

## Motherhood, Rhetoric, and Remembrance: Recovering Diane Nash

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[Civil rights activist] Diane Nash Bevel was tried in Jackson for teaching the techniques of nonviolence to Negro youngsters; the charge was “contributing to the delinquency of minors” and she was sentenced to two years in jail. Four months pregnant, she insisted on going to jail rather than putting up bond, saying: “I can no longer cooperate with the evil and corrupt court system of this state. Since my child will be a black child, born in Mississippi, whether I am in jail or not he will be born in prison.” After a short stay in prison, she was released.

Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, 80

When Diane Nash entered the Hinds County Courthouse on April 31, 1962 to begin serving a two-year prison sentence, the twenty-three-year-old leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was not only protesting southern injustice but also sending a message to the civil rights community. Nash was convinced that the movement was relinquishing the jail-no-bail policy honed in previous desegregation campaigns, and she feared the ruinous financial demands that bonding and bailing out large numbers of protesters placed on cash-strapped organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC). She also believed that imprisoned activists helped draw media attention to the South and thus exerted moral pressure on white Southerners, two fundamental principles of nonviolent resistance. To ensure that her viewpoint and values were clear to others, Nash detailed the problem with current practices as well as her proposed solution in a short press release

and three-page letter to civil rights workers. These statements circulated widely in the press and reinvigorated movement discussion about the potential of mass incarceration.

Both the two-paragraph press release and eighteen-paragraph letter detailed why the movement should immediately return to jail-no-bail policy; each text also devoted a paragraph to Nash's physical condition, addressing the perceived irreconcilability of pregnancy, politics, and prison:

Some people have asked me how I can do this when I am expecting my first child in September. I have searched my soul about this and considered it in prayer. I have reached the conclusion that in the long run this will be the best thing I can do for my child. This will be a black child born in Mississippi and thus wherever he is born he will be in prison. I believe that if I go to jail now it may help hasten that day when my child and all children will be free—not only on the day of their birth but for all of their lives. (“A Message” 1)

Nash employed a variety of appeals in order to justify activating her sentence while expecting: Arguing that immediate incarceration would serve her child's long-term best interests provided sound reasons for her action; referencing soul searching, prayer, and contemplation regarding imprisonment's possible consequences for her pregnancy created ethos; and expressing faith that self-sacrifice would promote black children's freedom stirred emotion. Each appeal alluded to and garnered strength from the rhetor's impending motherhood.

Nash incorporated motherhood brilliantly in the one paragraph devoted to the topic but did not otherwise employ the *topos* in either the press release or letter. The activist may not have fully grasped or exploited the available means afforded by pregnancy, but subsequent chroniclers of the event did. For decades, historians focused on Nash's motherhood and elided her principles and policy objectives in their accounts of the event, reshaping it in troubling ways. The tendency is apparent, for instance, in the Zinn epigraph, which presents a noble, self-sacrificing mother bravely entering a racist stronghold in order to ensure black children's freedom, a dramatic portrait that does not even mention the term *jail-without-bail*. Other writers followed suit, portraying Nash as a courageous,

committed, pregnant activist while ignoring her strategy and impact on the movement. These depictions relegated her to the background of civil rights history.

Motherhood, then, enabled Nash to create a stirring and unforgettable message but also contributed to her marginalization within the official record. As Nash's predicament suggests, motherhood is a Janus-like rhetorical resource that can benefit and also impede women. On one hand, it affords them maternal authority and credibility; on the other, it invokes debilitating stereotypes that reinforce inequitable systems of gender, race, and power. To date, the puzzle and paradox of motherhood in public discourse has received relatively little attention within rhetorical studies. However, with women's entry into public life and the academy as well as the emergence of the field of feminist rhetorics, gendered topics like motherhood are ripe for exploration. Indeed, scholarship produced by Leslie Harris, Nan Johnson, Mari Boor Tonn, Julie Thompson, Patrice DiQuinzio, and Sarah Hayden has begun to unpack motherhood's rhetorical terms, construction, circulation, and effect upon women.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Within disciplines other than rhetoric, motherhood has inspired an enormous body of research for which I am grateful. My analysis here, however, is chiefly informed by feminist rhetorical scholarship, particularly the work of historiographers who have recovered women rhetors and rhetorics and theorized persuasion through a gendered lens (Buchanan and Ryan, xiii). Important feminist recovery efforts include Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's *Man Cannot Speak for Her: A Critical Study of Early Feminist Rhetoric*, Cheryl Glenn's *Rhetoric Retold: Regendering the Tradition from Antiquity Through the Renaissance*, Shirley Wilson Logan's "We Are Coming": *The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Black Women*, Jacqueline Jones Royster's *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change among African American Women*, Carol Mattingly's *Well-Tempered Women: Nineteenth-Century Temperance Rhetoric and Appropriate[ing] Dress: Women's Rhetorical Style in Nineteenth-Century America*, Nan Johnson's *Gender and Rhetorical Space in American Life, 1866-1910*, Roxanne Mountford's *The Gendered Pulpit: Preaching in American Protestant Spaces*, Wendy Sharer's *Voice and Vote: Women's Organizations and Public Literacy, 1915-1930*, Jessica Enoch's *Refiguring Rhetorical Education: Women Teaching African American, Native American, and Chicano/a Students, 1865-1911*, Suzanne Bordelon's *A Feminist Legacy: The Rhetoric and Pedagogy of Gertrude Buck* and edited collections by Catherine Hobbs, Andrea Lunsford, Molly Wertheimer, Christine Sutherland and Rebecca Sutcliffe, and Hildy Miller and Lillian Bridwell-Bowles. Feminist theorizations of rhetoric that inform my project include Glenn's *Unspoken: The Rhetoric of Silence* as well as Krista Ratcliffe's *Anglo-American Feminist Challenges to the Rhetorical Traditions: Virginia Woolf, Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich and Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*.

