Towards an Understanding of Bearing Witness and Conviction: #MLK and #BLM

Andre E. Johnson, University of Memphis
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On July 10, 2016, more than 1,000 frustrated and fed up American citizens took to the I-40 Bridge connecting Arkansas and Tennessee in an act of mass civil disobedience to disrupt and shut down traffic. These American citizens were protesting the latest videos; the murders of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, that had gone viral causing another round of trauma and pain in the minds and bodies of African Americans. Television stations in Memphis broke away from regularly scheduled programming to cover the protest. The local newspaper provided live updates on its website while other media outlets offered “live” coverage of the event through social media.

People overheard one protester shouting, "We're trying to get equal rights. We want things to be fair. We want our voices to be heard." Black Lives Matter activist Shahidah Jones called the protest something similar to a family reunion. She remarked, “I saw people I hadn’t seen in years.” Activist Tami Sawyer reminded onlookers and the media that what was going on across the country where people “saying enough is enough,” She continued,

I think about this last year. People all over the city and the Commercial Appeal celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Selma march, where Dr. Martin Luther King and hundreds of

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1 I delivered this presentation at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, Arkansas on October 6, 2017 at the Southern Colloquium of Rhetoric.
3 Wendi Thomas. “Take It to the Bridge” #MLK50: Justice Through Journalism. <https://mlk50.com/july-10-2016-take-it-to-the-bridge-e13744c16c21>
African-Americans were hosed by water and attacked by dogs and beaten by police during a peaceful protest for their rights.⁴

As motorists expressed frustration at traffic coming to a standstill, activist Devante Hill told a television news reporter “We waited 400 years to get justice, they’re going to wait— they’re going to wait— to get across this bridge!”⁵ Labor and wage activist Jayanni Webster, who was one of the last ones off the bridge that night remarked that taking the bridge so openly was the “only opportunity that they would ever have in their life to even talk to a police officer in a way that won’t get them killed. People in Memphis never have the opportunity to confront those in power who represent a failed state of the economy and the politics of this city that continually oppresses people.”⁶

Pastor and University of Memphis Department of Communication graduate student Earle Fisher were one of the ones on the bridge that night. He told independent journalist Wendi Thomas that he was “happy as shit,” about taking the bridge because he “knew it would take a moment like that to change the trajectory of what the movement in Memphis would look like.”⁷ Activist Keedran Franklin noted that “A lot of people were crying together, but it was like tears of joy because a lot of people were hurt. That’s the only reason why we were up there,” “Not being heard, not being felt, not enough resources.”⁸ While the protest inconvenienced motorists, some that night showed signs of solidarity. One trucker allowed demonstrators to climb on top of his truck to hold up signs and raised fists. Community activist Nour Hantouli, told a reporter that

⁵ Wendi Thomas. “Take It to the Bridge” #MLK50: Justice Through Journalism. <https://mlk50.com/july-10-2016-take-it-to-the-bridge-e13744c16c21>
⁶ Wendi Thomas. “Take It to the Bridge”
⁷ Wendi Thomas. “Take It to the Bridge”
⁸ Wendi Thomas. “Take It to the Bridge”
the incident was a “very remarkable sign of solidarity from someone who is caught in the very inconvenient position of that demonstration,” but further added, “of course, that got turned into ‘thugs trashing property,’ you know, the typical racist narrative.”

City officials, on the other hand, had a different view. While claiming that he understood the protester's frustration, and promising an open dialogue toward effecting change, Interim Police Director at the time of the incident, Mike Rallings remarked that a “bridge shutdown was not the proper way to protest.” Claiming to stand with the protesters, Rallings commented, “I don't want us to shut down a bridge, I'm with you; I'll march with you. But we need to do it together; we need to have a dialogue, we need not to be shutting down bridges.”

Shelby County Commissioner Terry Roland said that while he was “proud we didn’t have any violence, a lot of those people weren’t even from Memphis, and they should not have blocked the roads, especially a federal highway.” Memphis Mayor Jim Strickland, while appreciating the fact that the protest “remained peaceful,” he cautioned that “citizens must protest in a legal way. Stopping traffic on the interstate is not legal.”

A day before the I-40 bridge take over and protest, Atlanta mayor Kasim Reed, after citizens there shut down a major highway infamously proclaimed, “We’re the home of Dr. Martin Luther King. The only thing I ask is that they not take the freeways. Dr. King would never take a freeway.”

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9 Wendi Thomas. “Take It to the Bridge”
12 Woke: Was the Protest on the Bridge a Sign of Real Change to Come?
However well-meaning, these historical descriptions just are not accurate. In an upcoming work, I challenge some of these contemporary embedded narratives by examining the more radical King. Specifically, I examine King’s religious rhetoric within the African American prophetic tradition during the last year of his life and place special emphasis on what I call King’s "prophetic pessimism." For many black prophets, finding the racism too entrenched and the American covenant ideals not realistic for black Americans to ascertain, they become wailing and moaning prophets within what I call the *lament tradition of prophecy*. In this tradition, the prophet’s primary function is to speak out on behalf of others and to chronicle their pain and suffering, as well as her or his own. By speaking, the prophet offers hope and encouragement to others by acknowledging their sufferings and letting them know that they are not alone.

Moreover, by adopting a prophetic persona of a pessimistic prophet during the last year of his life, I argue that King begins a rhetorical project with the aim not necessarily to persuade but to bear witness through conviction. Psychologists use the term “bearing witness” to refer to “sharing our experiences with others, most notably in the communication to others of traumatic experiences.” They conclude that “bearing witness is a valuable way to process an experience, to obtain empathy and support, to lighten our emotional load via sharing it with the witness, and to obtain catharsis.”

While the psychological definition is helpful for my purposes here, I use it within the prophetic tradition. To bear witness is to communicate a truth that sometimes is hard to communicate. Typically, when one bears witness in the prophetic pessimism tradition, one is declaring that change may not happen soon or ever, but someone must stand watch and give an

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account of what happened. Moreover, drawing from the 8th century BCE prophets found in the Hebrew Bible, many of these accounts are performative. King himself alludes to this when interviewed after his announcement of the Poor People’s Campaign. When the reporter asked King, “it seems from what you have said here that this movement seems to have a more militant tone about it. Would you say that this is going to be a more militant movement than ever before, King responded,

I would say that this will be a move that will be consciously designed to develop massive dislocation. I think this is absolutely necessary at this point. It will be massive dislocation without destroying life or property and we’ve found through our experience that timid supplications for justice will not solve the problem. We’ve got to massively confront the power structure. So, this is a move to dramatize the situation, channelize the very legitimate and understandable rage of the ghetto and we know we can’t do it with something weak. It has to be something strong, dramatic, and attention-getting.

During the last year of King’s life, his ability to persuade and to gain a national consensus around issues of war, poverty, economic injustice, and the inequality suffered by blacks and all people of color had waned. Faced with increasing hostility to him and the movement along with the rising white backlash that eventually would give birth to Nixon’s silent majority coalition, King knew that moral suasion would not give him the results that he had hoped. Thus, King begins a campaign, grounded in non-violence that aimed to force the government to act on behalf of the movement. No longer believing that government officials would “do the right thing,” King called for a campaign of massive civil disobedience that would lead to economic boycotts and shut down entire cities. By doing this, King asked activists to bear witness to their suffering in hopes that the action could convict the government to do the “right
thing.” I argue that BLM whether knowingly or not, have adopted many of the ideas that King argued during the last year of his life becoming the natural extension of King’s vision in the last year of his life.