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## ***Introduction***

Frederick Douglass; Martin Luther King, Jr.; Barack Obama—all among the greatest orators brought forth from this Nation. Each individual's style, word choice, and actions have allotted them a place in our nation's history. Yet, aside from their incredible leadership skills and unforgettable speeches, all three men share another common denominator: their skin color. The issue of race, not only in politics but society as well, has been one of controversy and contention dating back to the birth of the United States. The most deadly and bloody war ever fought on American soil resulted from the issue of race—men died, suffered, and gave up everything in the fight for equality. This is an easy idea to forget when examining today's current society. Men and women of all different races are free to socially interact, have the same jobs, and share the same living space—one hundred years ago, the same could not be said. Our country has come so far in changing and developing race relations, and while we are still far from perfect, it is impossible to deny the progress we have made. From where exactly has this sort of progress come? From men like the aforementioned three—men who were willing to speak out and call for change, regardless of whether or not they would be persecuted for their beliefs. It is due to the courage, strength, and words of men like these that have changed our nation.

## ***Civil Rights Background***

The Civil Rights Era of our nation dates back to 1954 in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. This Supreme Court decision, which spurred the Civil Rights movement, “outlawed racial segregation in schools” (Rathbone 1). The predominant goal of the Civil Rights era was a simple one: equal rights regardless of skin

color. As the years progressed, the movement garnered more power and attention, as evidenced in the yearlong African American boycott of the bus system from Rosa Parks. The endless acts of bravery made by the recognized and unsung heroes of this era would help bring an end to the Civil Rights Era in 1971 (Rathbone). The story of the Civil Rights Movement documented the faith in humanity and sheer tenacity of ordinary people. The movement took ordinary people, and through the circumstances surrounding this time period, made them extraordinary. In an excerpt from an interview with David Gergen, Editor-at-Large of *U.S. News & World Report*, author and Martin Luther King, Jr./Civil Rights historian Taylor Branch details what the era was about:

I think those years meant an America that enlarged freedom, when it didn't really think that it could, and discovered all kinds of optimism that had been kind of tamped down after World War II in its human relations and in stepping out in the world. We were a much more provincial, narrow, and spiteful in many respects and divided country then than we are now. And it took a lot of courage and with the race issue and segregation having lived for a century after the Civil War, for people to believe that something good could happen. It's much harder than it is today. And this is a story about ordinary people from all ranks, you know, from presidents down to cripples, who took risks and risked their lives to enlarge freedom. And we have inherited a much better country for it. (Branch, 1998)

One of the most dominant figures to emerge from this era was Martin Luther King, Jr. His many leadership skills, demonstrations, and speeches would all contribute to this progressive era, but none more so than his "I Have a Dream" speech. Through this

speech, King was able to solidify his position a great rhetorician and leader while simultaneously delivering one of the most enchanting and effective speeches of our time.

### ***The March on Washington***

The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was projected to be the largest civil rights demonstration in the country's history. King made a statement to reporters in 1963 that the march "will have a two-fold purpose...to arouse the conscience of the nation on the economic plight of the Negro one hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation and to demand strong forthright civil rights legislation" (Hansen 16).

Washington itself appeared split of both sides, with some supporting the march and others absolutely against it. In an era where African Americans were seen as uneducated and brutish, many white politicians feared the worst, especially in terms of violence.

They feared that thousands of African Americans pouring into the nation's capital in a demonstration for jobs and freedom might result in a mob-like mentality, and potentially shake the foundation of the government. One representative from South Carolina, William Jennings Bryan Dorn, compared the march to the "Mussolini Fascist blackshirt march on Rome in 1922. It is reminiscent of the Socialist Hitler's government-sponsored rallies of Nuremberg" (Hansen 30). At the other end of the spectrum was President John F. Kennedy, who addressed the march as a "peaceful assembly calling for the redress of grievances" (Hansen 30). These two opposing viewpoints on the march played a critical role in the construction of King's speech. There was a tightrope King had to traverse: constructing and delivering a speech conservative enough as to not isolate and validate the fears of many politicians, yet liberal enough to still purport action for change in the economy and social rights.