I build upon their efforts by examining Diane Nash's persuasive use of motherhood and tracing its impact upon her historical legacy, a chain of events that began with the rhetor's crafting of maternal appeals so compelling that they became the centerpiece of subsequent accounts of the incident. Historians created dramatic narratives that commemorated Nash as a mother rather than a leader and positioned her in a supporting role within the movement. Fortunately, scholarly recuperation of women's neglected contributions to civil rights is finally bringing overdue recognition to Nash's efforts and accomplishments. This article, then, also considers how recent accounts of her resistant action negotiate motherhood and civic engagement. Why do these historical representations merit attention? Because they constitute a significant site that reflects how motherhood functions as a cultural construct, as a *topos* that generates persuasive means, and as a rhetorical resource that works for and against women. Indeed, this particular case illuminates how motherhood compromised Nash's rightful place in public memory for decades.

### Motherhood in Public Discourse

To appreciate motherhood's rhetorical and historical impact, one must consider its relationship to the overarching system of gender. Per Michel Foucault, I envision motherhood as part of a symbolic order comprised of discursive formations, loosely organized bodies of knowledge that establish "regimes of truth," encode power relations, and produce speaking subjects ("Truth and Power" 131). Discursive formations have an epistemic function, flagging certain objects as worthy of attention, generating information about those objects, and encouraging acceptance of purported truths about them (truths embedded within assumptions, values, and world views). Motherhood is part of the discursive formation of gender and so reiterates its prevailing constructs of male and female, masculine and feminine. Like gender, motherhood's meaning is contextually bound, its central tenets and associations forever in flux rather than fixed, its constitution varying across historical periods and cultures. Motherhood, then, both reflects the network of power relations that undergird gender and makes those relations appear to be normal, unchanging, self-evident expressions of "the way things are" (Barthes, *S/Z* 206). Stated somewhat differently, motherhood functions as "an

abbreviated version of the entire system" of gender (Silverman 31) and brings that system to bear upon subjects, social practices, and rhetorical texts.<sup>2</sup>

Susan Miller's *Trust in Texts: A Different History of Rhetoric* sheds light upon the connections between motherhood and persuasion. Subjects, she observes, are educated into a cultural matrix that establishes shared "ideas about standards of credible behavior," "fitting responses to specific situations," and "appropriate ways of talking about them"; these conventions, in turn, promote a sense of community based upon emotion and its corollary, trust (22-23). The rhetor must seek common scripts, constructs, and values capable of inspiring collective feeling (anger, fear, enthusiasm, admiration, etc.) and earning the audience's trust—all of this must occur *before* persuasion becomes possible. To adapt Miller's framework to the topic at hand, motherhood is part of the cultural matrix, and enculturation entails learning the role's associations and values, standards of credible behavior by and toward mothers, and appropriate ways of discussing mothers, mothering, and motherhood. To those schooled to its cultural meaning, motherhood invites—perhaps even commands—prescribed emotional responses, including respect, obedience, love, and so on. The construct, thus, provides subjects with an opportunity to recognize and respond appropriately to dominant scripts and ideologies and to create socially legible character. Due to its role in subject formation and collusion with the discursive formation of gender, motherhood is easily invoked but difficult to resist in public discourse. When it surfaces in a rhetorical text, it (re)interpellates the audience, placing members in familiar subject positions, eliciting conventional feelings, and inspiring trust.

Richard Weaver's discussion of *god terms* further clarifies the cultural significance and rhetorical impact of motherhood. Societies make sense of the world by discerning (I would say by agreeing upon) absolutes of good and bad; they, then, use these absolutes to sort objects and experiences, to evaluate them and create hierarchies, and to systematize relationships between attractive and repulsive terms (212). A *god term* is an expression of ideas and ideals that subjects feel "socially impelled

<sup>2</sup> My understanding of motherhood as a cultural, historic, and semiotic construct and my rhetorical framework for decoding its operations in public discourse are detailed fully in *Rhetorics of Motherhood*.

to accept and even to sacrifice for” (212-14). The Mother, I argue, operates as a god term within American public discourse and connotes a plethora of positive associations, including children, love, protection, home, nourishment, altruism, morality, religion, self-sacrifice, strength, the reproductive body, the private sphere, and the nation. The Mother’s rhetorical force derives from its cultural resonance and centrality: It provides speakers with an immediately recognizable figure or stereotype comprised of well-known qualities and attributes. That stereotype, however, is imbued with inequitable and restrictive gender presumptions (holding, for example, that mothers belong in the private rather than the public sphere). Women—especially mothers—who fail to manifest characteristics associated with the god-term Mother stir negative emotions and garner distrust, thereby running serious risk of ethical diminishment and social rejection. The power and peril of motherhood in public discourse derives from the god-term’s complicity with dominant systems of gender, knowledge, and power. To explore its (dis)advantages, I return to Diane Nash’s rhetoric and movement objectives as she readied herself to enter a Mississippi prison.

