Toward a rhetorical theory of deixis

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Toward a rhetorical theory of deixis
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ABSTRACT
This article advances a rhetorical theory of deixis, a theoretical and methodological orientation that infuses the linguistic concept of deixis with rhetorical understandings of ethos, place, and time. Deixis reveals the rhetorical dynamics within the fabric of spoken discourse, dynamics that often refer to what is outside the text to make sense of what is within it. Ultimately, I argue that identifying the deictic indicators within a speech text enables the critic to pinpoint where, how, and why a speaker activates the physical elements of the speech situation as a material means of persuasion. After outlining the theoretical tenets of this approach, I analyze Harry S. Truman's Address to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People on June 29, 1947, to show how a rhetorical theory of deixis orients the critic to the bodies, places, and temporalities implied in and displayed through speech.

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In recent years, the spatial, material, visual, and affective “turns” have pushed critics beyond the bounds of the speaker–audience model characterizing the public address tradition. These “turns,” and the scholarship resulting from them, have provided valuable studies that extend our understanding of the available means of persuasion at various times, in certain places, and on specific occasions. This burgeoning and important scholarly emphasis on bodies, objects, sensation, materiality, ethnography, and in situ criticism necessitates a discussion of how critics are to analyze oratorical texts within and as a product of their material, historical, and symbolic contexts. How are we to account for the material dimensions of a speech designed for and delivered in place? How do we define context, particularly in light of new methodological approaches such as rhetorical field methods, ethnography, autoethnography, and audience studies? And what is the critic’s job in “recovering” the materiality of historical texts—the bodies, sensations, locations, and temporalities addressed and constituted through speech? I argue that a rhetorical theory of deixis offers the critic a theoretical and methodological tool for “[u]npacking a text, probing its dimensions and possibilities” to better understand how orators use language to activate “the richness of a very specific situation that already has passed and will not return in exactly the same way.” It is this richness, this ability to uncover the “text and texture” of a rhetorical act within its historical and social contexts that this article aims to explore.
spatiotemporal contexts that make the practice of close reading and a deictic approach to textual criticism still relevant and necessary for rhetorical scholarship.

Although strands of deixis can be identified in earlier works by C. S. Peirce, Philipp Wegener, Karl Brugmann, and Sir Alan Gardiner, contemporary linguists most often credit German psychologist Karl Bühler as first organizing and systemizing a formal theory of deixis. In 1934, Bühler published *Theory of Language: The Representational Function of Language* and defined the communicative encounter, or what he also referred to as the “concrete speech event,” as comprised of three primary elements: the person doing the speaking (“I”), the place or location of the interaction (“here”), and the time this interaction occurred (“now”).4 These three terms or axes (the “I/here/now” triad) constitute the “deictic field” and define the bounds of the communicative encounter. For Bühler, these indicators (words such as “I,” “you,” “here,” “there,” “this,” and “now,” to name a few) operate as “expedient ways to guide the partners” and direct audience members to “the details of the situation.”5 To put it simply, deictic indicators operate as verbal gestures within the speech act and direct the audience to the “persons, objects, events, processes and activities being talked about, or referred to, in relation to the spatio-temporal context created and sustained by the act of utterance and the participation in it.”6 For many linguists, deixis offers a way to identify which elements of context the speaker implicates through language. However, these studies too often limit contextual parameters to the immediate conversational exchange, thereby neglecting the political, ideological, and ultimately rhetorical implications of privileging certain people, places, and times through speech.

In this article, I advance a rhetorical theory of deixis, a theoretical and methodological orientation that infuses the linguistic concept of deixis with rhetorical understandings of *ethos*, place, and time. As a discipline, rhetoric is uniquely qualified to interrogate how these relational, spatial, and temporal axes implicate each other. A rhetorical approach to deixis does not simply identify these coordinates; it asks why they are there, what they symbolize, and how this symbolization constitutes specific audiences, geopolitical realities, ideologies, and ways of being in the world. This rhetorical appropriation of Bühler’s deictic field also thickens our contextual understanding of the rhetorical situation by adding bodies, physical locations, and temporalities into the equation. It pushes us to consider the text in its historical, spatial, and temporal totality, as a speech act designed for and delivered in place, within a specific historical/temporal moment, to real people—bodies in their lived experiences. For rhetorical scholars, the idea that words or language can orient one to the details of the situation is not new. And in fact, the concept of deixis actually has a long history within the classical rhetorical tradition. Deixis is the English version of δειξις (deixis), a Greek noun translated as “mode of proof,” “specimen,” “display,” or “exhibition.”7 The noun derives from the Greek verb δείκνυμι (deiknumi), “to bring to light, display, exhibit,” “to set before one,” and “to point out by words, to tell, explain, teach.”8 Aristotle’s conception of epideictic speech stems from *epideixis*, a term that described speech that displays or shows forth *on or for* something.9 “Epideixis,” writes Debra Hawhee, “primarily meant a material or bodily display. . . . [that] itself becomes manifest via discourse.”10 If rhetoric is the art of seeing or discovering all “the available means of persuasion,”11 deixis—the act of displaying, exhibiting, showing forth through speech—reveals these elements to an audience.
In what follows, I first discuss how deixis interacts with and contributes to scholarly conversations regarding text, context, and materiality within rhetorical studies. I then detail how rhetorical understandings of ethos, place, and temporality enrich and extend linguistic appropriations of the “I/here/now” triad. After this theoretical and methodological discussion, I use this approach to analyze Harry S. Truman’s speech to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) on June 29, 1947. Through my analysis, I show how a critical sensitivity to the people, places, and temporalities displayed in and implied through speech orient the critic toward, in the words of Michael Calvin McGee, those “elements of ‘context’ . . . so important to the ‘text’ that one cannot discover, or even discuss, the meaning of ‘text’ without reference to them.”

