



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
Episode 20: Civil Rights Episode

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Participants:

Trevor Parry-Giles
Robin Boylorn
Maegan Parker Brooks
Armond Towns

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RECORDING BEGINS

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Welcome to *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*. I'm Trevor Parry-Giles, the Executive Director of the National Communication Association. The National Communication Association is the preeminent scholarly association devoted to the study and teaching of communication. Founded in 1914, NCA is a thriving group of thousands from across the nation and around the world who are committed to a collective mission to advance communication as an academic discipline. In keeping with NCA's mission to advance the discipline of communication, NCA has developed this podcast series to expand the reach of our member scholars' work and perspectives.

Introduction:

This is *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*.

Robin Boylorn:

At the basic level for me, diversity is a very basic general thing that everybody should be doing anyway. It really should be aspirational at this point. But how can we unpack it and deconstruct it a bit more without putting additional invisible labor on faculty and scholars of color?

Trevor Parry-Giles:

On today's episode of *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*, we're addressing civil rights and the passing of the civil rights generation, the new civil rights generation and issues related to diversity, equity and inclusion. Professors Robin M. Boylorn, Maegan Parker Brooks and Armond Towns join me today for this really timely and interesting conversation. First, let me tell you a little bit about our guests. Robin M. Boylorn is an associate professor of interpersonal and intercultural communication in the department of communication studies at the University of Alabama. As an auto ethnographer, Dr. Boylorn researches herself, her culture and her identity as a black woman raised in the South. Dr. Boylorn's research centers around lived experience, intersectionality,



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social identities and cultural criticism. Dr. Boylorn is a member of the Crunk Feminist Collective, a scholar activist group and is also the editor-elect of NCA's journal *Communication and Critical Cultural Studies*. Hi, Robin. Thanks for joining us today.

Robin Boylorn:

Thank you so much for having me.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Maegan Parker-Brooks is an associate professor of civic communication and media and American ethnic studies at Willamette University and is particularly interested in rhetoric, race and public memory. Dr. Brooks is also the director of Find Your Voice the online resource for Fannie Lou Hamer studies, a multimedia project created in partnership with the Hamer family and with students, educators and civil rights activists in Hamer's home region the Mississippi delta. In total, Brooks has authored or co-authored and edited four books about Fannie Lou Hamer including the first and only collection of Hamer speeches and a recently released biography entitled *Fannie Lou Hamer: America's Freedom Fighting Woman*. Hi, Maegan. Thanks for joining us today.

Maegan Parker Brooks:

Thank you. Great to be here.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Armond Towns is an assistant professor of rhetoric and communication studies at the University of Richmond. Dr. Towns researches in the areas of black studies, media philosophy, communication history and British cultural studies. Dr. Towns is currently working on *Technological Darwinism: The Black Body as Medium*, a project that focuses on questions about race, gender, sexuality, class, time and space. Hi, Armond. Thanks for coming on our podcast today.

Armond Towns:

Thank you for having me. I'm glad to be here.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

So, I want to start the conversation at a sort of broader theoretical level and among other areas, Armond, that your work focuses on is the area of black studies. Can you tell our listeners a little bit about what black studies means to you, how it relates to media studies and communication and what we can learn from black studies about the evolution of the civil rights struggle in the United States?



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Armond Towns:

Yeah, I think depending on who you ask, this is probably going to be answered in multiple ways. But my approach to it is I guess maybe I can kind of break them down into two areas. The first area is communication and media studies which I argue represents a logic of the same and I think this is basically the way that a lot of different disciplines operate which is to say there's a problem that assumes that we can use Western tools and Western methods to understand non-Western people and how we move through the world. So, basically the argument of communication studies when applied to black and brown people becomes you're just a different version of me, me here being this kind of Western construct of man which I am pulling from people like Michel Foucault and Sylvia Wynter. So, ancient Greek theories which are reproduced as Western and I think reproduced is really important here are presumably useful for understanding the movement for black lives or the civil rights movement. And for me black studies says what if those Western produced theories cannot. Right? What if they can't actually tell us what we need to know? So, as Robin Kelley argues, black studies represents an epistemological break from the logic of the same. What if black people open up a radically different epistemological framework not wholly distinct from Western theories but which can't be fully reduced to them either? And I think this is what Du Bois was saying in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Right? He calls blackness a gift, one that leads a population into an alternative epistemological framework that can't be fully comprehended within Western institutional logics. And I think this is why I'm interested in things like Maroon societies. So, I guess all that's to say that communication studies maintains an institutional epistemology and black studies rushes it.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

How is that related to issues of say Afrocentricity, Afrofuturism, these other theories? How are those connected? I'm interested because we just, as you may or may not know, inducted Molefi Asante as a NCA distinguished scholar finally last year and his approach has always been around Afrocentricity. And I'm curious as to how that marries up or does not with what you've just articulated about black studies and a new Afrocentric sort of epistemology?