### ***Composition***

The composition of this speech began about four days before the address was given. King was a well-traveled and well-versed speaker in 1963, having almost ten years of experience in public speaking. King was given a five-minute time slot for the speech; consequently, this narrowed down the topics about which he could speak (however, the final speech was nearly seventeen minutes). The time limit resulted in multiple drafts, discussions, and editing to bring the speech to its completed form. It took King and his advisors the full four days before the speech to complete the final draft. “This meticulous process of composition, beginning with the solicitation of drafts from several advisers and culminating in a complete manuscript of the speech, was highly unusual for King at this stage in his career” (Hansen 70). King’s normal style of speech construction was to use pre-adapted material, or what Drew Hansen calls “set-pieces.” “King had collected a repertoire of oratorical fragments—successful passages from his own sermons, sections from other preachers’ works, anecdotes, bible verses, lines from favorite poets—that he could combine to create a sermon” (Hansen 70). Memorizing these set pieces was a common practice for preachers, and this style of speech construction was something with which King was extremely familiar. Based on composition, these previous speeches differed from his “I Have a Dream” speech. Previous speeches read as sermons, where King would rearrange and draw upon his memorized set-pieces. This contrasted drastically with the four-day construction of the meticulously drafted “I Have a Dream” speech. King’s team submitted a draft of the prepared, proposed speech on the day of the march.

### ***Analysis of Prepared vs. Delivered Speech***

Yet, the prepared, proposed speech King drafted and submitted to the press was not the one given on August 28, 1963. In a side-by-side comparison of the prepared speech and the delivered speech, the composition of the prepared speech differs greatly from the composition of the delivered speech (See Appendix A). Word choice and sentence construction are paramount in composition, considering each has the potential and power to change an entire speech's meaning.

### ***Additions to Prepared Speech (in bold)***

1. **“I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation.”**

By inserting this passage into the beginning of the speech, King stresses the importance of the occasion. The struggles and hard work from the past eight years of the Civil Rights Movement led the country to that moment in time, where hundreds of thousands of people were listening to what he had to say. This addition is an attention-grabber, which serves the purpose to ensure that the audience is listening and that King has their undivided attention. King makes the audience aware of the fact that they are witnessing a monumental moment in time. King inserts his feelings into this opening as well, saying that he is **“happy to join with you today.”** By revealing an emotion and using the word **join**, King is able to level himself with the audience and listeners from around the country. By joining with everyone rather than acting as a superior, King is able to become a more approachable, identifiable figure. His revelation of feelings paints the portrait of a human being rather than that of an extremist leader.

2. **“And so we've come here today to dramatize a shameful condition...This note was a promise that all men—yes, black men as well as white men—would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”**

King uses the word **shameful** in the delivered speech as opposed to the word *appalling* in the prepared speech. By using the word *appalling*, King would have validated the stereotype that many members of government and people around the country had at that time of African Americans. The stereotype was that of an angry, brutish man incapable of articulation. The word *appalling* exacerbates that stereotype; had this word been used, it would discount the progress made over the past eight years in the Civil Rights Movement. It would only further validate the hesitations and worries amongst those opposed to equality. The word *appalling* also implies blame, as in one group did something wrong. This would further divide the crowd into black and whites; into “we” vs. “them.” This word would fit best in the context of more extreme rhetoric, such as that of Malcolm X. “The difference between King and Malcolm is the difference between rhetoric of absorption and rhetoric of attack” (Lischer 155). However, King was a proponent for peaceful demonstration rather than extreme actions and rhetoric. *Appalling* would have created divisions among the audience instead of solidarity. The word **shameful** is much more fitting for the occasion because it implies guilt rather than disgust. “King so thoroughly associated the goals of the African Americans with the values of mainstream America that the latter group was left with the choice of taking action on behalf of the oppressed or accepting its own guilt” (Lischer 155). Rather than blaming anyone for the current state of social inequality, King focuses in on America’s failure to live up to the ideals set forth in the Declaration of Independence. The core pillars upon which America is founded are not being honored, and what could possibly be more un-American than that? By addressing the issue of the Declaration of Independence, King is not only able to make a point about racial equality, but also call into question the morals of his opponents that consider themselves American. The word