**Contextualizing texts, materializing contexts**

The practice of “close textual analysis” emerged as a methodological antidote to the discipline’s early focus on historical and biographical accounts of “great” orators and the turn toward analyses of social movements and ideological criticism in the 1960s. As Stephen E. Lucas described the problem:

> The preoccupation of traditional criticism with recreating the historical milieu, describing the immediate setting, assaying the composition and the attitudes of the audience, and determining the effect of the speech led to a derogation of intensive textual analysis as a mere exercise.

In other words, rhetorical scholars had made context—the social, political, cultural, and economic factors of a particular discursive act—their primary focus instead of critically analyzing the speech text itself. Although there were rumblings of a renewed focus on close textual criticism in the 1970s, Michael Leff outlined the tenets of close textual analysis most clearly in 1986 when he described what a program of close textual analysis would entail: a careful reading (and rereading) of the text, an analysis of the historical and contextual factors to which the rhetor was responding, and a consideration of how the rhetorical “construction of a symbolic event invites a reconstruction of the events to which it refers.” For Leff, the critic’s job was to discover “the local circumstances that frame and motivate the work and the unique blend of formal and material elements that constitute its substance.” Although Leff’s focus on these “local circumstances” and the “formal and material elements” motivating rhetorical action encouraged critics to analyze texts as both working upon and as a product of their contexts, this critical approach privileged the solitary rhetor over the ordinary experience of audiences and elevated the symbolic nature of rhetorical action above its material effects. This is not to imply that the practice of close textual criticism ignored its context. What I do mean to suggest, however, is that the “schism” within rhetorical scholarship between doing history and doing criticism often forced the critic to choose one approach over the other, often to the detriment of both.

As Leff called rhetorical scholars to return to the oratorical text, Michael Calvin McGee advocated approaching rhetoric as “a thing, a material artifact of human interaction” requiring not just an analysis of abstract theoretical principles of how rhetoric ought to work, but also a careful consideration of how speakers “acted in and on the real world.” Since McGee’s initial introduction of rhetorical materialism in 1982, many scholars have debated what such a concept might look like in theory and practice. As Carole
Blair notes, the materialist “turn” within rhetorical studies has produced at least three “camps”: “a traditional one that insists upon considering the material conditions of discourse, another that focuses upon the lived-in body as a condition and consequence of rhetoric, and still another that understands rhetoric as itself material.” My aim is not to rehash these debates. Instead, my goal is to highlight how McGee’s initial foray into materialism pushed scholars to consider the lived experiences, embodied sensations, and everyday practices that accompany rhetorical action.

To understand rhetoric’s materiality, McGee argued, was to recognize that “rhetoric is ‘material’ by measure of human experiencing of it.” This focus on the human experience of rhetoric—real bodies interacting in real places in real time—was transformative. More recent moves toward rhetorical field methods, ethnography, and audience studies have extended our understanding of “context” beyond the historical/biographical work that characterized the discipline’s early years. Although questions of a speaker’s personal background, his/her persuasive agenda, and a specific historical narrative are still quite relevant, these are not the only elements of context that deserve our critical attention. As Michael K. Middleton, Samantha Senda-Cook, and Danielle Endres observe, “rhetoric is not constituted simply by texts or textual fragments, but through a combination of material contexts, social relationships, identities, consciousnesses, and (interrelated) rhetorical acts that produce meanings and that are coconstructed between rhetor, audience, and particular contexts.” The authors posit that “in situ rhetorical analysis can create a focused starting point for debate on the questions posed by a shift from analysis of objectified texts to a critique of ‘live’ rhetorics”—rhetorical action happening in the here and now. To be sure, critics who participate in the rhetorical action they study are able to provide unique insights into the practices and processes of particular groups engaged in persuasive movements simply—and perhaps most especially—because they are there. And yet, is it possible to include questions of materiality, bodies, and sensation into our analysis of historical texts? Put another way, how might critics of historical texts uncover the “smells, sounds, time, space, and other factors” that Middleton, Senda-Cook, and Endres claim are “excluded by a focus on text”?

I argue that a rhetorical theory of deixis helps scholars discover and recover a text’s materiality (even as it reveals how spoken oratory responds symbolically to the world around it) because “deixis links language to context in distinguishable ways, [and] the better we understand it, the more we know about context.” A rhetorical theory of deixis draws on the principles of close textual criticism to analyze how the relational, spatial, and temporal coordinates of a speech act—both the symbolic coordinates within the text and the tangible bodies, locations, and times that comprise the physical speech situation—constitute a shared social world that is both linguistically constructed and also materially real. Identifying the deictic references within an orator’s speech act provides tangible evidence for the historical events, social relationships, symbolic places, shared communities, and dimensions of temporality the rhetor invokes through speech. This approach allows the critic to identify where and how the speaker uses language to activate the scenic or situational elements of the immediate historical and sociopolitical context for his/her persuasive purposes. Ultimately, I argue that a deictic approach to close textual criticism offers one way to understand how oratorical texts activate, operate within, and speak through their contexts.
Beata Stawarska underscores the symbolic (and inherently rhetorical) potential of deixis when she observes,

