inaccurate, evidence is a basic analogy by a fortiori. Reasoning that if the least among us can rise up and "shake and rock and smash" the system of exploitation, then certainly the most powerful among us has this potential, Carmichael attempted to reach both those honored guests seated inside the church doors as well as those less prominent people who stood outside. This central claim may have failed to reach either group, however, saturated as it was in stereotypical misconceptions of the Delta poor.¹⁰⁵

The tensions over race representation and the stereotypical misconceptions among black movement activists also extended to the realm of interracial politics. At the same convention where Wilkins berated Hamer for her political ignorance, President Johnson took issue with her vernacular speech. During a meeting of notable civil rights activists gathered to consider the two-seat compromise that President Johnson grudgingly offered the MFDP, Bayard Rustin asked if Fannie Lou Hamer would be considered for one of these two seats, to which vice president hopeful Hubert Humphrey replied, "The President will not allow that illiterate woman to speak from the floor of the convention."¹⁰⁶ Four years later, Hamer's 1968 DNC address was not televised because many members of the party worried that her uninhibited speech and radical vision for social change might reflect poorly on the newly recognized interracial coalition sent from Mississippi. Hamer was, thus, useful to movement strategists insofar as she could testify about her representative

life experiences. Yet, the very vernacular nature of her discourse, especially when combined with the confrontational register through which she convicted American people and institutions, led black freedom movement activists and political power brokers alike to discount Hamer's contribution to the movement.

CONCLUSION

Over 30 years after her death, Reverend Edwin King still bristles at the suggestion that Hamer was “some romantic grassroots person” who stood and spoke and stumbled upon greatness. A fellow Mississippian, friend, and close activist ally, King's proximity to Hamer enabled him to appreciate how seriously she took her speaking responsibilities. “Mrs. Hamer was not just speaking,” argues King, “Mrs. Hamer was self-conscious and knew that she was a voice that needed to be used.”¹⁰⁷ King considers Hamer a religious prophet and describes her as a speaker who was “aware,” who had a “mission,” who was “self-conscious” in “trying to understand her own style” so that she could better communicate her message.¹⁰⁸ Given the centrality of speech to her activist identity, it is clear that a rhetorical analysis of Fannie Lou Hamer's career is long overdue. Furthermore, consideration of her vernacular persona—the centerpiece of her message that evolved over time, across space, and in the service of various exigencies—provides an apt starting point to learn more about how she sustained a platform for her expression and to discern what was distinctive about her discourse. Treating her vernacular self-presentation as a persona also reminds critic and audience member alike that Hamer made strategic choices in the service of her rhetorical purposes. In particular, she constructed her vernacular appeal from cultural and counter-institutional frameworks such as the Exodus narrative, the Jeremiad, and the black vernacular trope of signification to establish her authority to speak, to encourage her oppressed audiences to recognize their capacity for activism, and to cultivate the will to change among their oppressors. Recognizing the traditions upon which Hamer drew, and analyzing the way in which her choices cohered into a persona that forwarded her rhetorical purposes, provides a fuller understanding of her discourse's ostensibly paradoxical nature. Ultimately, analysis that accounts for the strategic choices Hamer made encourages a renewed appreciation of her rhetorical abilities, while also guarding against the all-too-common tendency to portray Hamer as a

stereotype or a flat caricature from which contemporary audiences would have little to learn. Quite conversely, audience members like King and Dorsey, who recognized Hamer's persona as strategic, contend that the power and force of her message came, in no small part, from her ability to challenge and dispel the derogatory conceptions that had silenced poor black women for centuries.¹⁰⁹

Unfortunately, movement activists from Roy Wilkins to Stokely Carmichael, not to mention political power brokers all the way up to the office of U.S. President, either failed to see the radical potential in Hamer's rhetoric or feared its implications. This failure and fear coupled with Hamer's humble self-presentation—her preference to speak without a manuscript and her insistence that she was simply “telling it like it is”—resulted in the preservation of far fewer of her public addresses than of other movement greats. Although we might not yet have access to volumes of Hamer's speeches, with the recent publication of nearly twenty of her texts, rhetorical scholars can now move beyond the racist, sexist, and classist biases that limited the success of her message in its context and begin to discover the enduring value of her words.