Armond Towns:

Well, Asante is speaking to the initial kind of rupture that communication studies has in this 1960s/1970s time period. And essentially, what he says is what if rhetoric isn't Western? What if it's not white? Right? And that is like the foundation of a black studies question. Now I think that what Asante does in terms of his research is to flip the idea of Eurocentrism as the kind of universal. Right? So, for Asante, it says Eurocentrism is, I don't really care about critiquing it or saying it's good or bad but I'm more interested in saying well, there's also an Afrocentric approach that we can take to the world. And what happens if we take that approach to rhetoric and communication studies? So, I think that it's kind of hard to say that you're doing like black studies



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and communication studies and not say that you're also influenced by Asante. Yeah, I don't know if that answers your questions.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Yeah. No, that's great. It just occurred to me as you were talking about the sort of epistemological bases about black studies that this has been a persistent opportunity for communication studies to rethink itself and that's interesting. I think our listeners would also be particularly curious about your ongoing projects, particularly *Technological Darwinism* and this notion of approaching the underground railroad as a media environment. The mediation here is fascinating and I'm wondering if you could tell us a little bit more about what you're discovering in these research endeavors.

Armond Towns:

Yeah, sure. That's an interesting question because I'm still in the middle of writing. But I think the way to think about it like what I'm doing is I'm pulling from this discussion of epistemology that has been built in communication and media studies for a while and I'm trying to expand that discussion of epistemology which is to say that communication and black studies represent two related but different epistemological projects and we must accept that black people have different conceptions of communication and media, some of which will overlap with and contradict Western communication and media. So, some of those forms of communication and media may be deemed illegible or irrational by white people but that may be necessary for black people and I think the underground railroad is a representation of this. Right? The underground railroad assumed an alternative media environment or an alternative media economy, meaning that rather than caring about appearing rational or legible for white people, the runaway enslaved people sought abolition. They sought freedom. They sought liberation. Right? So, let's say maps and handwritten notes may be deemed like rational or efficient modes of traversing space for white people. But trees or the North Star or a flagpole were necessary for traversing those same spaces for enslaved people, meaning that media for them meant something different. Right? Something completely different than the white people that were trying to chase them down. So, the media environment basically opens up a new world. Right? For black people, that new world was a world of abolition. It's this unfinished project that W.E.B Du Bois talks about in *Black Reconstruction*. So, I'm interested in how media technologies really open up new ideas of abolition and liberation.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That's fascinating and I think it exists on a number of different levels. I'm hoping now we can maybe look a little bit more historically at an important figure in the civil rights movement and certainly with an eye toward her media presence I think because that could be a fascinating area of discussion. But here we're talking about the mid-20th century figure Fannie Lou Hamer and, Maegan, as we've indicated, your research is really focused on Fannie Lou Hamer. And we live



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in this really tense time about voter discrimination, voter suppression. What types of voter discrimination did Hamer face and what lessons can we learn from her advocacy back in the what? The 50s and 60s?

Maegan Parker Brooks:

Yeah, thank you. Throughout her life, Hamer faced voter disenfranchisement, suppression, discrimination and retaliation. If we look at just her first voter registration attempt, we can get a sense of how widespread and blatant this discrimination was across the South. Hamer would often remark that before August of 1962, that point when representatives of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee came into her rural Mississippi delta community, the very idea of citizenship rights had been withheld from her and those black people in her community. But once she learned of her rights, Hamer was eager to exercise them. She participated in a mass registration attempt that was organized by SNCC in August of 1962 and through mass meetings held at churches and in the living rooms of local leaders, SNCC inspired a group of 18 black delatans to try to register at the county courthouse. When they arrived by borrowed bus to the county seat in Indianola, the registration hopefuls were met by an armed mob of citizens councilors who were widely known as the Klan in suits, not sheets. Once Hamer and the other black citizens from Ruleville made their way into the courthouse, they were given literacy tests and asked to interpret sections of the Mississippi constitution to the white clerk's satisfaction and all 18 registration hopefuls failed these tests which were designed to bar their civic participation.