[D]eixis is not to be narrowly construed as an exclusively linguistic category, for it denotes a social and corporeal expertise which harnesses and mobilizes our abilities to orient in a shared spatial environment using the repertoire of available perceptual and motor skills. That is why deixis . . . cannot be accounted for in terms of syntax and semantics alone, but also requires explanation in terms of embodied existence embedded in the shared natural and social world.26

This is why a specifically rhetorical approach to deixis is more than a simple exercise in counting the number of times a speaker says “I,” “here,” or “now.” Deixis provides a link between what is spoken and what the audience experiences during, because of, and through a speech act. Deictic indicators reveal the potential of speech to activate sensory dimensions. They “establish a direct referential link between the world and language,” revealing the symbolic and material relations between the spoken word and its material situation—or, the text and its context.27

I now turn to describing how a rhetorical theory of deixis works together with more recent scholarship on ethos, place, and temporality. This perspective takes into account the unique insights linguistics might offer to rhetoric even as it outlines how a specifically rhetorical approach to deixis extends its theoretical and methodological potential.

Toward a rhetorical theory of deixis

Rhetorical authority and ethos rooted in place

Although rhetorical scholars have long examined how inclusive or exclusive pronouns establish relationships, invite identification, create division, and constitute publics, deixis extends this analysis to the embodied existence of individuals present within the speech setting. A careful consideration of the pronouns embedded in spoken texts not only reveals how language physically links bodies together in time and place, but also marks “characteristic[s] of the sender,”28 suggesting that audience members will recognize “characteristics” or qualities they associate with the speaker—ethos. A rhetorical theory of deixis asks how a speaker’s rhetorical authority is linked to and perhaps even established in that place or location.29 The decision to situate a speech in a particular location is one way that speakers can bolster their own ethos, for, as Risa Applegarth notes, “ethos is a situated practice.” Understanding ethos in relation to place reveals how speakers “draw on places to meet their rhetorical aims and to position themselves persuasively—in material contexts and in genres which shape relations between rhetors and audiences in significant ways.”30 Michael J. Hyde describes the rhetor as one

whose symbolic constructions both create and invite others into a place where they can dwell and feel at home while thinking about and discussing the truth of some matter that the rhetor/architect has already attempted to disclose and show-forth (epi-deixis) in a specific way with his or her work of art.31

Orators, then, have the ability to symbolically construct the meaning of their rhetoric in situ in both senses—what that rhetoric means because it is located in that place, and what that place comes to represent because of their rhetorical action. In turn, rhetors
invite their audiences to deliberate together over what they have heard and seen in that place.

A rhetorical theory of deixis also offers another way to conceptualize the relationship between a speaker’s persona or ethos and the responsibilities he/she assigns to the assembled audience. Aristotle described the epideictic audience not as judges (kritês) but as witnesses (theôros), a term that Jeffrey Walker translates as

one who is to make “observations” (theôriaï) about what is praiseworthy, preferable, desirable, or worthy of belief in the speaker’s logos... The role of the theôros, in short, is not to make rulings but to form opinions about and in response to the discourse presented.32

Note here that the primary responsibility of an epideictic audience is to bear witness to an orator’s display (epideixis) of past virtue or vice and, if necessary, reorient the community toward what is good and just. As Megan Foley observes, “epideictic points toward a moment of movement. Epideictic points toward the promise of change.”33 The community bearing witness, then, also assumes a responsibility for preserving past greatness for generations to come, for “the theôros sees what could be.”34 Rhetorically understood, deixis works in tandem with epideixis to display people, places, and events that are worthy of this communal reflection. It invites the audience to observe and bear witness to the past and respond accordingly. It is the means by which a speaker can “unshroud men’s notable deeds in order to let us gaze at the aura glowing from within.”35 A rhetorical theory of deixis helps the critic pinpoint the ways in which the speaker uses the material and symbolic dimensions of a place to remind the audience of previous events and future possibilities. Thus, when rhetors speak in place about what that place symbolizes for the community, their language constitutes the assembled audience as theôros responsible for living and acting in such a way that the lessons of the past might be (re)constituted for future generations.

Rhetoric in place and place-as-rhetoric

A rhetorical theory of deixis pushes the critic to include the location or place of public address as a key analytic and to consider the mutually constitutive relationship between rhetoric as delivered in place and place-as-rhetoric. Rhetoric always has been designed for a particular location or place. Classical rhetors situated their performances in front of scenic landscapes and directed their audiences to monuments, statues, and temples that symbolized specific civic virtues and political ideologies.36 This approach saw place, location, and/or situation as a primary element of rhetorical invention—rhetoric that was designed for and delivered in situ, or in place. Linguists conceptualize the “here” or location of a speech act in terms of how spatial deictics establish joint attention of both the speaker and the audience “on concrete entities in the surrounding situation.”37 But these spatial deictics (terms such as “here,” “there,” “this,” or “that”) also “may indicate whether the referent is visible or out-of-sight,” suggesting that a listener’s bodily presence in that place—what they may not see directly but intuitively know is there—also contributes to the meaning of a concrete speech event.38 A rhetorical theory of deixis, then, conceptualizes place not simply as a geographical location or physical marker, but also as a symbolic construct that can operate as a means of invention (rhetoric in place) and as a persuasive argument in and of itself (place-as-rhetoric).
Recent work articulating the connections between rhetoric and place reveals, as Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott note, that place “assume[s] an identity precisely in being recognizable—as named, bordered, and invented in particular ways. . . . [and] rendered recognizable by symbolic, and often material, intervention.” These studies also provide a helpful framework for thinking about how a place or location can come to represent civic patriotism, social moments, or ideology. Danielle Endres and Samantha Senda-Cook term this approach “place-as-rhetoric,” observing that this view “refers to the material (physical and embodied) aspects of a place having meaning and consequence, be it through bodies, signage, buildings, fences, flags, and so on. . . . place-as-rhetoric assumes that place itself is rhetorical.” Endres and Senda-Cook describe how protest movements rhetorically deploy place to add an additional layer to that place’s meaning, temporarily alter the meaning of that place, and perhaps, over time, remake that place through repeated action.