### Nash as Strategist and Rhetor

In 1962, Nash was already well known within civil rights circles and well versed in jail-without-bail strategy. Her involvement in the movement had begun in 1959 when, as a Fisk University sophomore, she completed Reverend James Lawson’s workshop on nonviolent resistance and quickly emerged as a leader of the Nashville sit-ins, a sprawling campaign that lasted from February to May 1960 and successfully integrated many of the city’s lunch counters and public venues. Nash’s first experience with jail-no-bail policy took place during this period. In a coordinated effort to exert pressure on the system and heighten community awareness of racism, arrested protesters refused to pay their \$50 fines and opted for jail instead. Nash, serving as spokesperson, explained their reasoning to the court: “We feel that if we pay these fines we would be contributing to and supporting the injustice and immoral practices that have been performed in the arrest and conviction of the defendants” (Westmoreland-White, n.p.). Nash also helped found SNCC in April 1960 and subsequently guided many of its direct-action desegregation efforts in the South, endeavors that often led to her

imprisonment. In early 1961, for example, she and three other SNCC members joined students in Rock Hill, South Carolina—where sit-ins had been ongoing for a year with little effect. In hopes of reviving the campaign, Rock Hill students agreed to change strategy and began to refuse bail following arrest; Nash showed support by spending the month of February in jail alongside them (Jones, n.p.).

Her next major encounter with jail-no-bail policy involved the Freedom Rides, a drive that began in May 1961 when black and white passengers departed from the nation’s capital, determined to test whether interstate buses and bus terminals were, in fact, desegregated as federal law mandated. Their journey through the Deep South was initially uneventful. When they reached Alabama, however, mob violence led to the burning of a freedom bus outside Anniston and the beating of riders in Birmingham, events that brought the effort to a halt (see Arsenault). Nash was convinced that allowing violence to stop the endeavor would spell the end of the civil rights movement, so she resuscitated the Freedom Rides despite U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy’s pleas for a cooling-off period (Nash, “Inside” 53). She arranged for a steady stream of college-age passengers to ride interstate buses from Alabama to Jackson, MS, where they were immediately charged with breaching the peace and arrested. Nash persuaded them to forego bail, so, between May 24<sup>th</sup> and September 13<sup>th</sup>, 1961, 328 riders filled city and county jails as well as the infamous Parchman Prison (“A Short History,” n.p.). This endeavor demonstrated to the movement “that ‘nonviolent direct action’ and ‘jail—no bail’ offered a successful way forward” (“A Short History,” n.p.) and shaped coming desegregation campaigns in Albany, Birmingham, and Selma, efforts that Nash had a major hand in strategizing and planning.

To oversee the Jackson leg of the Freedom Rides, she moved to Mississippi in the summer of 1961 along with SNCC cohorts Bernard Lafayette and James Bevel, whom Nash would soon marry. The trio encountered such entrenched racism and intimidation that they had little success recruiting adult riders and so began training volunteers as young as fourteen. Nash, Lafayette, and Bevel were soon charged with and convicted for contributing to the delinquency of minors (Halberstam 391-93); they were tried and sentenced in city court and then freed

on bond while awaiting an appeal hearing.<sup>3</sup> However, by the time her hearing arrived, Nash was no longer willing to cooperate with the state of Mississippi (“Dianne” 1, 6). Her letter to civil rights workers detailed the absurdity of fighting segregation, undergoing arrest, bailing out of jail, and then placing matters in the hands of an “evil and corrupt court system” (Nash, “A Message” 2). Protestors, she argued, would never receive justice in a system where they were arrested on spurious charges (such as breaching the peace, criminal anarchy, conspiracy to violate trespass law, and corrupting minors), were tried in segregated courtrooms, and were required to “pay the bill for this humiliation in court costs” (“A Message” 2). Nash was also alarmed at the “skyrocketing expense” of bailing out protesters and was convinced that the practice undermined the movement’s potential: “I think we all realize what it would mean if we had hundreds and thousands of people across the South prepared to go to jail and stay. There can be no doubt that our battle would be won” (“A Message” 3). Leaving jail, she reasoned, deprived the movement of its most powerful tool, “truth force and soul force.” Imprisoned protesters not only put pressure on the system but also exemplified “redemption through suffering,” thereby promoting the possibility of real change:

When we leave the jails under bond we lose our opportunity to witness—to prick the conscience of the oppressing group and to appeal to the imagination of the oppressed group and inspire them. . . . Gandhi said the difference between people who are recklessly breaking the law and those who are standing on a moral principle is [. . . willingness] to take the consequences of their action. When they do this a whole community, indeed a whole nation and the world, may be awakened, and the sights of all society are raised to a new level. (“A Message” 2)

Expressing faith that the actions of “a few people, even one person, [could] move mountains,” Nash was determined to do what she asked of others: “[E]ven if we cannot honestly foresee great effects from our stand,