**shame** is a perfect substitution for *appalling* because it brings forth a sense of disappointment and guilt rather than disgust and blame. The disappointment is that as a country, we have failed to implement the beliefs of our forefathers. King's insertion of **“yes, black men as well as white men”** points out the problem at hand. The Declaration of Independence states that all men are to be guaranteed the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, yet America has interpreted and implemented this in a context of race. However, the Declaration of Independence states “all men”—this is encompassing, regardless of skin color, and for King to point this out once again calls into question what it means to be American. This is another attempt by King to unify his listeners and create a sense of solidarity rather than division by pointing out that as Americans, we are entitled to certain rights regardless of skin color. This quotation “brought out how racially egalitarian King thought the Declaration was” (Hansen 91).

3. **“Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.”**

King's positive use of language creates a sense of urgency. It serves as a call for action. **“Now is the time”** creates a sense of the present, of the here and now. King did not use passive word choices, saying that the time “will” come or “may” come. His wording is active, forceful, and motivating. It is with this statement that King is condemning the gradualism exhibited in the past by America. “King insisted that it would be “fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment.” He realized how easily social movements can be thwarted by partial and Pyrrhic victories. He warned against taking “the tranquilizing drug of gradualism” (DeLaure and Duffy 265). America was guilty of gradualism—inequality existed for hundreds of years prior to King's speech and nothing was done about it. Over time, inequality continued to gradually become worse. King calls gradualism a “tranquilizing drug” because it conveys the idea that “it will be done later”—



since it is not that important, it can be put off until tomorrow. What is so dangerous about this notion is that what is put off slowly begins to accumulate. This accumulation causes any situation to become worse until it becomes larger than ever imagined. King calls for urgency because America has been plagued in the past by the “tranquilizing drug of gradualism.” His message of urgency is so important because the actions of the past, or lack thereof, contributed to the negative race relations of the time. It would be “fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment” because relations would continue to become worse. King is calling for action and immediate change. When he uses the word “now,” King is essentially providing anyone against the movement with a clean slate. It is almost as if King is saying we must not forget the past, but learn from it and move forward toward equality, beginning with change right now. This line extends an open hand to those previously opposed to King, offering a cleansing renewal and forgiveness of past injustices—in essence, a baptism. **“Now is the time”** to change, to move forward and progress toward equality. King is once again able to create a common thread among his listeners by saying that we are **“all God’s children.”**

4. **“No, no, we are not satisfied and** we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

Once again, King adds language that embodies the current state of affairs and creates a sense of urgency. He is saying that not only will victims of injustice be unsatisfied “until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream”, but also that they are currently not satisfied. Without **“No, no, we are not satisfied”** in the prepared speech, the paragraph is extremely passive. By adding it to the delivered speech, King brings a voice to victims of inequality, to those that do not have a platform to say how miserable they are. This insertion is where King really begins to lay down his

conviction. Although the Civil Rights movement had been going on for eight years and some Americans had alterations in their beliefs toward equality, the movement still had a long way to go in order to achieve success. “His “We are not satisfied” litany catalogues an inventory of exploitation: Blacks are routinely disenfranchised; regularly excluded from motels, hotels, and prosperous neighborhoods; and restricted to impoverished neighborhoods. They are refused many other rights and blocked from the mainstream of American life” (Miller 418). This addition is almost as if King is slamming down his fist, saying that enough is enough, and demanding the attention of the government and the citizens of America.

***Omissions from Prepared Speech (in italics)***

1. “But one hundred years later, *we must face the tragic fact that* the Negro still is not free.”

King’s delivered speech omits “*we must face the tragic fact*”. There can be many interpretations for King’s motivation behind this. One may be because he did not want to portray African Americans as victims. Although African Americans were in fact victims of inequality, portraying themselves in that light would coincide with weakness and inferiority. If African Americans were to attain equal rights, they would have to demonstrate their strength, capability, and courage to their opponents. Pairing the word *tragic* with Negro conjures associations of helplessness and vulnerability. Being portrayed as victims would not garner the respect they so desperately needed. Another reason may be the implication behind the word “*tragic.*” When something is tragic, it usually implies an ending. The Civil Rights Movement was just starting, and it is possible that King did not want to imply it was over before it really flourished. Finally, King may not have wanted to highlight the tragic past of African Americans over the past one

hundred years. Had he focused primarily on past, tragic injustices, King may have isolated white audience members. By speaking about African Americans' tragic past, King had the potential to validate white people's fears of an extremist leader out to avenge the previous sufferings of his people. King's speech highlights change, progression, and a call to action; dwelling on previous tragic experiences would invalidate the idea of dreaming toward a better future.