A rhetorical theory of deixis builds on this understanding of place-as-rhetoric, and yet suggests that a coconstitutive relationship exists between rhetors locating their speech acts in a particular location and the rhetorical dimensions of that place. It attends to the placement of situated public addresses, extending our understanding of how speakers draw on place-as-rhetoric as one way to advance their rhetoric in place. Put another way, deixis helps the critic to account for the ways rhetors invoke the material and symbolic dimensions of where their speech is placed as a rhetorical strategy, a way of persuading a specific audience within a particular historical/temporal moment. Deixis is concerned with speakers and hearers in a situation, taking this word in its original sense of being in situ or in a location. Needless to say, the location is not to be taken in a purely objective, geographical sense, but rather as the natural and social context of communicative practice shared, and in part created, by the interlocutors.

To understand the inventive possibilities of place, a rhetorical theory of deixis approaches the rhetorical situation both as a symbolic construct and as materially real. In what ways is this place “always already rhetorical”? That is, what prior symbolic meanings has this place accrued? What does speaking in this place—and thus linking a rhetorical act to this place—signify? And what will the bodies—both of speaker and audience—see, hear, sense, and experience when they are in this place? In what ways does the physical makeup of the speech location encourage visitors to be still and reflect, to engage in controversy, to listen attentively? A rhetorical theory of deixis helps critics to identify how rhetors use the spoken word to invoke the rhetorical possibilities of a place while simultaneously rooting their discourse in that particular location. It examines how the text directs the audience to what is particularly meaningful and consequential about that place. It emphasizes the centrality of place to all rhetorical action and provides a method for identifying how rhetors invest places, people, things, and time with symbolic meaning while simultaneously appropriating these symbols for their overall rhetorical purposes.

Chronos and kairos in space–time

A rhetorical theory of deixis understands time as both a specific temporal marker on a timeline of history (quantitative time, or chronos) and as a symbolically constructed moment that is ripe or opportune for rhetorical action (qualitative time, or kairos).
This approach also underscores the relationship between time and place, paying specific attention to how rhetorical acts link speech to physical locations, historical/temporal moments, and the bodies that interact with them. From this perspective, deixis understands texts as radically temporal and yet also extendable across space and time. Deixis, then, encourages the critic to read a text within its particular historical moment while also accounting for how the meaning of a “moment” can shift over time, in and through rhetorical action.

Identifying the deictic references to time within a speech text reveals how speakers create historical narratives and kairotic encounters that are also rooted in place. “Time, in the chronos sense, permits . . . a chronology to be constructed, and therefore a chronicle of events which forms the initial material for the writing of history.”46 This chronos view of time is also reflected in scholarly treatments of deixis, where “[t]ime is commonly conceptualized as a straight line providing the conceptual ground for a fictive observer.”47 For example, temporal deictics such as “now,” “yesterday,” or “tomorrow” orient the listener to a specific point along a historical trajectory. “Now” becomes the anchoring point (or the “deictic centre”) for the speech act, with “yesterday” coming before the “now” and “tomorrow” coming after it. And because this concept of linear time is profoundly spatial, linguists also recognize that “spatial deictics can function to ‘locate’ an event on the time line relative to the moment of the speech event.”48 A rhetorical theory of deixis approaches chronos time as both a temporal and a spatial phenomenon, a concept that is defined both by its location along the timeline of history and by its physical situatedness in a particular location. Kairos adds an additional layer to this understanding of time, the idea of a right or perfect time. Where chronos describes time that can be marked or measured on a continuum, kairos expresses the significance of a certain moment within a larger historical flow. According to Eric Charles White, kairos refers “to a passing instant when an opening appears which must be driven through with force if success is to be achieved.”49 To achieve kairos, a rhetor must approach the “the present as unprecedented, as a moment of decision, a moment of crisis,” and adapt his/her speech to the uniqueness of the moment.50

A rhetorical theory of deixis understands time in both the quantitative and qualitative senses, revealing how speakers use temporal indicators to stress both historical (or linear) time and the appropriateness of the moment. A speaker’s description of “now” can refer to both historical time (chronos) and the appropriateness of the occasion (kairos), communicating both the exact historical moment of a speech act (such as June 29, 1947) and also the larger time frame in which the speech occurs. Although chronos and kairos may operate simultaneously within a particular speech text, orators can shift the interpretation of a particular moment from a simple historical event to “a point in time filled with significance, charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end.” As speakers use language to evoke past memories, address present realities, and create a shared vision for the future, “that which was conceived of as simply successive [time] becomes charged with past and future: what was chronos becomes kairos.”51 A rhetorical theory of deixis identifies the transformative potential of language to accomplish this shift. Locating the temporal deictic indicators with a speech text enables the critic to analyze how speakers use language to create kairotic encounters that are both timely and timeless, rooted in places that are symbolically constructed and materially real.
Finally, a rhetorical theory of deixis acknowledges that the “concrete speech event”\textsuperscript{52} is a product of the social, temporal, and spatial relations. This view corresponds with Doreen Massey’s conception of space–time, or the idea that "space and time are inextricably interwoven. . . . [and] the definitions of both space and time in themselves must be constructed as the result of interrelations."\textsuperscript{53} Massey underscores this relationship between social actors, space, and time, writing that if

the spatial is thought of in the context of space–time and as formed out of social interrelations at all scales, then one view of a place is a particular articulation of those relations, a particular moment in those networks of social relations and understandings.\textsuperscript{54}