<sup>3</sup> According to the *Jackson Advocate*, Nash was charged with four counts of contributing to the delinquency of minors. She was tried and sentenced to two years’ imprisonment as well as a \$2,000 fine by the City Court; the case was appealed to the County Court, and she was free on bond while awaiting the hearing (“Dianne Nash” 1, 6).

it is my belief that each of us must act on our own conscience—do the thing we know in our hearts is right. . . . I think each of us—regardless of what others may do—must make our own decision, alone and for ourselves. I have made mine” (“A Message” 3). Her commitment to spiritual principle and self-sacrifice as well as her vision and courage created formidable ethos and stirred emotion in readers. Most of her letter, however, marshaled logical proofs to support the claim that justice was best served by resisting a corrupt system and staying in jail. In all, fourteen of the document’s eighteen paragraphs detailed financial, organizational, tactical, and spiritual arguments for jail-no-bail policy. Reasoned analysis, then, was the rhetor’s preferred means for influencing others.

Nash, however, could not make a compelling case without also addressing her physical condition. In fact, before halting the appeal process, she anguished over the potential consequences of resistant action for her pregnancy: “I sat out in the cotton fields and thought about my strategy for a very long time” (2008 interview). Although she did not want to serve time while pregnant, give birth in jail, or risk separation from her child, Nash decided it was imperative to set an example in order to urge widespread adoption of jail-no-bail policy with no exceptions. She, therefore, devoted a paragraph to her impending motherhood in both the letter and press release. The short media announcement ended with the motherhood paragraph, which brought the document to a moving and memorable conclusion. However, she positioned the motherhood paragraph early in the letter—where it was the fourth of eighteen paragraphs—and diluted its impact considerably, suggesting some discomfort with the *topos*. (Nash herself later attributed her limited use of maternal appeals to being unaware of pregnancy’s rhetorical force [2008 interview].) The ethical and emotional power of motherhood, then, played a relatively minor role in the missive to civil rights workers when compared to logical exposition.

Understanding Nash’s broader objectives helps to explain why, upon entering the Hinds County Courthouse for her appeal hearing, she elected to sit in the white-only section of Judge Russell Moore’s courtroom. Determined to contest segregation and enter jail one way or another, she refused to move to the colored section when ordered and immediately received a ten-day sentence for contempt of court. After she



finished serving the ten-day term, Judge Moore released Nash despite assurances that she'd return immediately to freedom fighting (Carson, *The Student Voice* 53, 56). He eventually ruled that she could not abandon her appeal but suspended her original two-year sentence. Therefore, Nash was at liberty when she gave birth to her first child, Sherrilynn, on August 5, 1962 (Theoharis 835-36).<sup>4</sup>

Nash's appeal revocation (more specifically, the explanation offered in her letter and press release) may be viewed as a *rhetorical refusal*, "an act of writing or speaking in which the rhetor pointedly refuses to do what the audience considers rhetorically normal. By rejecting a procedure that the audience expects, the rhetor seeks the audience's assent to another principle, cast as a higher priority" (Schilb 3). Although it defies audience expectations, a rhetorical refusal, nevertheless, attempts to persuade even as it violates protocol. Schilb characterizes such refusals as deliberate, purpose driven, and atypical (3), and Nash's decision to enter jail rather than cooperate further with Mississippi's "justice" system certainly meets these criteria. It was deliberate, undertaken to make a statement and change minds; it was purpose driven, intended to encourage other arrested protestors to stay in jail; and it was atypical, disrupting conventions of law, race, and gender. Regarding law, Nash's action moved counter to the procedural assumption that pursuing an appeal was preferable to being in jail. Regarding race, her critique of state systems, refusal to cooperate with them, and voluntary incarceration flouted southern expectations of African Americans, who were "supposed" to accept the status quo subserviently, passively, and silently. Regarding gender, the expectant mother's willingness to enter prison defied prevailing norms of maternal conduct, which mandated that women prioritize pregnancy over politics and sequester themselves in the private sphere.

Nash, as a woman and a person of color, faced a complex audience and rhetorical situation in her negotiation of gender. Her press release

<sup>4</sup> Nash has stated that her pregnancy created a public-relations predicament for Mississippi authorities ("Interview" 2008). Although Moore gave her a ten-day sentence for openly defying segregation in the courtroom (chiefly because he felt compelled to reassert authority), she believes he was simply not willing to deal with the negative publicity that would have followed from sending a high-profile expectant mother to jail for two years. After all, pressure and attention are focused on the system when protesters are imprisoned; keeping Nash out of jail alleviated both ("Interview" 2008).

addressed a national readership likely to uphold dominant gender conventions that positioned mothers within the home, encouraged complete devotion to husband and children, and dictated distance from public affairs. The expectant mother's willingness to go to jail, her dedication to civil rights, her efforts to promote social justice, and her immersion in public life clearly moved counter to convention, so Nash risked appearing "unfeminine" and "unmotherly" to a national audience, potentially eroding her character and credibility. She, therefore, justified her actions, arguing that her unorthodoxy served a higher—and decidedly maternal—purpose, "hasten[ing] that day when my child and all children will be free—not only on the day of their birth but for all of their lives" ("A Message" 1). Her reasoning called upon assumptions about motherhood that were familiar to audience members and easily invoked through suggestion (rather than explicit statement).<sup>5</sup> Stated fully, her enthymeme might run as follows:

Major Premise: Mothers do/should suffer for their children's best interests.