2. "It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment *and to underestimate the determination of the Negro.*"

King leaves the first part of this sentence in his delivered speech, but omits the second half. This sentence, with the inclusion of "*and to underestimate the determination of the Negro,*" comes across as threatening. In a time where King was trying to establish a connection among races and change legislation, using threatening language would result in the polar opposite. It would further separate races and would cause Congress to become more wary of giving equal rights to African Americans. It also implies that African Americans would do anything to obtain the freedom for which they are fighting. In the minds of conservatives, this may have been in the form of violence. King's omission of this sentence was wise. Had the second half of the sentence remained in the delivered speech, the powerful first half would have been overshadowed. By leaving this portion out, King is able to come across as non-threatening and avoid the risk of alienating his race out of fear from white people.

3. "*This offense we share mounted to storm the battlements of injustice must be carried forth by a biracial army. We cannot walk alone.*"

This is another wise omission by King. The march that King was speaking at urged non-violence. King himself was a proponent for peaceful demonstration. Using the

metaphor “*biracial army*” is simply not appropriate for a non-violent event. The metaphor itself has good intentions, constructing an image of African American and white people fighting for justice, but the inclusion of the word “*army*” confuses its intentions. Though the metaphor itself doesn’t call for violence, it creates a violent image. King’s decision to leave out this sentence was brilliant due to a skeptical Congress and country. With the country teetering on the cusp of a social revolution, inserting a military metaphor would not have been the best idea, especially considering the fact that many people feared a violent upheaval from African Americans. Omitting “*biracial army*” eliminates potential problems that may have stemmed from the misinterpretation of the metaphor. Other rhetoricians have done the same type of editing in the past, including President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In his “First Inaugural Address” speech, Roosevelt edited “sword of leadership” to simply “leadership.” Like King, Roosevelt may have thought the wording created a violent image. “Perhaps the term “sword” sounded too militaristic, and perhaps he wanted to stress his personal leadership rather than his assuming a symbolic sword of leadership” (Ryan 22). Using militaristic words did not coincide with King’s philosophy. King stressed nonviolence as the way for America’s success. “His oratory fused the political promise of equal votes with the spiritual doctrine of equal souls. He planted one foot in the American heritage, the other in scripture, and both in nonviolence” (Branch 2006).

4. “*Let us work and march and love and stand tall together until that day has come when we can join hands and sing, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"*”

King omits the previous closing statement in favor of one with vivid imagery. The prepared closing statement was instead delivered as: “...**we will be able to speed up that**

**day when all of God's children—black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics—will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"**” By changing the initial closing statement, King is able to come full circle with previously mentioned topics. Earlier in the speech, King discusses that everyone is God’s child, and he re-visits this point in the delivered conclusion. The conclusion in the prepared speech is vague and does not offer any specifics besides the word “*us*.” By including rich imagery in the delivered speech, King enables the audience visualize a world of “**all of God's children—black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics.**” The delivered closing statement also has an important inclusion of the word Negro. By saying “**in the words of the old Negro spiritual,**” King is further establishing a common ground among his audience members. The Declaration of Independence, one of America’s founding documents, has at its core the ideal of freedom. The “**old Negro spiritual,**” which has been around for centuries, also has at its core the ideal of freedom. King is able to unveil a commonality, to demonstrate that even though two groups are so drastically different, they both have the same common denominator: a belief in freedom. In pointing out this similarity, King might have been trying to show that whites and African Americans are more alike than previously imagined. Aside from this connection, King may have inserted “**old Negro spiritual**” as a final homage to African Americans. The insertion claims ownership over the spiritual, calling it a “**Negro spiritual**” as opposed to just a spiritual. It is as though King is saying that this idea was ours from the start, and we have held onto it for so long; but now is the time, our time, to finally be “free at last.” King’s omissions from the prepared text drastically improve and strengthen the closing of this speech.