More than simply celebrating a vernacular voice, therefore, this article provides an invitation for further analysis by demonstrating why Hamer's rhetoric warrants continued critical consideration. It moves beyond the first step of anthologizing a vernacular voice to employ the vernacular as an analytical lens in examining the implications of that voice, the rhetorical strategies upon which it relied, and the purposes those strategies served. Such analysis suggests that the vernacular frame can help illuminate how oppressed advocates establish their authority to speak, how they motivate the subjugated communities they represent, and how they engage broader national audiences. Ultimately, this article demonstrates that vernacular-framed analyses hold the potential to explain the paradoxes surrounding, and thereby overcome the misconceptions silencing, many of the alternative voices and rhetorical strategies that propelled the black freedom movement.¹¹⁰

NOTES

1. Andrew Young, “Eulogy at Fannie Lou Hamer's funeral,” March 20, 1977, transcribed by author from video recording of funeral. Tape of Fannie Lou Hamer funeral, March 20,

1977, by Jane Petty and Patti Carr Black, Trans Video, Ltd., available from Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH), MP81.2, Tape 1 and 2, Jackson, Mississippi.

2. Young, "Eulogy at Fannie Lou Hamer's Funeral."
3. For recent articles in communication studies journals that mention Fannie Lou Hamer, see: Christine Harold and Kevin Michael DeLuca, "Behold the Corpse: Violent Images and the Lynching of Emmett Till," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8 (2005): 263–86; and Marilyn Bordwell DeLaure, "Planting Seeds of Change: Ella Baker's Radical Rhetoric," *Women's Studies in Communication* 31 (2008): 1–28.
4. For biographical works about Hamer (in chronological order), see: June Jordan, *Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1972); Susan Kling, *Fannie Lou Hamer: A Biography* (Women for Racial and Economic Equality, 1979); David Rubel, *Fannie Lou Hamer: From Sharecropping to Politics* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Silver Burdett Press, 1990); Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: Penguin, 1993); Kay Griffin-Jeuchter, "Fannie Lou Hamer: From Sharecropper to Freedom Fighter," (M.A. thesis, Sarah Lawrence College, 1990); Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999). Although not a communication studies journal, the *Journal of Black Studies* published Janice D. Hamlet's analysis (which could be considered rhetorical) of Hamer's activist career; see Janice D. Hamlet, "Fannie Lou Hamer: The Unquenchable Spirit of the Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of Black Studies* 26 (1996): 560–76. Bernice Johnson Reagon also incorporates elements of interpretive analysis into her scholarship; see Reagon, "Let the Church Sing 'Freedom,'" *Black Music Research Journal* 7 (1987): 105–18.
5. For anthologies featuring Hamer's speeches (in chronological order), see: Fannie Lou Hamer, "It's In Your Hands," in *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*, ed. Gerda Lerner (New York: Vintage, 1972), 609–14; Fannie Lou Hamer, "Testimony of Fannie Lou Hamer," in *We Want Our Freedom: Rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. W. Stuart Towns (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), 167–72; Fannie Lou Hamer, "Untitled Speech 1964," in *Rhetoric, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954–1965*, ed. Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), 786–93; and Fannie Lou Hamer, "Untitled Speech," in *Women and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954–1965*, ed. Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 280–87.
6. Fannie Lou Hamer, "Testimony Before the Credentials Committee at the Democratic National Convention," Atlantic City, New Jersey, August 22, 1964, in *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To Tell It Like It Is*, ed. Maegan Parker Brooks and Davis W. Houck (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 45.
7. Hamer saw her own participation and the larger MFDP's activism as "turning the tide

of the Convention . . . by shaking people up,” as reported in Interview with Fannie Lou Hamer by Anne Romaine, 1966, Civil Rights Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison.