Minor Premise: Nash is a [soon-to-be] mother.

Conclusion: Therefore, Nash does/should suffer for children's best interests.

By drawing upon shared beliefs about mothers, mothering, and motherhood, Nash framed her entry into prison as right conduct. She privileged her child's—and by deliberate extension, all children's—long-term welfare over her own short-term discomfort and thus successfully aligned herself with the god-term Mother (despite what, at first glance, appeared to be serious divergence from it). What is more, the enthymeme presented her self-sacrifice as noble (creating ethos), her courage as

<sup>5</sup> John Gage describes the enthymeme as "any statement made in reasoned discourse that is accompanied by substantiation in the form of one or more premises" likely to be known by the audience (223). A rhetor rarely presents an enthymeme's entire line of reasoning (in the form of major premise, minor premise, and conclusion) and instead omits material familiar to her audience. According to Aristotle, the audience's ability to supply missing premises is crucial to the creation of enthymemes, for it connects "the assumed beliefs of the audience with the conclusion of the rhetor by means of invented arguments" (Gage 223). The real determinate of an enthymeme, then, is not that it has a missing premise but that its premises invoke common beliefs inculcated through shared cultural scripts and codes.

admirable (creating pathos), and her appeal revocation as sensible (creating logos).

Race, however, also shaped the meaning and interpretation of Nash's resistant action. While her decision to enter jail while pregnant was likely perceived as a gendered rhetorical refusal by audiences operating from within the dominant gender framework, it may well have seemed reasonable and responsible to those familiar with African American traditions of mothering and motherhood. As Patricia Hill Collins explains, cultural assumptions that dichotomize "the public sphere of economic and political discourse and the private sphere of family and household responsibilities" have never reflected the lives of women of color, who routinely traversed those realms in the course of sustaining children and employment. Further, their maternal obligations typically encompassed both the personal and the communal, prompting them to safeguard their families while also ensuring "group survival, empowerment, and identity" (Collins, "Shifting" 58-59). To negotiate these duties, African American women developed distinct maternal practices, serving as *bloodmothers* to their offspring, as *othermothers* to their kin's and neighbors' children, and as *community othermothers* to the larger black collective (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 189-92). The strong sense of social responsibility that accompanied these roles—particularly that of community othermother—prompted many educated black women to become political actors within the public sphere throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see Giddings; Higginbotham; Logan). Nash's appeal revocation connected her to a long line of African American women who coordinated motherwork with racial uplift and social justice. To illustrate, both Frances Watkins Harper and Mary Ann Shadd Cary combined mothering with public speaking in the 1860s, advocating abolition and emigration and recruiting black soldiers for the Union Army (see Buchanan, *Regendering* 177-78, 148-50). In 1896, anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells Barnett gave birth to her first child and almost immediately returned to the lecture circuit, remarking, "I honestly believe that I am the only woman in the United States who ever traveled throughout the country with a nursing baby to make political speeches" (Giddings 377). As a result of women's prominent, public roles as community othermothers, African American standards of maternal decorum differed significantly from those of the dominant

culture. To black audiences, the pregnant Nash's entry into prison may well have appeared to be gender-as-usual rather than a gendered refusal.

As historians took notice of Nash's appeal revocation and incorporated it into their accounts of the civil rights movement, motherhood moved center stage and pushed the scope and purpose of her resistant action into the shadows. Her portrayal as an emotional, brave mother not only erased her strategic thinking and movement objectives but also distorted her rhetorical style. Ironically, although Nash enacted a rhetorical refusal that (for many) defied dominant gender conventions, historians cast her as an exemplary Mother, and she has been remembered as such. More distortion was created by writers' selective use of Nash's rhetoric: They often focused on her maternal appeals and elided the legal, economic, and spiritual reasons underpinning jail-no-bail policy, thereby converting her farsighted action into a minor interlude in the chronicles of Great Black Men of the civil rights movement. I explore an illustrative example next.

### Nash as Mother and Activist

Kimberlé Crenshaw provides a useful framework for examining historical representations of Nash's appeal revocation. She observes that women of color are positioned "within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas," namely eradicating racism and obliterating sexism (1252). Antiracist (civil rights) groups often make gendered assumptions that normalize black men's experience while antisexist (feminist) groups make racial assumptions that normalize white women's experience. Both groups, therefore, "fail women of color by not acknowledging the 'additional' issue of race or of patriarchy" that constitutes their double burden, thereby oversimplifying the "full dimensions of racism and sexism" and strengthening the oppressive "power relations that each attempts to challenge" (1282). Crenshaw encourages scholars to investigate depictions of African American women in order to identify how "prevalent narratives of race and gender" perpetuate their displacement (1282-83).