On the way back to their small delta town, the bus driver that carried them to the courthouse was stopped by a state highway patrolman and charged with "driving a bus that was too yellow." Once Hamer finally made it home, the citizens council had already informed her employer who was also her landlord. She lost her job and she was evicted from her home for her registration attempt. She sought refuge at a friend's home and less than two weeks later, a white supremacist knight rider shot 16 bullets into the friend's home just inches above the bed where Hamer had slept. She had to go into hiding at a distant cousin's cabin for fear of her life. So, because Hamer attempted unsuccessfully to register to vote in the Mississippi delta in 1962, she was harassed and ridiculed by citizens council members, the county clerk and a state highway patrolman. She lost her job and was evicted from a home where she had lived with her family for 18 years and her life was threatened so much so that she had to go into hiding.

Hamer wouldn't be deterred which is remarkable. I think a lesson that we learned from her advocacy is that she would often say if the white supremacists thought their violent actions would deter her from fighting or would compel her to leave the South, they would find out differently. She recognized that the South was her home, that her ancestors' labor had built its economy and that she had every right to stay and demand citizenship privileges that she deserved. Hamer was



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adamant about spreading that message across the delta and she was gifted in garnering northern support for her advocacy in the South. So, Hamer recognized because she had experienced it firsthand that black civic assertion came with real material costs to one's livelihood. So, she often coupled her voting rights advocacy with food, clothing and shelter provisions for those who risked everything to participate in politics.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Along with Shirley Chisholm and others, I was particularly pleased when Tracee Ellis Ross and Kamala Harris invoked Fannie Lou Hamer's name at the Democratic National Convention. And it got me to thinking and I'm sure it did for you as well, Maegan, what the legacy and the significance of Hamer is to the Democratic Party, to our sense of public memory and I guess one of the things that I'm particularly interested in is how we're evolving our contemporary understandings of civil rights. And so, Armond is giving us a different vision of how the media environment worked in the underground railroad. Similarly, I think we have this evolving sense of what the civil rights movement was all about. I'm wondering if you could talk about where Hamer fits in that re-envisioning of the civil rights movement?

Maegan Parker Brooks:

Yeah, absolutely. Hamer is not as well-known popularly as activists like Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King or Malcolm X but she has become a touchstone within the Democratic Party. Her name, her 1964 and 1972 DNC challenges have been frequently referenced over the years. So, for instance, Gloria Steinem relied heavily upon Hamer in a 1972 DNC challenge designed to secure a female running mate for George McGovern. Bill Clinton and Al Gore both mentioned her name in their 1992 acceptance speeches. And in 2004 the DNC marked the 40th anniversary of the MFDP Challenge with Maya Angelou reading a portion of Hamer's 1964 testimony from the main stage. So, Harris and Ross' most recent invocations of Hamer's name provide well-deserved recognition of the role that black women have played and continue to play in the expansion of voting rights and in the creation of a more inclusive and representative party. And yet to speak to the portion of your question really about public memory and how that's evolving, I feel really compelled to mention what gets remembered about Hamer and what gets forgotten. So, one of the driving forces behind my Hamer research is the conviction that telling her story as fully and complexly as I am able provides a counterpoint to what Jeanne Theoharis has dubbed "the national fable of the civil rights movement." Right? So, those well-worn, white-washed stories that permeate our popular culture, Theoharis suggests they function as a veil to obscure enduring racial inequality, a tool to chastise contemporary protest and a shield to charges of indifference and inaction.

So, the story of Hamer's 1964 challenge risks contributing to that same triumphalist tale if we leave out the facts that the white supremacist delegation sent from Mississippi was in fact seated at the 1964 DNC. President Johnson offered the 68-member interracial delegation that Hamer



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represented two at large seats as a compromise. What's worse, Johnson hand-picked who those seats would go to. He declared that Hamer who was the vice president of the MFDP would, he would not "allow that illiterate woman to be seated on the convention floor" and that part of the story is often overlooked as is the back room dealings during which Hamer was excluded from high-level meetings to craft the compromise because she challenged Vice Presidential candidate Hubert Humphrey. So, that part of the story is not commonly told. And last, I'll just bring forth a key insight, that SNCC activist Dorie Ladner shared with me in an interview. Ladner pointed out that while our country has paid some attention to Hamer's involvement in the 1964 DNC, popular civil rights narratives have all but erased her 1965 congressional challenge during which she, Annie Devine and Victoria Gray went straight to the floor of the House of Representatives and demanded that the white supremacists congressional members sent from Mississippi be unseated. Ladner reasons that that demonstration is in her words, "just too damn threatening to be folded into this fable of the civil rights movement."

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That's I think a really important insight about the formation of public memory and the, what, fabalization or mythologization of our understanding of the civil rights movement. The other dimension here too is Hamer's personal experiences with police brutality. So, what's passed as prologue, we're still seeing this happening today. The context of that address in 1964 and her testimony for the credentials committee, what was so memorable about that? Was it the police brutality or was it just the entirety of the situation?