## *Analysis of Delivered Speech*

### *Delivery*

The delivery of King's "I Have a Dream" speech differs drastically from most popular rhetoric of the 1960's. This speech was one in which the audience interactively participated. His adoption of a sermon style delivery in the second half of his speech made his audience feel like they were involved.

Additionally, the speech reflects the form of a Baptist sermon in the Black traditions of the United States. Necessarily, this form is defined by the overt participation of the audience. Similarly, Keith and Whittenberger-Keith (1988/89) emphasize orality by focusing on the speech as a conversation analytic approach to public address. They conceptualize their study in terms of an orator's "call" for an audience response by applause or verbal response. (Weitzel 52)

This type of interactive participation is also known as call and response, which was very popular among African American churches. In this style, the preacher essentially engages in a conversation with the audience. Instead of talking at the audience, the preacher talks with the audience.. "All are to some degree performers, and none are spectators, though the corporate performance in no way reduced the importance of the individual preacher's virtuosity. Call and response represents the congregation's love for its pastor and the pastor's gift to his or her people (Lischer 138). Most Americans were not familiar with this sermon style delivery, which was much more familiar to African Americans and their congregations. King played the role of a preacher at the march, delivering a sermon to his congregation: the citizens on America. "...What affected his audiences was not just his prose (they could have heard its equal from a hundred others), but the whole persona: the

role that King was playing in an epic drama and the character that he explicated in that role” (Vail 52). The people of the United States needed King as the hero character in the “epic drama” to save the nation from hatred and segregation.

King’s vocal intonations also play a major role in the delivery of his speech. “King’s sermons exhibit a masterly organization of repetition into rhythm. Strictly speaking, rhythm is not a sound but the interval *between* sounds that constitutes their organizing principle” (Lischer 131). The rhythm and pace changes from the first half of the speech to the second half of the speech. In the first half of his speech, King was essentially reading the prepared text verbatim. He speaks slowly and methodically. When King decides to speak extemporaneously, his voice completely changes. His voice becomes louder, swelling, and full of passion and conviction. The rhythm becomes faster, aggressive, and therefore more emotional. King becomes lost in what he is saying, and this causes the audience to become lost in what he is saying as well. They are so enchanted by his passion in the second half of the speech that they erupt in response after almost every pause King takes.

The occasion introduced King’s everyday pulpit rhetoric as a national hymn. Despair wrestled deep in his voice against belief in democratic injustice, producing his distinctive orator’s passion, but the passion itself went to the core of the American heritage. From his reassurance of a common political ideal, the address spilled over into fresh cultural optimism.” (Branch 133)

### ***Language***

King’s word choice throughout the rest of the speech is paramount as well. He uses vivid words to construct an image. Some examples include the following: “beacon

of light,” “seared in the flames,” “midst of a vast ocean,” and “joyous daybreak.” In choosing words with intense imagery, the speech is given life and jumps into the imagination of the audience. The language utilized in the speech was that in which a normal, everyday person was capable of understanding. King was a very well educated man, and his lack of enormous words shows his solidarity with his audience members and his unwillingness to isolate any of them. “Whatever he received he first stripped of intellectual complexity and ambiguity in order to offer plain choices to his hearers. Then he clothed what was left in exaggerated metaphorical language in order to elevate the subject matter of his speech. Such language has little appeal to the eye but never fails to work on the ear and the heart” (Lischer 117). The rhetorical device used the most in this speech was *anaphora*. Anaphora is the repetition of a word or phrase, and King uses anaphora on four different occasions: “One hundred years later,” “I have a dream,” “Let freedom ring,” and “Free at last.” There are obvious reasons for using anaphora, which include stressing the importance of what you’re saying, and additionally, helping people to remember what you’re saying. Had King not used the rhetorical device of anaphora, I do not believe that this speech would have been as successful. It is possible to listen to a speech and at the end, still not understand what the speaker just said; however, with the device that King uses, it is almost guaranteeing that you will pay attention. If you did not hear what he said the first time, you are going to pay attention when he repeats it for the third or fourth time. Upon closer examination, I believe King chose to repeat the words that he did for a specific reason: to detail the timeline of racial segregation. By using “One hundred years later,” King is showing that things have still not changed and inequality exists. When saying “I have a dream,” King is showing what he wants in