I respond to Crenshaw's call by considering how histories written from an antiracist perspective render Nash's appeal revocation in ways that perpetuate an inequitable gender system privileging men and cast the civil rights movement chiefly as their handiwork. I am especially interested in antiracist historians' invocation of the god-term Mother,

which subsumed Nash, the accomplished movement strategist, and projected a simple, authoritative stereotype in her place. To appreciate the god term's rhetorical impact here, one must recall that the Mother reflects and sustains the network of power relations that undergird gender. Through constant repetition, the Mother presents the "social, the cultural, the ideological, [and] the historical" as natural, thereby converting the gender system's "contingent foundations" into "Common Sense, Right Reason, the Norm, General Opinion, in short the *doxa*" (Barthes, "Change the Object Itself" 165). Gendered *doxa* circulate uncontested in antiracist depictions of Nash's appeal revocation, which present men and women in ways that naturalize motherhood and reify the gendered status quo.

I concentrate here on one account—that presented in Taylor Branch's *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-65*—and refer readers interested in more comprehensive analysis to *Rhetorics of Motherhood*. Branch's version consistently subordinates Nash to the men around her through three rhetorical moves: its gendered assumptions and invocations of the Mother, its selective use of the activist's rhetoric, and its failure to contextualize her action within the civil rights movement. Branch starts by foregrounding Nash's pregnancy, calling her "the young lady who [dared] Mississippi to make her give birth in jail" (55). He then introduces a spiritual precept from Rev. James Lawson, whose workshop introduced Nash to nonviolent resistance and inspired her commitment to the Nashville sit-ins, namely that "oppression requires the participation of the oppressed" (*Pillar* 55). The reverend's tenet, Branch explains, turned in his student's mind "until she saw her felony appeals as participation that soothed Mississippi with a false presumption of justice." The account suggests that Lawson's convictions prompted Nash's appeal revocation, a puzzling attribution as the activist's press release and letter detail the spiritual principles and economic imperatives guiding her action and give evidence of a formidable and independent thinker.

The historian then dramatizes a wildly confrontational courtroom scene that begins with Judge Moore banging "down an additional ten days for contempt when Nash refuse[s] to sit in the colored section of the courtroom." Branch describes the chaotic aftermath:

Bevel, serving as her lawyer, made a speech to the court, and Nash herself read from an apocalyptic statement on why she chose to give birth behind bars. "This will be a black baby born in Mississippi," she declared before being led off to the Hinds County Jail, "and thus wherever he is born, he will be in prison . . . I have searched my soul about this and considered it in prayer. I have reached the conclusion that in the long run, this will be the best thing I can do for my child." (*Pillar* 56)

Despite their revolutionary fervor, Bevel and Nash adopt fairly conventional gender roles: The husband handles legal matters, addressing the court on his wife's behalf, while she confines her remarks to pregnancy, childbirth, and progeny. Culling material from Nash's motherhood paragraph, Branch invokes the Mother and creates impressive ethos for the activist, portraying her as a brave, self-sacrificing woman of color who voluntarily delivers herself into racist hands in order to benefit her child and the larger black collective. He makes no mention of her efforts to persuade arrested protestors to stay in jail and forego bail, an omission undercuts Nash's agency, agenda, and acumen; relegates her to a supporting role; and casts her chiefly as Bevel's expectant wife. Branch's vivid, memorable, and moving courtroom scene is also inaccurate: Nash was represented by a lawyer, not her husband, during the hearing and was not permitted to utter a word, making the delivery of an "apocalyptic statement" about birth behind bars impossible (Nash, 2008 interview).

The troubling gender assumptions embedded within Branch's narrative become even more apparent in the next scene. After Nash is dragged off to jail, the setting shifts to the judge's chambers where Moore and Bevel debate principles and priorities. The judge urges the husband to protect his young, vulnerable, expectant wife and insists that Bevel's "first duty in all his roles—as lay attorney, citizen, husband, and expectant father—is to keep Nash *out* of prison, not in it":

"You know, son," he said ruefully, "you people are insane."

"Judge Moore, you don't understand Christianity," Bevel replied. "All the early Christians went to jail."



“Maybe so,” said the judge. “But they weren’t all pregnant and twenty-one.” Bevel held his ground during the standoff, assuring Moore that Nash would renounce any court-appointed lawyer who tried to reinstate her appeal. Moore eventually ordered her release and simply ignored the uncontested two-year sentence. (Branch, *Pillar* 56)

By this point in the story, Nash has been reduced to the silent, offstage object of men’s negotiations, her maternal body configured as the site of racial struggle. Bevel “wins” the battle, holding “his ground during the standoff” through his willingness to keep his wife in jail; her release and suspended sentence stem, instead, from the judge’s somewhat confused sense of chivalry.