Massey’s description of the relationship between space, place, and time suggests that the meaning of place is constantly changing and is defined not just by what is physically present in that place, but also by how that place is linked to and defined by broader social and political relations, networks, and ideologies. Deixis helps critics approach rhetoric as a product of a specific historical/temporal moment and a physical location. This approach reveals the potential for texts to constitute themselves in place and, in so doing, invite future rhetorical action linked to that place. As Michael Leff notes:

rhetorical discourses are themselves temporal phenomena. They emerge in time; they are conditioned by other discourses and by the progression of events, but they are also constructed things that occupy a span of time. . . . The rhetorical text, then, is a historical development occurring within a broader context of historical developments.\textsuperscript{55}

A rhetorical theory of deixis is concerned with how a speaker defines his/her rhetorical act within both senses of time (\textit{chronos} and \textit{kairos}), place, and space–time while also attending to the ways a discourse might change over time in accordance with historical events, moments that often define, and are defined by, their placement.

Taken together, rhetorical understandings of \textit{ethos}, place, and temporality enrich and extend the linguistic concept of deixis. Where Bühler’s initial theory focused on identifying the discrete bounds of the “concrete speech event,” a rhetorical theory of deixis reveals the dynamic interplay between text and context by examining how speakers use language to activate the people, places, and times embedded within the concrete speech situation as a means of persuasion. I now turn to an extended example to demonstrate one way this approach might operate in theory and practice.

**Truman at the Lincoln Memorial**

On June 29, 1947, Harry S. Truman became the first U.S. president to address the NAACP.\textsuperscript{56} Speaking from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial at the closing session of the organization’s thirty-eighth annual meeting, Truman argued that the United States had a moral duty to extend the full benefits of citizenship to all citizens, regardless of race, color, religion, or creed. Historian David McCullough writes that Truman’s NAACP speech was “the strongest statement on civil rights heard in Washington since the time of Lincoln,”\textsuperscript{57} and rhetorical critic Garth E. Pauley observes that Truman’s speech was significant because he was “the first president to define civil rights as a crisis.”\textsuperscript{58} Indeed, Truman’s argument for federal civil rights legislation was notable, particularly because this speech came a full year before his decision to make race a
central issue of his 1948 presidential campaign. Far from simply a political calculation, Truman’s insistence that the U.S. government take active steps to secure civil rights for “all Americans” was a bold step as police brutality, lynchings, and Jim Crow traversed any supposed promise of racial justice on both sides of the Mason–Dixon line. In my analysis of the speech, I focus on Truman’s deictic references to his own rhetorical authority and ethos, the place of his address—the Lincoln Memorial—and the historical/temporal moment to show how the president rooted his audience in place and time while also extending the United States’ metaphorical place on the Cold War global stage. To understand why Truman’s decision to speak to the NAACP at the Lincoln Memorial was so remarkable, however, it is important to first consider the president’s own history with civil rights and the rhetorical resonances of this site prior to June 29, 1947.

**Contextualizing Truman’s presidential ethos in place and time**

When Truman delivered the keynote address at the closing session of the thirty-eighth annual conference on June 29, 1947, his physical presence—both as President of the United States and as border-state Democrat whose grandparents were proud slave owners—lent executive and political authority to the issue of civil rights in the United States. William E. Leuchtenburg writes that Truman “literally learned at his mother’s knee to share the South’s view of the War Between the States. . . . [and] acquired an abiding belief in white supremacy.” Years later, when Truman’s mother Martha visited her son in the White House and was offered the Lincoln bedroom, she said, “You tell Harry if he tries to put me in Lincoln’s bed, I’ll sleep on the floor.” Truman’s initial attitudes on race mirrored those of his parents and grandparents. Perhaps nowhere else is this more evident than in a letter he wrote to Bess Wallace in 1911: “I am strongly of the opinion that negroes ought to be in Africa, yellow men in Asia[,] and white men in Europe and America.” Shocking as these comments are, they reflect the social and political mores of Independence, Missouri, a town that Truman biographer Merle Miller described as “a Southern town, a border town, one of whose more prominent organizations had been the United Daughters of the Confederacy.” Although he would continue to make similar racially charged comments throughout his life and even postpresidency, Truman took steps toward securing civil rights for African Americans that were, at the time, notable, particularly in the border-state of Missouri.

When Truman assumed the presidency following Roosevelt’s sudden death in April 1945, he inherited FDR’s less than stellar record on civil rights. Throughout the Roosevelt Administration, it was First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt who championed the issue of civil rights and became the moral conscience of the nation, meeting often with black political leaders and urging her husband to support antilynching legislation in the U.S. Congress (something that FDR would never agree to do). The NAACP first found an ally in Truman in September 1946 when, after briefing the president on the brutal beatings and lynchings of African Americans in the South (including U.S. service members returning from World War II), the president decided to create the President’s Commission on Civil Rights through executive order. This action was the first of many important steps the president took to assume federal responsibility for the issue of civil rights in the United States. And although black political leaders and the NAACP were thrilled to finally have an ally in the White House, southern Democrats were furious. After Truman’s
special message to Congress in February 1948 outlining comprehensive civil rights reform, a U.S. Congressman from Georgia said his state had been “kicked in the teeth” by the president. Rep. William M. Colmer of Mississippi stated:

Not since the first gun was fired on Fort Sumter, resulting as it did in the greatest fratricidal strife in the history of the world, has any message of any President of these glorious United States . . . resulted in the driving of a schism in the ranks of our people, as did President Truman’s so-called civil rights message.