8. Interview with Dr. Leslie McLemore by author, Jackson, Mississippi, June 13, 2007.
9. Interview with Dr. L. C. Dorsey by author, Jackson, Mississippi, June 11, 2007.
10. Interview with Reverend Edwin King by author, Jackson, Mississippi, June 15, 2007.
11. As Davis W. Houck has discovered, at least two different accounts exist regarding the inception of Fannie Lou Hamer’s civil rights activism: one account, promulgated principally by Charles Evers and passed along by several scholars, suggests that Hamer was an early participant in the Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL), a progressive civil rights organization founded in Cleveland, Mississippi, by legendary physician Dr. T. R. M. Howard in 1951. A second and more plausible account is that Hamer’s activism dates to August 1962, when she attended a meeting at Williams Chapel Church and heard James Bevel and James Forman encourage local Ruleville blacks to attempt to register to vote. The plausibility of this second account is reinforced by the fact that Hamer never mentions the RCNL in her autobiography, nor does she attribute her activist awakening to an RCNL meeting in any oral history or speech of which we are aware.
12. “Interview with Fannie Lou Hamer by Project South,” Stanford University, Department of Special Collections.
13. Interview with Ambassador Andrew Young by author, June 25, 2007, Atlanta, Georgia.
14. Interview with Ambassador Andrew Young.
15. Robert Glenn Howard, “A Theory of Vernacular Rhetoric: The Case of the ‘Sinner’s Prayer’ Online,” *Folklore* 116 (2005): 174.
16. “Raising Cain” is a phrase used by Hamer most famously in her 1964 Democratic National convention testimony. It also appears in other speeches that tell the story of her being fired from Marlow’s plantation.
17. For more on common grammatical and syntactical patterns, as well as stylistic features of AAVE, see Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977).
18. The hypotactic style is characteristically complex, featuring “numerous subordinate or dependent clauses along with prepositional phrases.” For an excellent summary of hypotaxis and its opposite, parataxis, see James Jasinski, *Sourcebook on Rhetoric: Key Concepts in Contemporary Rhetorical Studies* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001), 540.
19. See Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin*; Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin that Talk: Language, Culture, and Education in America* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Geneva Smitherman, *Word from the Mother: Language and African Americans* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

20. Howard, "A Theory of Vernacular Rhetoric," 175.
21. Robert Glenn Howard, "The Vernacular Web of Participatory Media," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25 (2008): 493.
22. Interview with Fannie Lou Hamer by Robert Wright, August 6, 1968, Oral History Collection, Civil Rights Documentation Project, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.
23. Fannie Lou Hamer, "Songs My Mother Taught Me," audio recording accompanying papers, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans. Tape produced by Bernice Johnson Reagon, financed by the We Shall Overcome Fund and the National Endowment for the Humanities, 1980. Songs taped by Worth Long.
24. Interview with Dr. L. C. Dorsey by author.
25. Leroy Fitts, *A History of Black Baptists* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1985), 222.
26. Jordan, *Fannie Lou Hamer*, 15.
27. Interview with Dr. Leslie McLemore by author.
28. Interview with Fannie Lou Hamer by Robert Wright.
29. Interview with Fannie Lou Hamer by Robert Wright.
30. Howard, "A Theory of Vernacular Rhetoric," 174, emphasis added.
31. Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 7–8.
32. Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 10.
33. Glaude, *Exodus!*, 46. See also, Gates's use of Mikael Bakhtin's narrative theory of the dual voice in Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 50–51.
34. Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 44, emphasis added.
35. Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 45.
36. Burke explores this concept most fully in *Permanence and Change* (1935; rpt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 89–96. See also, Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History* (1937; rpt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 308–14.
37. Glaude, *Exodus!*, 54.
38. David Howard-Pitney, *The Afro-American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 6.
39. Howard-Pitney, *The Afro-American Jeremiad*, 8.
40. Howard-Pitney, *The Afro-American Jeremiad*, 15 and 12, respectively.
41. Walzer briefly discusses what he labels the "optimistic view of the effects of oppression on ordinary men and women" in his second chapter "The Murmurings: Slaves in the Wilderness," in *Exodus and Revolution*, 41–45.
42. Robert Glenn Howard, "Toward a Theory of the World Wide Web Vernacular: The Case for Pet Cloning," *Journal of Folklore Research* 42 (2005): 325.
43. For more on the relationship between prior ethos (stereotyping) and the authority

