

## Virtual Reality Meets Rhetoric

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I attended a presentation entitled *The vMLK Project: Crafting a Necessary (Digital) Space to Explore Rhetorical Leadership and Civic Transformation*. The vMLK project is an immersive, ambient recreation, including sound and visual renderings, of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1960 speech, "Fill Up the Jails" of which there are no known recordings (UWM, 2018) using virtual reality (VR) technology. Drawing from *Minor Re/Visions: Asian American Literacy as a Rhetoric of Citizenship* by Morris Young, I use this post to make connections between Re/Visions and the vMLK project. "Re/vision (a term familiar to writing teachers) is a key process in the connections between literacy, race, and citizenship, where we work with existing material, negotiating ideas and arguments, but also work to re/vision what these ideas and arguments can be, what they can teach us and others" (p.8). With the opportunity to talk to Morris Young in class via Skype, the author discussed his work & his book published in 2004. From the class discussion, the question was raised, how we might apply the narratives to today's climate and how is it evolving?

The existing materials in this case are the resources of photos, videos, documentaries and people who lived through the civil rights era to re/create the historical event. To move the project beyond the existing materials to virtual reality, different disciplines were drawn on to produce the reenactment of the MLK, Jr. speech by an actor (from theater world) to try and capture the "voice" of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The physical environment of the church where the speech took place was demolished. Architects & designers relied on photos of the church to recreated in a virtual reality environment; and the sound engineers who worked to re/create the sound effects of the public address system based on both the speech reenactment and the physical aspects of the church. The project tries to provide an experience the audience member can feel as an embodiment of the event as if one was there.

Young states regarding narratives, "When we read stories, we attempt, whether consciously or unconsciously, to make a connection between stories and our lives"(p. 26). Although the MLK, Jr. speech, "Fill Up the Jails" happened over 50 years ago, we still are captivated by the stories of the people who were engaged in the civil rights struggle. To read their stories not only to see ourselves, but to understand history and what they had to go through to fight for citizenship, their identity, and their rights. It is the narratives about the struggle, knowledge, ideas, arguments and the language/writings during the civil rights area which help to shape the public discourse and the laws we have today.

The principal researcher of the project, Dr. Victoria J Gallagher of North Carolina University, specializes in rhetorical criticism of visual and material culture. Her explanation in the difference in approaches between King and the Reverend Douglas Moore (i.e., their ideas) to engaging social justice was interesting. Within the context of the civil rights movement, Dr. King believed in the traditional rhetorical approach – the art of persuasion, of to not only to inspire people to engage but to inform the masses of their rights during the political climate at this time. Dr. Moore believed in a direct-action oriented approach, a type of tactic in organizing a group (i.e., a strike or protest). Thus, the June 23, 1957, non-violent [protest at the Royal Ice Cream Company](#).

Dr. Gallagher explained MLK, Jr. was of course a very influential leader but also, ordinary

people showed courage and engaged in social justice. By examining rhetoric and civic transformation of past events through digital humanities, their contribution (narratives) helps to educate and empower all with knowledge or literacy significant to American citizenship.

You can read more about vMLK Project at <https://vmlk.chass.ncsu.edu/>

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