Another Congressman from Mississippi, Rep. John Bell Williams, agreed, stating that the president “has . . . run a political dagger into our backs and now he is trying to drink our blood.”

But Truman was resolute, believing that he had a moral duty to ensure that all citizens enjoyed the rights laid out in the U.S. Constitution. When Democratic leaders asked him to back down on his civil rights agenda, the president replied:

My forebears were Confederates. . . . Every factor and influence in my background—and in my wife’s for that matter—would foster the personal belief that you are right. But my stomach turned over when I learned that Negro soldiers, just back from overseas, were being dumped out of Army trucks and beaten. Whatever my inclinations as a native of Missouri might have been, as President I know this is bad. I shall fight to end evils like this.

In another letter to a southern friend, Truman referenced the beating and blinding of Sergeant Isaac Woodward by local authorities as evidence that

something is radically wrong with the system. I can’t approve of such goings on and I shall never approve of it, as long as I am here . . . I am going to try to remedy it and if that ends up in my failure to be reelected, that failure will be in a good cause.

When NAACP executive secretary Walter White asked the president to keynote the closing session of the organization’s thirty-eighth annual conference, both men undoubtedly recognized the political risk. In his address, Truman would become the first president to address the organization since its founding in 1909 and, more importantly, the “first modern president to make an open and public commitment to civil rights.” In a meeting with Truman on April 9, 1947, White reminded the president “how acts of discrimination against minorities were being used abroad to discredit the United States and convince the people of the world that Americans were incurably addicted to bigotry.” Accordingly, White urged Truman to issue “forthright and unequivocal statement . . . to let the people of the world know that . . . we were constantly at work to narrow the margin between our protestations of freedom and our practice of them.” According to White’s autobiography, Truman told White to send him a list of the items he thought the president should emphasize in his speech to the NAACP on June 29, 1947. “We both laughed,” recalled White, “as I told him that if he included even one half of the things I thought he ought to say, the Southern Democrats would probably want to run him out of the country.”

Truman’s address to the NAACP would ruffle feathers not just because of what he said, but also because of where he would speak—from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Although contemporary audiences associate the site with the Civil Rights Movement, this was by no means its original intent. In 1912, the Lincoln Memorial Commission (LMC) designed a monument that would honor Abraham Lincoln as the “Savior of the
Union—not the “Great Emancipator.” Because the “early twentieth century celebrated the economic and political reunion of North and South,” writes historian Scott Sandage, “Lincoln’s ties to black freedom waned as politicians and scholars sculpted him into a ‘pro-Southern conservative’ honored on both sides of the Mason–Dixon line.”

The LMC was explicit about its intent to memorialize Lincoln as “Savior of the Union,” designing a Greek Doric temple featuring thirty-six columns, one for every state in the Union at the time of Lincoln’s death, and forty-eight memorial festoons representing the number of states in 1922. The text inscribed above Lincoln’s statue also underscored the slain president’s status in national memory: “IN THIS TEMPLE / AS IN THE HEARTS OF THE PEOPLE / FOR WHOM HE SAVED THE UNION / THE MEMORY OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN / IS ENSHRINED FOREVER.” The author of these words, Royal Cortissoz, explained their significance to architect Henry Bacon, writing:

The memorial must make a common ground for the meeting of the north and the south. By emphasizing his saving the union you need to appeal to both sections. By saying nothing about slavery you avoid the rubbing of old sores.

When President Warren G. Harding dedicated the Memorial in 1922, he was explicit about rejecting Lincoln’s status as the “Great Emancipator,” arguing

The supreme chapter in history is not emancipation. The simple truth is that Lincoln, recognizing an established order, would have compromised with slavery that existed if he could have halted its extension. . . . Emancipation was a means to a great end—maintained union and nationality.

Moreover, Harding reminded his audience that Lincoln saw “deliberate public opinion as the supreme power of civilization” and offered this “tonic” to those impatient with the state of race relations in the United States: “Deliberate public opinion never fails.” To underscore the point, the U.S. Park Service segregated seating at the dedication ceremony, making only a small number of seats available to “distinguished Colored ticket holders” in a “Jim Crow section of seats” at the very back.

But when Truman spoke from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial twenty-five years later, he invoked an altogether different interpretation of the slain president’s status in national memory and, more specifically, the symbolism of this particular place in U.S. national memory. In the spring of 1939, after the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to let world-renowned singer Marian Anderson perform at Constitution Hall because she was black, the NAACP suggested the idea of an outdoor concert instead. In a personal letter to Anderson, executive secretary Walter White recommended the Lincoln Memorial “because of the peculiar appropriateness of that place under the present circumstances.”