- discursively constructed within speaking encounters, see Ruth Amossy, "Ethos at the Crossroads of Disciplines: Rhetoric, Pragmatics, Sociology," *Poetics Today* Vol. 22, No. 1 (2001): 1–23.
44. See Thomas B. Farrell's characterization of Aristotle's "aesthetic discussion," wherein he described a rhetoric "intrinsic to a conflicted, indeterminate human nature," in *Norms of Rhetorical Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 103. See also Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 73 and 83.
 45. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "Agency: Promiscuous and Protean," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 2 (2005): 4, 2, 4–5.
 46. Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).
 47. See Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. R. Roberts (New York: Modern Library, 1954); Eugene Garver, *Aristotle's Rhetoric: An Art of Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
 48. As Karlyn Kohrs Campbell notes, "the principle of rhetorical invention is subversion." Accordingly, "one of the richest and oldest sources of rhetorical invention" is "symbolic reversal" (112–13). For more on women's subversive efforts in coming to voice, see Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "Inventing Women: From Amaterasu to Virginia Woolf," *Women's Studies in Communication* 21 (1998): 111–26.
 49. Campbell, "Inventing Women," 112–13. Walzer acknowledges this parallel as a reason why the "Exodus story appealed so much to African slaves in the American South." See Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, 31.
 50. Hamer, "What Have We to Hail?" in *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer*, 81.
 51. Hamer, "Until I Am Free, You Are Not Free Either," in *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer*, 124.
 52. Hamer, "It's in Your Hands," 609–10.
 53. Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, 43.
 54. Hamer, "I'm Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired," in *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer*, 58.
 55. Hamer, "Testimony Before the Democratic Reform Committee," in *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer*, 96.
 56. Hamer was actually 46 years old when she passed the voter registration test. Hamer, "Is it Too Late?" in *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer*, 132.
 57. Hamer, "America is a Sick Place, and Man is on the Critical List," [1970] in *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer*, 115.
 58. Hamer, "Until I Am Free," 123
 59. Hamer, "It's in Your Hands," 612.
 60. Hamer, "America is a Sick Place," 115.

61. Hamer, "I'm Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired," 63.
62. Hamer, "We're on Our Way," 1964, in *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer*, 49.
63. Quotation taken from untitled document within 1964 Second Congressional District Campaign folder in Box 52 (SNCC Papers), Martin Luther King Jr. Library and Archives, Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta.
64. Hamer, "We're on Our Way," 53.
65. Hamer, "America is a Sick Place," 119.
66. Hamer, "America is a Sick Place," 120.
67. Hamer, "To Make Democracy a Reality," in *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer*, 102; and Hamer, "The Only Thing We Can Do Is to Work Together," in *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer*, 72.
68. Hamer, "To Make Democracy a Reality," 102.
69. Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, 43.
70. In particular, see Howard-Pitney's discussion of "The Black Jeremiad and the Jackson Phenomenon," in *The Afro-American Jeremiad*, 190, 192.
71. Hamer, "We're on Our Way," 53.
72. Hamer, "We're on Our Way," 53.
73. Hamer, "We're on Our Way," 49.
74. Hamer, "We're on Our Way," 53.
75. Hamer, "We're on Our Way," 53–54.
76. Howard-Pitney, *The Afro-American Jeremiad*, 12.
77. Hamer, "We're on Our Way," 54.
78. See Hamer, "We're on Our Way," 53 and 52, respectively. See also Walzer's discussion of the less optimistic effects of persecution, "The Murmurings: Slaves in the Wilderness," in *Exodus and Revolution*, 43–70. This reaffirmation, furthermore, demonstrates what Ono and Sloop suggest as the multifaceted potential of vernacular discourse. In "Critique of Vernacular Discourse," Ono and Sloop underscore a point raised by Todd Boyd that "vernacular discourse does not exist only as counter-hegemonic, but also as affirmative, articulating a sense of community that does not function solely as oppositional to dominant ideologies," cited in Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop, "The Critique of Vernacular Discourse," *Communication Monographs* 62 (1995): 22.
79. Speaking before an audience in Madison, Wisconsin, Hamer celebrated "the contribution that [black people] have made in the past," suggesting "we know as well as you know—that this country was built on the blood and the sweat of black people." See Hamer, "Until I Am Free," 125.
80. Hamer, "America Is a Sick Place," in *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer*, 118.
81. Hamer, "Until I Am Free," 126.
82. Hamer, "To Tell It Like It Is," in *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer*, 91.