changing this inequity. In saying “Let freedom ring,” King is showing that freedom is indeed a possibility. And when saying “Free at last,” King is projecting to the future, showing that his dreams are within reach and will come true. Essentially, it is what I think King wanted out of his involvement in the Civil Rights Era: to see what happened in the past, think about making change, make the change happen, and look back and celebrate after the change occurred. When looking at it this way, it could be seen as a self-fulfilling prophecy embedded in this speech. While this may be a self-fulfilling prophecy for King himself and his end goals for the era, it may also be one to the nation as well: we can have equality, we will have equality, and one day we will look back and celebrate.

### ***The Bible***

The Bible also played a large role in the construction of King’s speech. King’s inclusion of biblical rhetoric may have been due to not only his upbringing as a pastor, but also his knowledge of the audience. “Many of those who heard “I Have a Dream” had read the Bible repeatedly and carefully. Biblically literate Jews and Christians comprised a large portion of King’s audience—the 250,000 who heard the speech in person, the several million who listened on radio and television, and the many additional millions who heard or studied it later” (Miller 409). While there were biblical scholars among the audience, there were also African Americans who may have recognized certain verses, but did not study them to the extent of these scholars. By including these verses in his speech, King is able to create a bridge between scholars and the laymen of the audience. For the scholars, King’s inclusion of biblical passages demonstrates how knowledgeable he was in the academics of the Bible. For the laymen audience members, specifically

African Americans, he was showing parallel images between the suffering of those in the Bible in accordance with the sufferings felt by African Americans at the time. African Americans surely felt a connection between themselves and those that were persecuted, including the Jews and Christians. This is a way for King to connect with his audience. And, even though scholars may not have identified with what King was preaching, to members of his own race, they were able to recognize and appreciate how well versed King was in his study of the Bible. It also may have helped scholars to re-examine their interpretation of the Bible. “King contends that the African-American struggle against oppression provides an invaluable lens for viewing biblical narratives about oppression. He argues, in effect, that because African Americans live in captivity and exile, their experience is, in Niebuhr’s terms, the “medium” from which one can comprehend the Hebrews’ experience of slavery in Egypt and of captivity and exile in Babylon (Miller 417). King is essentially trying to expose the hypocrisy that may have been portrayed by religious leaders who were not in favor of equality and integration. He is exposing the parallelism between African Americans and members of religious organizations that experienced injustices in the past. By exposing the similarities between groups, King is able to establish a connection between African Americans, religious scholars in favor of integration, and religious scholars against integration.

Voice merging is a common practice of African American preachers and was utilized by King in his “I Have A Dream” speech. Voice merging occurs when the preacher uses language that identifies himself with a bigger picture or past tradition of African Americans. The identity is meant to transcend that of the preacher and encompass the audience. It is a way of taking an identity and making it applicable in

many different forms (Miller). “The minister creates a self as his identity converges with those of others. A typological epistemology make this convergence possible by affirming that knowable and repeatable types of human experience recur from generation to generation” (Miller 25). Voice merging can be seen through the example of the prophet Amos, who says in the Bible that he will not be satisfied until “justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a might stream” (Miller). When King utilizes this passage from Amos, he uses the phrase “we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” This is an example of voice merging: “So Amos is also speaking here as King merges Amos’s persona with his own. This union reflects back to the preceding sentences of the anaphora: The “we” who cannot be satisfied until justice reigns are the same “we” who seek lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of cities” (Miller 26). King is creating a connection between the prophet Amos and the people that were persecuted in his time and the African American audience who were being persecuted during 1963. The “we” that Amos spoke of hundreds of years in the past was merged with the current “we,” being the African American citizens of the United States.