Maegan Parker Brooks:

Yeah. I think that Martin Luther King testified that day as did Edwin King, Rita Schwerner, the widow of Michael Schwerner. So, there were memorable testimonies that day in 1964. But from the research that I've done, people who were there, people who were watching it on television, when I asked them about what really stands out about Hamer, they do mention her description of the violent sexual physical abuse that she endured in a Winona, Mississippi jail cell on her return trip from the civic education workshop. They mentioned that testimony. They mentioned the way that she detailed the earlier story that I shared about her very first registration attempt and of course, they mentioned the fact that Lyndon B. Johnson, sitting President Lyndon B. Johnson interrupted her live television broadcast of her testimony with a spurious press conference that he called, he told NBC, CBS and ABC, the three major networks, they were under the impression he was going to announce his running mate. And so, they took the cameras off Hamer, put them on Johnson. He announced that it was the nine-month anniversary of Kennedy's assassination. So, it was a non-announcement and once they realized that, networks replayed Hamer's testimony during their evening broadcast. And so, one of the things that is so powerful about Hamer's testimony that day is that folks across the United States got to hear her during their evening program. So, she got prime time coverage of that testimony. So, that is the testimony that most



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often gets remembered. And I think to your point about police brutality, I think that Hamer's story really rightfully suggests that the threat of police brutality affects all black people, black women, black men, black trans folks too. And I think the experiences recently of Breonna Taylor, Sandra Bland, not to mention past Angela Davis, Assata Shakur and so many others really speak to this truth as well.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Hi, listeners. We're taking a small break right now to share highlights of our colleagues' great work and accomplishments. So, here they are. Dr. Lauren B. Mackenzie has been named a Marine Corps University's outstanding civilian professor for the academic year 2019-2020. Dr. Mackenzie was also presented with the Dr. Elihu Rose award earlier this year as part of the university's commencement ceremony in Quantico, Virginia. Sungeun Chung of Sungkyunkwan University and The Republic of Korea and Edward L. Fink of Temple University in Philadelphia have received the 2020 Randall Harrison Outstanding Article Award from The International Communication Association's information systems division. Edward L. Fink has also been selected to become an inaugural fellow of Sigma Chi, the scientific research honor society. The society has about one hundred thousand members and two hundred members of the society have received The Nobel Prize. And NCA past president, Stephen John Hartnett is editing the new Michigan State University press series on US-China relations in the age of globalization. The series will include *Green Communication and China: On Crisis, Care, and Global Futures* by Jingfang Liu and Phaedra Pezzullo and *Communication Convergence in Contemporary China: International Perspectives on Politics, Platforms and Participation* by Patrick Shaou-Whea Dodge. Congratulations to all of our colleagues.

So, Fannie Hamer was this remarkable black woman from the South and another remarkable black woman from the South is Robin Boylorn who is an auto ethnographer and who writes about the experiences and the narratives of resilience that black women experience over multiple generations in the South. So, Robin, what does your book *Sweetwater: Black Women and Narratives of Resilience* tell us about the lives and experiences of black women in the South?

Robin Boylorn:

I think *Sweetwater* celebrates the lived experiences of black women by centering their stories and survival practices which very much feels in line with Fannie Lou Hamer's legacy. Right? So, the stories that I tell in *Sweetwater* chronicles how black women make sense of oppression and how they seek some semblance of social justice in their lives. Right? And that is definitely informed by Hamer's legacy. But specifically, the book emphasizes the role of family, community, spirituality, tradition and storytelling as mechanisms for resilience in the Deep South, a region that has historically and presently been known for racism and discrimination of people of color more profoundly and out loud, out in the open than other areas. Not to say that the South is the only



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place that's racist for sure but there is a historical context in the South that makes it seem that way. So, in the book, I think that black women are often the architects of change in social movements at home and on the ground and in more global contexts. But they are largely disappeared from public discourses and discussions. So, one of the things that I wanted to do with *Sweetwater* was to center their voices, make them visible, make them discernable to themselves more so than anyone else. But if a byproduct of that visibility to themselves was other people getting some insight about black women in the South, then that was a welcome addition.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

How do you think black women in particular and Southern black women have been erased from our history and the ways in which we remember and think about the civil rights movement? I don't know that they have but this question of visibility and invisibility and how that plays with these ideas of public memory, do you have any thoughts on what the erasure of black women has been in the civil rights movement?

