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Building a Dream

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Building a Dream

A Rhetorical Analysis by Jenny Nestelberger
Advisor: Dr. Henry

The March on Washington is often remembered as the symbol of the civil rights movement. “To many Americans, the March on Washington in August of 1963 was the civil rights movement.” Moreover, within this symbol is the memory of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s famous “I Have a Dream” address. Although ten speeches were delivered by leaders of the varying civil rights, religious, and labor groups, King’s address became not only the most praised of the March but one of the most highly acclaimed speeches in American history, pushing the others to the margins of American memory. King has been elevated into an iconic representation of the civil rights movement which obscures not only the collective memory of the March but the movement as whole, which was “built on the courageous and determined efforts of thousands upon thousands of everyday people.” The March on Washington ought to be remembered as more than simply the event that allowed King to portray his dream. As a mass protest and organization of hundreds of thousands of Americans, this collective action represents the power that social movements can have and the outcomes that can result from meaningful dissent.

There is no King without a movement, [but] there is a movement without King.

-Cornel West, civil rights activist

CONTEXT

The March occurred during a time of friction for the United States. It served as a response to the extensive division in the nation that resulted from the socially constructed identity of African-Americans as an inferior race. Frustrated by the unfair treatment they had long endured, African-Americans began to express their dissatisfaction publicly. The variety of protests that took place opened the possibilities for communication among activists. However, while activism spread in the nation, so too did aggressive reactions from the opposition. Violence was especially prominent in the South where pressure hoses and police dogs were used to stop protestors. Both the growing activism and the violent responses to these demonstrations led to the proposal for a massive protest at the capital as an attempt to generate change.

CONSTRUCTING COMMUNITY IN A TIME OF DIVISION

Community building helps individuals understand their identity and sense of self as it relates to their role in the community. With a lack of identity, the African-American community needed something with which to connect in order to develop their sense of self. The addresses at the March provided that connection and demonstrated that cohesion is not only attainable but necessary for future action.

RHEOTICAL ANALYSIS

Speeches of the “Big Six” organizations were examined to discern their contribution to building community at the March. When viewed from the discourse of multiple speakers, the March is a dynamic spectacle—a socially constructed event that encapsulates the arguments of a given moment— that highlights the varying perspectives of different organizers yet maintains a sense of cohesion and community. The arrangement of the addresses allowed the arguments presented to be emphasized and created momentum for the grand finale, King’s address, which served as their ultimate vision for change. The multiple addresses at the March and their cohesive message iconically represented the change they sought in the nation. The leaders’ collective effort resembled the action for which they verbally urged in their speeches. Through its materialization as a dynamic spectacle, the arrangement of the discourse at the March, and its iconic representation of desired change, the March on Washington constructed community among civil rights activists. This sense of community helped urge subsequent action and provided an identity for the African-American community.

CONCLUSION

As a supplement to existing research that primarily focuses on King’s role in the March, this project aimed to highlight the perspectives of six leaders that played a crucial role in the organization of a critical moment in the civil rights movement. The speakers not only promoted community through their language but also through the embodiment of community at the event. Viewing the March from a single speech, however eloquently spoken, leaves us with an incomplete impression of the event. Going beyond individual messages helps us understand the patterns of public discourse and the complex mosaic that produces them. Observing the rhetorical strategies employed by multiple speakers helps us understand how community can be constructed even in the most turbulent times.