### ***Departure***

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech is titled “I Have a Dream”; however, nowhere in the prepared speech does King utter these words. As evidenced in the side-by-side comparison, the “I have a dream” refrain appears only in the delivered speech. This means that after nearly ten minutes of reading his prepared speech (with minor adjustments), King completely abandoned his written text and improvised the final seven minutes. According to Hansen, in a 1963 interview with Donald Smith, King explains why he chose to abandon his written text:

I started out reading the speech, and I read it down to a point, and just all of a sudden, I decided—the audience response was wonderful that day, you know—and all of a sudden this thing came to me that I have used—I'd used many times before, that thing about “I have a dream”—and I just felt that I wanted to use it here. I don't know why. I hadn't thought about it before the speech. (Hansen 95)

King states that he used the “I have a dream” refrain many times before, and in fact: “He had already used it to a spectacular effect at a mass address in Detroit” (Lischer 116). Considering that it is not in the prepared speech and based on King's revelation that he had used the saying in the past, it is possible to conclude “I have a dream” was one of King's “set-pieces.” As previously mentioned, set-pieces are memorized passages, Bible verses, sayings, etc. that preachers draw upon to conduct sermons. King would utilize different set-pieces and choose the ones that best applied to what he was saying for a given occasion. This is the type of speech composition familiar to King, especially with his foundation as a preacher and familiarity with sermons. “One advantage of a compositional method based on rearranging and adapting previously memorized set pieces is that it gave King the flexibility to alter his addresses as he was speaking based on what he heard from the audience” (Hansen 96). King did not leave his prepared speech until almost ten minutes into speaking. During these ten minutes, King had to gauge the crowd to see what words and sayings created a reaction. Based on the words and sayings that elicited a reaction from the crowd, King chose a set-piece that would continue the audience's response. The break from prepared text to improvisation may have been due to the strong reactions from the crowd. “As King neared the end of his prepared text, he must have realized his written speech did not have a conclusion that matched the emotion of the moment” (Hansen 97). In this case, King chose the “I have a dream” set-piece.

King and his advisors spent four days drafting the prepared text of the speech; however, King composed and delivered a better address while standing in front of the audience.

I agree with Drew Hansen, who believes that it was King's departure from his prepared speech that made the delivered speech so moving: "...the address did not become known for any of the tag lines from the prepared text—we do not speak of King's "Bad Check" speech, or his "Now is the Time" speech" (Hansen 135). Hundreds of other speeches on economic and social inequality were given during this era. However, we remember this speech because of "the dream." While the set-piece itself is beautiful, the saying is remembered for its implications rather than its literal meaning. At a time when racial inequality was at its height—where people were being thrown into jails; where people were being beaten; where people were being murdered, all because of their skin color—in one of the most dark and desolate times of our country, King was able to provide a vision. This prophetic vision dreamt of a world where "children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." Providing listeners vivid imagery of a redeemed country without racial inequality was revolutionary. "He gave the nation a vision of what it could look like if all things were made new" (Hansen 156).

### ***The Test of Time***

King's speech "...had fewer than 1,600 words. Even with the dramatic pauses and roaring Southern oratory, it took King just over 15 minutes to deliver it" (Harris-Lacewell 10). This 1,600 word, fifteen minute long speech would mark King's spot in the history books. One of the main reasons cited for the speech's popularity is the electronic media. Unlike the previous century, Martin Luther King Jr. had the power and resources of the media behind him to help distribute the speech further than even imagined. In an excerpt

from Duffy and Besel's essay "Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" and the Politics of Cultural Memory: An Apostil": "King's speech was instantaneously heard and seen by radio listeners and television viewers numbering in the millions. For all its compelling metaphor and soaring imagery, "I Have a Dream" is more drama than poetry; as drama, it must be heard and seen" (Duffy, Besel 186). Through electronic media, listeners and viewers were able to see and hear just moved King was by his own words. Having the ability to replay and reproduce such a memorable moment helped this speech to stand the test of time.

### ***Conclusion***

Martin Luther King Jr. had many aspects that contributed to the success of the speech. However, I believe the most significant reason for why this speech was such a success was due to the final seven minutes. In the final seven minutes of his speech, King deserted the prepared draft and spoke from his heart. He spoke of a country where blacks weren't automatically assumed inferior to whites. He spoke of a country ridden of racism. He spoke of a country that returned to the fundamental principles upon which it was established. This future America that King spoke of, the America that we have come to know today, was unlike any rhetoric the country had ever heard. Rhetoric of the time was based on facts, goals, but never imagination. Through imagination, King hoped to make his dreams a reality; but most importantly, he hoped to make the new America a reality. Sharing his vision with the country that day slowly but surely began the process of achieving his dream. The Civil Rights Movement changed race relations in our country.