Robin Boylorn:

I think there's definitely been an erasure and one of the ways that we know that is because if you were to ask someone about icons of the civil rights movement, the figureheads were black men. So, they can tell you Martin Luther King. They can say Rose Parks, for example, but she would be the only black woman that most people can recount or that they know anything about. And so, our patriarchal histories often push black women to the periphery and the civil rights movement is no different. It was racially progressive but it was not gender progressive. So, blatant sexism led to the exclusion of black women from the public platforms even while they were the literal foundation of the movement at the local and grassroots level. I think that another thing that's at play with why, for example, Rose Parks is a recognizable figure more so than Fannie Lou Hamer. Right? I think that it links to notions of respectability politics and colorism which in many cases dictates who was allowed to be a representative. So, Rose Parks is an icon but she wasn't the first black woman to refuse to give up her seat on a bus. Right? She was, however, a light-skinned black woman with a quiet demeanor which was seemingly much more digestible for the cause than a dark-skinned "angry black woman" who would supposedly jeopardize the cause.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That's fascinating. I know that there's a lot of discussion of this sort of I guess going back to what Maegan said, the fabalization of the Rosa Parks story and a lot of that is left out of what we teach people about civil rights. Now I'm going to switch gears a little bit, Robin, because you're an incoming editor of a journal and I know Armond has expressed some interest in the discipline of communication and media studies and where we've gone and our epistemologies and where we're going. Perhaps you might have some thoughts as an incoming editor about how we through the editorial and publication process can maximize our commitments to diversity, equity and



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inclusion in the journal? Do you have any forward-looking sort of prognostications about where we're going with our journal publishing?

Robin Boylorn:

Absolutely. I have to say that editing a journal was not on my career bucket list but one of the things that is, one of the things that I'm definitely committed and invested in is creating spaces for non-traditional scholarship and non-traditional scholars read non-white scholars. Right? Non-heteronormative scholars. And I believe that the editor of a journal can influence the kinds of transcripts and manuscripts that are received. So, as the first black woman editor of CCCS, I plan to create a space and visibility for those who may have otherwise never submitted to help instigate conversations about communication and culture that account for some of the things that Armond talks about and more specifically, about identity and representation. So, while my commitment is, of course, to continue and emphasize the mission of the journal, I welcome the opportunity to explore how interdisciplinarity and creativity can contribute to our understanding and engagement of critical and cultural studies and theories in communication.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That's great. I know that that's been a relatively new but always been present commitment at NCA. And so, I think it's important to get journal editors in place with those commitments. So, that's fantastic. Congratulations by the way.

Robin Boylorn:

Thank you.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

It's a very important journal. So, now I'm curious about all of you perhaps weighing in on the larger question of the sort of generational changes and passages that we're seeing with the civil rights movement and I think it's really been occasioned with the death of John Lewis in July. And so, every time one of these pivotal figures in the civil rights movement especially someone of such stature as John Lewis passes, I think there's a sort of renewal of public memory and a renewal of the discussion of the civil rights movement. So, like CNN next week is coming out with a documentary about John Lewis, about *Good Trouble* and all of that. Could you all talk a little bit about what you see as the legacy and relevance of the civil rights movement in the 50s and 60s today and where we're going down the road? Maybe, we haven't heard from Armond in a while. Maybe you have some thoughts, Armond, about how it is we remember that legacy and that relevance?



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Armond Towns:

Yeah, sure. I can start us off. I think about like the legacy of the civil rights movement through the work of people like Angela Davis and one of the things that Angela Davis has been talking about for a long time is how do we think about the changing terrain of struggle. The civil rights movement changed the terrain of struggle. It was a project that would provide an opening for black power and relatedly black studies. Right? People like John Lewis remind us of that terrain change. Right? He went from one of the most visible protesters being brutally beaten in the street to the House of Representatives. Right? And I don't note that necessarily as like a forward progress nor do I seek to critique John Lewis. But I say this to note that the shifts in the politics and the economies of the country speak to the different terrain that we have to fight on. Right? And so, I think about people like John Lewis and the civil rights movement as different understandings of how the terrain changes. Right? And John Lewis wrote a letter to the movement for black lives to outline for them the changing terrain of struggle. So, yeah, in my mind, that's the way that I think about the civil rights movement which is basically to say it hasn't ended. Right? It's just changed in ways that we still see as relevant today.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That notion that it hasn't ended is fascinating because there is this sort of, it's not as if it suddenly began in 1954 either. Right? We have these sort of time-bound truncated visions of these movements and, Maegan, maybe you are best positioned to think through some of that. I mean how do we account for this notion that we are so quick as a society to lock these civil rights notions into heroism and these time-bound constraints?