The NAACP secured permission from Harold Ickes, the Secretary of the Interior and the former president of the Chicago branch of the NAACP, to use the Lincoln Memorial for Anderson’s concert—the first time an artist had ever sung at the national shrine. The Interior Department predicted that a crowd of 50,000 would hear Anderson sing on Easter Sunday; after the event, the U.S. Capitol Park Police put the number at 75,000. To those who could not attend the event in person, the concert was broadcast live over radio networks. Secretary Ickes introduced Marian Anderson to the crowd himself, and took the opportunity to make a public statement on race relations in the United States, stating that
it is as appropriate as it is fortunate that today we stand reverently and humbly at the base of this memorial to the Great Emancipator while glorious tribute is rendered to his memory by a daughter of the race from which he struck the chains of slavery.77

Through this Easter Sunday concert, Marian Anderson and the NAACP shifted the site’s symbolic status from a national shrine to the “Savior of the Union” to a site for civil rights activism. And it was this new meaning, this place-as-rhetoric, that Truman would reaffirm when he spoke at the closing session of the NAACP’s thirty-eighth annual conference on June 29, 1947.78

Both the NAACP and the Truman Administration recognized the symbolic linkages between the president’s June 29, 1947, address and the rhetorical resonances of this particular location. An early draft of the Sunday afternoon program included ten minutes of singing by none other than Marian Anderson to open the event.79 In their formal press release announcing Truman’s participation, the NAACP noted, “It is expected that an audience as large as that which heard Marion [sic] Anderson at the historic 1939 Easter Sunday concert, will again fill the Lincoln Memorial.”80 Walter White underscored the domestic and international implications of the event, stating that the NAACP would “meet in the fitting shadow of the Abraham Lincoln monument to rededicate all of its resources and energies to the people of all nations who fought and are still fighting to secure the rights of all men.”81 The White House also saw this occasion as an opportunity for Truman to appropriate Lincoln’s memory in the current Cold War context. In a June 16, 1947, memo, White House administrative assistant David K. noted that the introduction of Truman’s speech should reference the

significance of meeting on the grounds of Lincoln memorial. “He died to make men free.” His problem: One Nation. Our problem: One world. The problem of freedom in the modern world; our goal, to maintain the greatest possible freedom for the individual.

Although Niles’ memorandum prioritized U.S. foreign policy over the current state of race relations at home and recommended that Truman only spend “one minute” on the issue of civil rights, the president did not follow this advice.82 In fact, according to a hastily scribbled note in the files, Truman had a mixed response to Niles’ memo: “some good; some not so good.”83 The president would use his address to the NAACP to argue that the United States needed to first take steps to “put our own house in order” if the nation were to provide moral leadership to the rest of the world.84

As part of a meticulously planned public relations campaign, Truman’s address to the NAACP would follow speeches by Republican Senator Wayne Morse of Oregon, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, and an introduction of the president by Walter White. As White outlined in a memo to presidential aide David K. Niles, the program would run “56 minutes with an allowance of 4 minutes for applause, etc. By adhering strictly to this schedule it is our hope that we shall be able to get the entire one-hour program broadcast by all of the networks.”85 The four major radio networks would broadcast the event, and the State Department sent the program by short wave radio around the globe.86 The NAACP also made arrangements to film the speech for newsreel distribution, and the day after the president’s address the Universal International Newsreel featured a one and a half minute clip of Truman speaking from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.87

When Truman delivered the keynote address to the NAACP’s thirty-eighth annual conference, his physical presence before this audience in this particular location at this
historical/temporal moment was profoundly rhetorical. Before he ever opened his mouth, the fact that this president, the grandson of slave owners, dared to challenge the institutionalized doxa of white supremacy and Jim Crow while standing in the literal and symbolic shadow of Abraham Lincoln had already spoken volumes.

June 29, 1947: “Address to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People”

The president began by acknowledging the other guests on the platform, particularly NAACP chairman Walter White, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, Senator Morse, and other “distinguished guests.” He then expressed his pleasure in attending this event, stating:

> I am happy to be present at the closing session of the 38th Annual Conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The occasion of meeting with you here at the Lincoln Memorial affords me the opportunity to congratulate the association upon its effective work for the improvement of our democratic processes.

In these opening remarks, Truman hinted at what made this moment so extraordinary. As the first president to address the NAACP in person, Truman’s presence before this particular audience underscored his support for the organization’s civil rights agenda. The rhetorical significance of Truman’s attendance was compounded by his physical location “here at the Lincoln Memorial.” By speaking to this audience in this place, Truman suggested that he would align himself not just with the NAACP, but also with the organization’s strategic deployment of this national shrine. In so doing, Truman countered Harding’s earlier dedication of the Lincoln Memorial and instead reaffirmed Lincoln’s status as the “Great Emancipator.” Put another way, Truman’s presidential rhetoric in place lent institutional authority to the NAACP’s symbolic adaptation of this place-as-rhetoric. When Truman underscored the fact that he was “here” to reaffirm freedom and equality for “all Americans,” this deictic reference helped his audience, those assembled on the National Mall and those listening to the radio, to envision the scene.

The president then declared the overall purpose for this address: “I should like to talk to you briefly about civil rights and human freedom.” Employing the presidential “I,” Truman reinforced his executive authority to define the bounds of “civil rights and human freedom” and characterize this particular moment in U.S. history. “It is my deep conviction that we have reached a turning point in the long history of our country’s efforts to guarantee freedom and equality to all our citizens.” Notice how Truman’s use of pronouns in this passage quickly assigned agency to the rest of the audience. Speaking both as President of the United States and as a fellow citizen, Truman transferred his own view (“my deep conviction”) of civil rights to the rest of his audience when he argued that “we have reached a turning point” or a kairotic moment within “the long history of our country’s efforts to guarantee freedom and equality to all our citizens.”

In the span of one sentence, Truman shifted the temporal view of race relations in the United States from one of gradual progress (“long history”) to a definitive moment requiring an immediate response (“turning point”). And yet, it was precisely because 1947 was situated within this “long history”—a history that had taken far too long, Truman suggested—that this particular moment could now be understood as kairotic. But Truman’s use of “turning point” had more than temporal implications. The phrase also
implies deliberate bodily movement in a particular place. One must turn away from something and move toward a something else. In this particular instance, Truman argued that this moment required the nation to reject the idea that racial progress would happen over time (a view that Harding had advocated at the Lincoln Memorial’s dedication in 1922) and instead take specific steps to “guarantee freedom and equality to all our citizens.”