“The freedom struggle had made black legal equality a constitutional and legislative reality, but those victories in turn illuminated how much of black inequality in American life could not be remedied simply by the enforcement of statutory equality and true protection of Southern African-Americans' right to vote” (Garrow). While we have greatly progressed as a country since the 1960’s, race relations are still not perfect. Almost fifty years later, we are slowly but surely becoming the country of which King dreamt. The distant dreams of a gifted thirty-four year old preacher in 1963 have steadily becoming the current realities for a twenty-two year old college student in 2011.

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### Appendix A

The following is a side-by-side comparison of King’s prepared speech and delivered speech taken from Drew Hansen’s book *The Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Speech That Inspired a Nation* (Hansen 71-85):

<p><b>Prepared Speech</b> <i>(omissions in italics)</i></p>	<p><b>Delivered Speech</b> <b>(additions in bold)</b></p>
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Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous

**I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation.**

Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous

daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.

But one hundred years later, *we must face the tragic fact that* the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land.

So we've come here today to dramatize an *appalling* condition. In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check; a check that has come back marked

daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.

But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land.

**And** so we've come here today to dramatize a **shameful** condition. In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men—**yes, black men as well as white men**—would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check; a check that has come back marked

"insufficient funds."

But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and security of justice.

We have also come to his hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. *Now is the time to open the doors of opportunity to all of God's children.* Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.

It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment *and to underestimate the determination of the Negro.* This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality.

Nineteen sixty-three is not an end but a beginning. Those who hoped that the

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But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and security of justice.

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It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment. This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality.

Nineteen sixty-three is not an end but a beginning. Those who hoped that the

Negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual.

There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.

But there is something that I must say to my people who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice. In the process of gaining our rightful place we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds.

Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.

We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force. The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny and their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. *This*

Negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual.

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*offense we share mounted to storm the battlements of injustice must be carried forth by a biracial army. We cannot walk alone.*

inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone.

And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back. There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, "When will you be satisfied?" We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities.

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We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one.

We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one.

We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating "for whites only."

We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating "for whites only."

We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote.

We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote.

We will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

**No, no, we are not satisfied and** we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

*And so today, let us go back to our communities as members of the international association for the advancement of creative dissatisfaction.*

*Let us go back and work with all the strength we can muster to get strong civil rights legislation in this session of Congress.*

*Let us go down from this place to ascend other peaks of purpose. Let us descend from this mountaintop to climb other hills of hope.*

I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of *excessive* trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive.

I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of **great** trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive.

**Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair.**

**I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream.**

**It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.**

**I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.**

**I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.**

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

**I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today!**

**I have a dream that one day down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and**



**nullification, one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today!**

**I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together. This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with.**

With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.

With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.

**With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.**

**This will be the day—this will be the day—when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my father's died, land of the Pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring!" And if America is to be a great nation,**

**this must become true.**

**And so let freedom ring from the  
prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire.**

**Let freedom ring from the mighty  
mountains of New York.**

**Let freedom ring from the heightening  
Alleghenies of Pennsylvania.**

**Let freedom ring from the snow-capped  
Rockies of Colorado.**

**Let freedom ring from the curvaceous  
slopes of California.**

**But not only that.**

**Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain  
of Georgia.**

**Let freedom ring from Lookout  
Mountain of Tennessee.**

**Let freedom ring from every hill and  
molehill of Mississippi, from every  
mountainside, let freedom ring. And  
when this happens, and when we allow  
freedom ring, when we let it ring from  
every village and every hamlet, from  
every state and every city, we will be  
able to speed up that day when all of  
God's children—black men and white  
men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and  
Catholics—will be able to join hands and**

*Let us work and march and love and stand  
tall together until that day has come when  
we can join hands and sing,*

"Free at last! Free at last! Thank God  
Almighty, we are free at last!"

**sing in the words of the old Negro  
spiritual,**

"Free at last! Free at last! Thank God  
Almighty, we are free at last!"