Maegan Parker Brooks:

I guess I really like Armond's invocation of Angela Davis because I think she too is a really great figure for thinking through how her activism has grown and I mean there have been consistent values in terms of prison abolition throughout her career. But I think of a speech that she gave to the protesters in Ferguson really talking about that notion of the more beautiful and terrible history that Theoharis and others talk about which is the sanitized version of the civil rights movement is often used to chastise Black Lives Matter protesters when, in fact, if we recover folks like Hamer, folks like Lewis in his speech at the march on Washington in 1963, if we look at more complex narratives of the civil rights movement, it's antecedents too, we see that the battles that they were fighting, Hamer in particular, she was not only battling against white supremacy but also police brutality, sexual assault, voter disenfranchisement, segregated education, food insecurity, healthcare access, governmental control over reproductive health. I mean these are the same battles that folks are fighting right now. And so, rather than see these movements as distinct or use white-washed, papered-over stories of these movements to chastise contemporary protesters, if current activists and organizers can look to folks who've been fighting these battles for decades, they can find wells of wisdom upon which to draw. Right? And Davis is such a great



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person in terms of providing that wisdom to future generations. Lewis was too. Had Hamer lived past 77, she absolutely would have been. She loved young people. She loved the young people that she was working with in SNCC. So, there certainly are people that we can look to whose activism certainly didn't stop in 1968 and didn't begin in 1954. It has gone on and really ruptured, to use a phrase that Armond used at the beginning, really ruptured those time markers which I think are problematic in a lot of ways.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Yeah. I agree and I'm wondering why we are so quick as a society—and is this a function of whiteness, is this a function of our own collective commitments? I don't know—to de-radicalize so that we marginalize figures like Angela Davis because they're too radical. We de-radicalize King even who by the time he was assassinated had gone fairly all-in on the social justice dimensions and the more radical dimensions of the civil rights movement. Why do we de-radicalize it all? Robin, maybe you know. I continue to ponder this question, how it is that we continue to force a movement that was in many ways very radical into this de-radicalized fable, as you say, Maegan. I don't know. I don't know why that happens.

Robin:

Yeah. I think about the fact that 70 years later, that's an entire lifetime and like Maegan was saying, we're still fighting over the same things and for the same rights. The cyclical nature of and the seduction of white supremacy which I think is essentially at the heart of it all, it's one of the reasons why we take 10 steps forward and then we're snatched back 20 and it doesn't feel like we're making any forward progress. I mean we're still fighting for voting rights. Our voting rights are still being jeopardized. We're still fighting for reproductive rights. We're still fighting for humanity, for LGBTQAI plus folk and undocumented folk and people who are poor and disabled. Like those things haven't changed. The context and circumstances has. So, when I think about the movement or movements plural, I think that one of the reasons it gets cached at a particular point is because we associate it with particular people and then we sanitize them. Martin Luther King was sanitized so that Colin Kaepernick can be demonized. And that's a problem because I think that revolution is the only way we're going to access change. Kindness and asking nicely has never gotten it. So, there has to be some type of revolutionary. There always had to be a revolutionary impulse of the movement then and now. And I think that we're just at a moment where we're at an extension of the movement but I don't think it's ever been over. We've just had certain pauses where we could breathe a little bit but now we're literally getting our breath taken away with knees on our neck and things.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

I've just started reading Isabel Wilkerson's book about caste. She tells the story of Martin Luther King going to India and being introduced as an untouchable and how shocked King was to be



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introduced that way. And in a way this goes full circle to Armond's points about different epistemologies and how we position and see ourselves in the world and how we know what we know both about ourselves, our identity and the society around us. So, getting a little bit more specific and following on this notion of rethinking and retooling how it is we understand civil rights and the struggle for civil rights, what can we as educators and institutions do to truly commit ourselves to diversity, equity, inclusion? What role do we have in understanding and perpetuating and motivating civil rights struggles? This is a really interesting question I think for NCA, for the discipline, for all of us involved in education and higher education. What can we do?

Armond Towns:

I also wonder about the question of our role as educators and that relationship to diversity, equity and inclusion. I think there's kind of maybe two parts to my answer. On the one hand, I think we need to know the history of where diversity, equity and inclusion comes from. I think we in a lot of places kind of accept the terms as progressive but people like Roger Ferguson show that diversity, equity and inclusion came out of corporate politics in the mid to late 20th century. So, in a lot of ways what Ferguson argues is that these terms kind of were a method of stopping black, feminist, queer, environmental, anti-Vietnam anger. So, instead of black studies with its goal of liberating the entire black community, we'll give you diversity and situate you as a representative inside of the institution. Right? So, you'll get paid but your call for black liberation, let's stop that. Right? And this again, I think this is why I think it's important for us to understand people like Angela Davis. Right? This is not to say that we can't or shouldn't think about diversity, equity and inclusion but it's to say that diversity, equity and inclusion is the terrain we have right now. Right? That's where we're at. That's the university's logic at this moment and if that's the logic at the moment, then I am really interested in our role as academics and what we should do with that logic. Right?