Branch also fails to mention a critical point here: Bevel and Lafayette, Nash’s SNCC colleagues in Mississippi, also incurred fines and jail time for “corrupting minors,” and they, too, ultimately had their sentences suspended (Halberstam 394-95).<sup>6</sup> In overlooking the similar treatment of Nash’s male cohorts, Branch implies that pregnancy afforded her special privileges with the court, a suggestion that again promotes problematic gendered *doxa*, including, for instance, that expectant women are emotional and vulnerable and that men are reasonable and women’s protectors. These *doxa* highlight Nash’s maternal role and undermine her recognition as a movement leader, for mothers presumably lack the intellectual acumen and strategic capacity to direct organizational policy. Branch presents Nash as a good girl—a faithful student, a trusting wife, an idealistic mother-to-be—whose actions and fate are determined by the men in her life, whether Lawson, Bevel, or Moore. The historian’s antiracist agenda not only reifies gender hierarchy but also attributes civil rights advances to men like Bevel, Martin Luther King, Ralph Abernathy,

<sup>6</sup> Bevel and Lafayette faced five charges for “corrupting minors,” each carrying a potential fine of \$2,000 and two-year jail term (Halberstam 394). The men spent two weeks in jail until NAACP lawyer Jack Young plea bargained a suspended sentence for them, with the proviso that they agree to leave Jackson. The SNCC activists, however, rejected the concession, fired Young, and represented themselves at trial. Bevel declared that he was not the one corrupting black children; the true culprit was the state of Mississippi’s “system of segregation which denied them their basic rights as well as decent schools and decent jobs, and their innate dignity as American citizens” (Halberstam 395). Although the judge sentenced Bevel and Lafayette to the maximum jail time and fines, he suspended their sentences, warning them to expect no mercy if they appeared in his court again.

Fred Shuttlesworth, and Medgar Evers. In the process, Nash is reduced to their sidekick.

Branch’s primary interest in racial politics, his repetition of gendered *doxa*, and his rendition of motherhood elide Nash’s strategic efforts to influence the movement on this occasion. He derives powerful ethical and emotional appeals from Nash’s motherhood paragraph but leaves unmentioned everything else in her press release and letter, including her reasons for halting the appeal process. Without philosophical ground, organizational purpose, or movement context, Nash’s resistant action is moving and unforgettable but somewhat pointless. Such critical elisions, Crenshaw observes, occur whenever race or gender becomes the sole concern, in either case placing women of color in “a location that resists telling” (1242). Branch’s account reveals this process at work; his portrayal of Nash as a good student, wife, woman, and mother (rather than an independent agent, thinker, and leader) effectively relegates her to a “location that resists telling” and a minor role within his history of the movement.

### Nash as Civil Rights Leader

Women’s contributions to civil rights are, at long last, receiving recognition thanks to intersectional scholarship that considers the interplay of race, gender, class, region, and religion on movement participants, initiatives, and events.<sup>7</sup> In consequence, more nuanced examinations of Nash’s appeal revocation are appearing that acknowledge her pregnancy *and* her underlying motives. Reclaiming the rhetor’s reasons and objectives, long hidden beneath the mantle of motherhood, is an important step in redressing gender imbalances and distortions within the historical record. Belinda Robnett’s *How Long? How Long?: African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* presents the

<sup>7</sup> These works include Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin’s *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement*; Vicki Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods’ *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965*; Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon’s *Women and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965*; Peter J. Ling and Sharon Monteith’s *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement*; Lynne Olson’s *Freedom’s Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970*; Belinda Robnett’s *How Long? How Long?: African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights*; and Rosetta Ross’s *Witnessing and Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights*.

most comprehensive account of the incident to date, and it is particularly instructive for its recuperation of Nash's strategic purpose and rhetorical acumen and for its positioning of the activist within the mainstream movement. Like Branch, Robnett acknowledges and even foregrounds Nash's pregnancy and impending motherhood; however, she resists the temptation to show the activist primarily in that light and instead incorporates information and acknowledges complexities ignored elsewhere. Robnett's attention to detail and to context effectively redirects the spotlight away from the Mother and onto the multifaceted young woman of color, SNCC organizer and tactician, wife and soon-to-be mother. The writer accomplishes this by connecting the activist's decision to enter jail with her promotion of jail-no-bail policy and by situating that action within the wider movement. In fact, she identifies Martin Luther King as Nash's primary rhetorical audience.

Robnett begins by acknowledging the overlap of women's roles as social actors and mothers: "Just like their male comrades, women risked their lives for the movement. Some even risked the lives of their children" (106). She then introduces Nash, establishing her marriage to Bevel and her pregnancy of four months, and details the nature of Nash's pending charges for "contributing to the delinquency of minors." Unlike Branch, the writer greatly condenses subsequent courtroom events, simply relating that Nash "was sentenced to two years' imprisonment but served only ten days" (106-7).<sup>8</sup> At this point, Robnett segues from Nash's incarceration to King's earlier participation in and arrest for a December 16, 1961 desegregation march in Albany, Georgia. Although the minister announced his determination to stay in jail, he bailed out hours later, a decision that deeply disappointed the SNCC organizers who spearheaded the Albany campaign. Robnett presents Nash's advocacy of jail-without-bail policy as a response to King's departure from his Albany cell and cites an extended passage from her April 30, 1962 letter to civil rights workers.

<sup>8</sup> Robnett's purpose is to demonstrate women's leadership role within the civil rights movement, and it sometimes leads her to gloss over complicating factors. She does not mention, for instance, that Nash posted bond and left jail after her initial sentencing (fall 1961) or that her decision to suspend her appeal and serve her term occurred months later (spring 1962). Telescoping events in this manner enables Robnett to tell her tale concisely, to present her protagonist as decisive from the outset, and to focus on Nash's rhetoric and strategy instead of the events leading up to them.