83. Hamer, "Until I Am Free," 126.
84. Interview with Reverend Edwin King by author.
85. Glaude, *Exodus!*, 165.
86. Howard-Pitney, *The Afro-American Jeremiad*, 6.
87. Howard-Pitney, *The Afro-American Jeremiad*, 7.
88. Howard-Pitney, *The Afro-American Jeremiad*, 6.
89. Howard-Pitney, *The Afro-American Jeremiad*, 6.
90. Hamer, "Until I Am Free," 129.
91. Hamer, "To Make Democracy a Reality," 99.
92. Hamer, "To Tell It Like It Is," 90.
93. Hamer, "We're on Our Way," 52.
94. Hamer, "I Don't Mind My Light Shining" in *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer*, 5.
95. Hamer, "America Is a Sick Place," 118.
96. Hamer, "Until I Am Free," 128.
97. Hodding Carter Jr. "Remarks and Fannie Lou Hamer's Funeral," March 20, 1977. Transcribed by author from video recording of funeral (MDAH).
98. Hamer, "We Haven't Arrived Yet," in *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer*, 184.
99. For a discussion of the "politics of respectability," see Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894–1994* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1999).
100. For example, student newspaper accounts indicate that Hamer spoke at places like Harvard, Duke, Carleton, Florida State University, and Seattle University. Yet after extensive engagement with the librarians and archivists at these institutions, we have not been able to track down a single recording or transcript from her engagements there.
101. Interview with Fannie Lou Hamer by Anne and Howard Romaine, 1966 (WHS), and interview with Reverend Edwin King by author, respectively.
102. Interview with Reverend Edwin King by author.
103. Kay Mills includes this anecdote in her biography of Hamer, *This Little Light*, 248–49. Reverend Edwin King also mentioned it in my interview with him.
104. The dismissal of Mrs. Hamer by black separatists within SNCC is discussed widely. Most references cite James Forman's autobiography, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, as the source for this anecdote. Describing a SNCC meeting held at "Peg Leg Bates's" in 1966, Forman contextualizes the comment in the following manner: "Some people with college educations showed their disdain toward people who were slow readers or could not read at all. A few black staffers were making such comments as 'Mrs. Hamer is no longer relevant' or 'Mrs. Hamer isn't at our level of development.' This conflict was related to the debate over whites, for the same middle-class blacks who spoke this way of working-class people like Mrs. Hamer also refused to look at 'the white question' in

- anything more than a racial context.” James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Washington, D.C.: Open Hand, 1985), 476.
105. Stokely Carmichael, “Special Tribute to Fannie Lou Hamer,” transcribed by author from video recording of Harner’s March 20, 1977, funeral, available from the MDAH.
 106. Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake*, 95 n.50, quoting an interview with Reverend Edwin King by Anne Romaine.
 107. Interview with Reverend Edwin King by author.
 108. Interview with Reverend Edwin King by author.
 109. Dr. L. C. Dorsey, for instance, recalls how aspects of Hamer’s physical appearance—the fact that she was “clearly black, overweight, often sweating, and unpolished”—placed her squarely within the bounds of the “mammy” stereotype. Yet, through the power of her testimony, Dorsey and Reverend Edwin King claim, Hamer dispelled the notions stereotypically associated with the mammy image. The fact that aspects of Hamer’s physical image sent a message that she was, in Dorsey’s estimation, “not quite educated or centered, definitely not of leadership quality,” created an attention-getting perspective by incongruity because the words that Hamer sang and spoke defied this demeaning characterization. Interview with L. C. Dorsey and Reverend Edwin King by author.
 110. Ono and Sloop suggest an important distinction between “descriptive/recuperative/appreciative/anthological texts and a critical framework,” which is akin to suggesting “a division between *topoi*, locations of objects, and *techne* as interrelated objects of critical inquiry” (42 n.7). Similarly, they contend that a community “constructed out of elements of culture,” is “heuristically worthy of critical contemplation”; see “The Critique of Vernacular Discourse,” 24.

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