I'm personally involved in a lot of different things at the university and part of that involvement always in the back of my mind is with the mind that the university is a part of the state and the capitalist project of development which often means that in many places, the university is against black freedom struggle. So, if that's the case, then I think it's important for us to think about our role as basically resource redistribution. How do we take the resources of the university and turn them into the service of black liberation? Right? This is what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten argue in their work. Right? The answer to the question is difficult and it has a lot of pushback but that's the way that I view my role is how do we redistribute.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That can be a tough role to navigate in the complex politics of higher education.

Armond Towns:

It is. Yeah.



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Robin Boylorn:

And I think for me, I often wonder what it even means anymore. Diversity has become such a catch-all phrase. Equity and inclusion are like what does it mean, what does it mean in practice? Because it has to mean more than just the tokenization of existing faculty of color or centering or using the few students of color that you have as representative of your diversity. Right? Is that true change? And because a lot of times some of the labor that's required to diversify is put on faculty of color. Right? Ask me how I know? Right? I'm a twofer. Get the black and the woman to go on all of the committees and do all of the things. But is it truly diversifying if it's just for show or if it's just this one? Because I think that my concern around how diversity and inclusion and equity is there is really not any equity. It's just the inclusion or the illusion of it. And then diversity being used in such a way that we don't even know what exactly does it mean. If we're diversifying, what does that represent? What's being diversified and who is being affected by that? So, I think it requires a much more nuanced engagement than we are encouraged to have at a surface level because at the basic level for me, diversity is a very basic general thing that everybody should be doing anyway. It really should be aspirational at this point. But how can we unpack it and deconstruct it a bit more without putting additional invisible labor on faculty and scholars of color?

Trevor Parry-Giles:

I had a colleague on the executive committee at NCA say at one point to all of us that we need to stop looking at these questions and I would call them diversity, equity and inclusion, the struggle for black liberation, the struggle generally for human liberation, whatever we want to call all of it, we need to stop looking at it as an issue or as a problem or as a challenge. We need to see it as an opportunity for openness and expansion and I've always taken that to heart. I thought that that was a really important insight. And as a discipline in communication and certainly the history of NCA and the communication discipline more broadly, we're at a moment where we're attempting to amplify the work of non-white scholars to the benefit of everyone. Any final thoughts that anyone might have about this where communication fits and the communication matters question which is something we always ask on the podcast? How does communication matter in this struggle for human liberation, black liberation, Latino liberation, what have you?

Maegan Parker Brooks:

One thing I'm doing in my rhetorical theory class this semester is foregrounding the rhetoric-so-white and the communication-so-white fora that we've recently had come out in our journals and there's a great piece that I engaged with my students last week from Martin Law and Lisa Corrigan that look at white speak within the communication discipline in particular. And one of the arguments that Law and Corrigan make that I think is relevant to your question here, Trevor, and maybe to the larger conversation that we've been having that I hear both Robin and Armond talking about is it's not just about amplifying voices of scholars of color. Absolutely, like that's essential. We should be doing that at the very foundation. Right? But Law and Corrigan also



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suggests that it's additionally about excising, sort of cutting back on the white noise in our discipline. So, this isn't like a silencing of white people. Right? It's not looking at this kind of white fragility and defensive moves here. But it is asking those important questions that Armond started us with. Right? Who is recognized as a legitimate producer of knowledge? Which methodologies, which approaches, which voices are being canonized and taught in our classrooms and seen as essential for citational politics? It's asking those questions and Law and Corrigan go so far as to suggest that it's going to require excising some of that from our canon in order to really center it in the rupturing that's necessary as we amplify scholars of color. So, I'm really persuaded by that argument and I would like to see more folks take up those great fora that we've had in the diversity of perspectives on the broad range of perspectives that scholars represented in those fora are providing for us and really think deeply about those challenges.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

I know that some of our editors have been particularly attuned to the citation politics that you mentioned in their review of submitted manuscripts and they've gone back to authors and said there's a lot of white noise on your citation list.