With this setup and background in place, the reader can almost hear Nash addressing King directly:

I believe the time has come, and is indeed long past, when each of us must make up his mind, when arrested on unjust charges, to serve his sentence and stop posting bonds. I believe that unless we do this our movement loses its power and will never succeed. We in the nonviolent movement have been talking about jail without bail for two years or more. It is time for us to mean what we say. (qtd. in Robnett 107)

Robnett incorporates eleven sentences from Nash's letter, and the activist's voice, logic, and values become audible and distinct. Incorporating material other than the oft-cited motherhood paragraph, the account acknowledges Nash's philosophical and organizational arguments for jail-no-bail policy (a term missing in Branch's version) and captures the rhetor's preference for logos. Nine of eleven sentences present reasons for arrested protesters to forego bond; only two concern Nash's pregnancy. Compared to Branch, Robnett devotes far less space and attention to the rhetor's impending motherhood (although its incorporation at the episode's beginning and end emphasize the point). She also explicitly links Nash's pregnancy to her policy objectives and situates her letter within the larger trajectory of the civil rights movement. Arguing for the effectiveness of the activist's discourse and action, Robnett attributes King's subsequent decision to return to and serve his sentence in the Albany jail to Nash's influence.<sup>9</sup> This rich, contextualized, intersectional analysis produces a well-rounded portrait of Nash as an African American committed to racial justice and a woman within a male-dominated organization. Robnett's attention to the dynamics of race and gender renders motherhood *an* element, rather than *the* element, of the narrative. In consequence, Nash comes out of the shadows and can be recognized for her impact on the movement.

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, one might make that case that King's appreciation for jail-no-bail policy profoundly influenced his future actions, culminating in his arrest and imprisonment during the 1963 Birmingham campaign and production of the acclaimed "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

I hope that this brief examination of Diane Nash's appeal revocation, rhetoric, and historical remembrance suggests how motherhood contributed to her initial displacement from public memory. Motherhood's paradoxical capacity to generate powerful persuasive resources and to reduce women to gender stereotypes comes sharply into focus in this case. Nash astutely employed maternal appeals to make her actions moving, memorable, and comprehensible to others. Ironically, those same appeals overshadowed her discussion of jail-without-bail policy in antiracist accounts, which typically commemorated Nash as a courageous African American mother fighting segregation rather than as a proponent of nonviolent resistance, a spiritual practitioner, or a movement strategist. Stated somewhat differently, antiracist histories displaced the complex woman of color and substituted the god-term Mother, a constellation of positive maternal attributes that is immediately recognizable and deeply meaningful to cultural insiders. In so doing, they undercut Nash's leadership role in and influence on the civil rights movement.

Motherhood, however, not only affected Nash's representation in antiracist histories but also shaped her rhetorical practice in ways that contributed to her marginalization as well. Nash relinquished public work following the birth of her children but did not end her engagement with the movement. From home, she continued to strategize major initiatives with her husband, including the 1963 Birmingham desegregation campaign, the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, and the 1965 Alabama voting rights campaign ("Nash"). The couple alternated pitching their ideas to SNCC and SCLC leaders although Bevel typically coordinated their projects in the field while Nash remained home with the children. Such collaboration links her, once again, to earlier generations of women whose cooperative partnerships with friends, family, and servants enabled them to negotiate conflicting maternal and civic obligations, produce and deliver rhetoric, and gain access to public forums (see Buchanan, *Regendering* 131-40).

There were, however, serious disadvantages to Nash and Bevel's collaboration, namely that her efforts were ignored while his reputation soared within the civil rights community. As SNCC organizer Ivanhoe Donaldson observed, Bevel eclipsed Nash following their marriage, and she "faded into his background while his star was out there shining"

(qtd. in Olson 211). Similarly, Andrew Young acknowledged that SCLC ministers overlooked Nash's part in the couple's projects, equating her behind-the-scenes contributions with those of their wives, who ran "the choir," "Sunday school," and "women's fellowship without any compensation" but their husbands' salaries: "It is not to our credit that we followed that model with Diane" (342). Organizational disregard of Nash's collaborative role, which she assumed in order to reconcile motherwork with social justice, also contributed to her sidelining within the movement and its histories.

Despite intersectional scholars' recuperative efforts, there is a long way to go before Nash receives the recognition she is due, as was all too apparent on the fifty-year anniversary of the Freedom Rides. In May 2011, a reunion and five-day conference took place in Jackson, MS, featuring an extensive series of lectures, exhibits, tours, celebrations, and showings. The name *Diane Nash*, however, did not appear once among the proceedings, lists of riders, or historical blurbs featured on the event website (see *Return of the Freedom Riders, 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Reunion*). Such disregard of the activist who not only revived the Freedom Rides after violence brought them to a halt but also coordinated their final leg into Jackson reflects the snail-like pace of women's incorporation into civil rights history.

Cheryl Glenn assures feminist rhetorical scholars that "history is not frozen, not merely the past" but instead presents "an approachable, disruptable ground for engaging and transforming traditional memory . . . in the interest of both the present and future" ("Comment" 463). I undertake this study of motherhood, rhetoric, and remembrance with faith that uncovering gendered and raced processes of marginalization can, indeed, disrupt traditional memory and make history fairer to and more inclusive of women.

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