Robin Boylorn:

I think that if I were to have any final thoughts, it's just about thinking about intentionality and the role that that can have. Communication is something we do all the time whether we're thinking about it or not. And I think that if we can be a bit more thoughtful and intentional about the way we communicate about difference, if we can engage in uncomfortable truths and walk towards them instead of moving away from them in our communication with others and in our communication about what we're studying, I think that that has the capacity to diversify the field without relying exclusively on identity politics. Because I think that while citation practices are important, cite a black woman, absolutely, I think that that can sometimes be problematic because it assumes and I'm a black woman who studies black women. Right? But not all black women study black women. So, you don't always know because maybe the things that I'm doing wouldn't be relevant for this person. So, I'm telling them to cite a black person but I don't want them to cite something that's not relevant. What I want them to realize is that not all black people study just black people. Right? Armond and I are scholars who our work is very much centered in blackness but not all scholars of color study that way and they're still invisibilized. I can't help but feel that it's somewhat intentional when you can study something that people of color are doing and still find a way to not cite them too when they're in your area doing similar work but somehow the people of color still get excluded. Because I guess in some ways it makes sense to me why I would be excluded from certain communication context conversations within the discipline but it doesn't make as much sense to me why some of our other colleagues of color have been and continue to be excluded from conversations that they've been contributing to for years.



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Armond Towns:

Yeah, I completely agree with everything that's been said so far. I guess maybe like a closing kind of thought on communication studies, I would say that the, I mean the history of the discipline is really interesting to me especially in this respect because we're directly tied to the split that happened with English in the early 20th century and then that early moment speech professors often conflate a democracy with speech and their democracy was often a capitalist democracy. Later the discipline would build out of the work of sociologists and psychologists and political scientists and particularly their approach to the Cold War. So, in that context, I think that it's important for us to note that the discipline has remained interested in the maintenance of a racial capitalist project of democracy as people like Cedric Robinson argue in their discussion of democracy. So, the amplification of non-white scholars often relies on anti-socialist, anti-communist positionalities which in many ways is to say anti-black projects and I think that the field must fully wrestle with its relationship between racism and capitalism to see how, why have people of color been attracted to these questions that are being asked around socialism, around communism. Right? It's not necessarily because people are reading Marx. Oftentimes it's because people are tired of starving. Right? So, I think that asking those questions about the discipline has to begin by thinking about what Cedric Robinson calls racial capitalism.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

And that's as good a place as any if we intentionally interrogate the racialist capitalist systems in which we find ourselves, we'll make some progress and we'll move a little bit further down the road. Hopefully, we'll take those 10 steps forward and not be hurled 20 steps back as Robin suggested. So, thank you, all of you, Robin, Maegan, Armond for joining me today. This has been a timely and important discussion both about society writ large but also about the communication discipline and our role as educators and scholars and teachers and researchers and all of those good things. So, thank you so much for joining me.

Robin Boylorn:

Thank you.

Maegan Parker Brooks:

Thank you.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Listeners, I hope you've enjoyed this discussion on the various aspects of the racial struggles for liberation, for the communication discipline and the ongoing legacy of the contemporary civil rights movement in the United States. Please join us again on another episode of *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*.



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In NCA news, we invite undergraduate students to apply and compete for the NCA Legacy Scholarship which provides \$1,000 to an undergraduate student pursuing a degree in communication or related program within a 50-mile radius of Indianapolis, Indiana where the NCA 106th Annual Convention was scheduled to be held this year. Students competing for the Legacy Scholarship must write an essay related to communication and civic responsibility. Learn more and apply today at natcom.org/2020-Legacy-Scholarship.

This Fall, NCA's public programs are focusing on the 2020 election and are being shared as bonus episodes of *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*. Our first public program focused on the politics of health and healthcare and it aired yesterday. In October, we'll be sharing two more public programs. The first will focus on communicating about the role of race and social change in politics. The second will focus on Vice Presidential candidates Kamala Harris and Mike Pence. We hope you'll tune in for these timely and informative public programs.

The October 15th episode of *Communication Matters* will explore how COVID-19 is influencing family, interpersonal and romantic communication. Professors Jeffrey Hall, Mei-Chen Lin and Jordan Soliz join me to discuss the ways our personal communication habits have been affected by the pandemic by working from home and by our social isolation. So, mark your calendars for this valuable conversation about navigating the pitfalls and perils of COVID-19.

Be sure to engage with us on social media by liking us on Facebook, following NCA on Twitter and Instagram and watching us on YouTube. And before you go, hit subscribe wherever you get your podcasts to listen in as we discuss emerging scholarship, establish theory and new applications, all exploring just how much communication matters in our classrooms, in our communities and in our world. See you next time.

Conclusion:

Communication Matters is hosted by NCA Executive Director Trevor Parry-Giles and is recorded in our national office in downtown Washington DC. The podcast is recorded and produced by Assistant Director for Digital Strategies Chelsea Bowes with writing support from Director of External Affairs and Publications Wendy Fernando and Content Development Specialist Grace Hébert. Thank you for listening.

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