Having defined this particular moment as a critical juncture in U.S. race relations, the president gestured toward “[r]ecent events in the United States and abroad [that] have made us realize that it is more important today than ever before to insure that all Americans enjoy these rights.” In this sentence, Truman used temporal and spatial metaphors to describe the current domestic and international situation. The president’s references to time reinforced the chronos/kairos dimensions of this moment in U.S. history. “Recent events”—events that were temporally proximate and also physically near—brought about this change in perspective: “today” it was more important than “ever before” to extend “these rights”—the “freedom and equality” Truman had mentioned in the previous sentence—to “all Americans.” Although “today” referred to June 29, 1947 (a distinct moment within the nation’s history), “today” now also suggested a larger temporal frame for this moment in time, a kairotic occasion that required communal reflection and deliberate action.

These “recent events” also had material implications for the audience’s daily existence in the United States and for the nation’s broader relationship with the rest of the world (“abroad”). Truman did not elaborate the specifics of these recent events, but instead invited his audience to supply their own evidence. Although the “recent events in the United States” of mob violence, police brutality, and lynching in the United States would have been all too familiar to the African American members of Truman’s audience, they also were widely reported throughout the nation and around the world. And in fact, foreign newspapers circulated these reports as evidence that the United States did not adhere to the democratic ideals it espoused.89 But these “recent events” also applied to international developments in the post-World War II world, most notably the failing economies in Greece and Turkey. Just three months earlier, in his “Truman Doctrine” pronouncement of March 12, 1947, the president had pledged that the United States would provide military and economic aid to help European democracies withstand the tide of Soviet communism.90 Thus, in pointing his audience toward the “recent events” at home and abroad, Truman gestured toward his later argument that the nation should become a beacon of democratic values to the rest of the world.

By the time Truman reached the two-minute mark of his address, he had underscored the significance of this particular occasion and his presidential presence in place, defined the urgency of this particular moment, and linked the United States’ racial progress to a larger Cold War foreign policy narrative. After laying this contextual groundwork for his immediate and extended audience, the president delivered what was perhaps the most striking line of his address—one that Truman added himself during the speechwriting process.91 In an extension of the previous sentence (“... it is more important today than ever before to insure that all Americans enjoy these rights”), Truman specified who was included in the category of “all Americans”: “When I say all Americans[,] I mean all Americans.” Truman’s delivery of this particular line was forceful and determined, and the president put particular emphasis on the second half of the sentence: “I mean all Americans.” To an audience accustomed to identifying vocal cadences over
the radio, this shift would have been quite obvious. Significant as well is how Truman’s use of the presidential “I” lent executive authority to his statement. Where his predecessor refused to support congressional antilynching legislation because he feared losing the support of Southern Democrats, Truman employed his presidential ethos to underscore the dichotomy between what the government proclaimed in principle and what it actually meant. The qualifier “all” suggested more than total inclusion; it also subtly linked Truman’s declaration with the emancipatory connotations of “all”—a phrase Lincoln used to describe the reach of his Emancipation Proclamation that “all persons held as slaves . . . shall be . . . forever free.”

After shifting the title of “American” from an exclusive category to one that would include all U.S. citizens, Truman stated that discrimination “because of ancestry, or religion, or race, or color” was inexcusable. “We must not tolerate such limitations on the freedom of any of our people and on their enjoyment of basic rights which every citizen in a truly democratic society must possess.” Here Truman’s larger Cold War foreign policy argument came to the forefront; if “[w]e” tolerated discrimination against “any of our people,” how could the United States claim that it was the paramount example of “a truly democratic society”? And yet, Truman explained, the reality for many citizens was starkly different:

Many of our people still suffer the indignity of insult, the harrowing fear of intimidation, and, I regret to say, the threat of physical injury and mob violence. The prejudice and intolerance in which these evils are rooted still exist. The conscience of our nation, and the legal machinery which enforces it, have not yet secured to each citizen full freedom from fear.

Characterizing the situation in moral terms, Truman appealed to the nation’s conscience to emphasize the urgency of the moment. “We cannot wait another decade or another generation to remedy these evils. We must work, as never before, to cure them now.” This was a direct attack on Southern Democrats who argued that racial prejudice was a lingering symptom of the Civil War, one that would require time and gradual progress.

Having already enumerated specific injustices faced by African American citizens, the president then extended the urgency beyond national borders and linked civil rights progress in the United States to his Cold War foreign policy:

The aftermath of war and the desire to keep faith with our Nation’s historic principles make the need a pressing one. The support of desperate populations of battle-ravaged countries must be won for the free way of life. We must have them as allies in our continuing struggle for the peaceful solution of the world’s problems. Freedom is not an easy lesson to teach, nor an easy cause to sell, to peoples beset by every kind of privation. They may surrender to the false security offered so temptingly by totalitarian regimes unless we can prove the superiority of democracy. Our case for democracy should be as strong as we can make it. It should rest on practical evidence that we have been able to put our own house in order.

The moral view of domestic race relations was now a tactical move within Truman’s Cold War foreign policy. The president’s deictic indicators quickly elevated the United States to a position of moral and political authority on this metaphorical chessboard. The “desperate populations of battle-ravaged countries” looked to the United States for leadership to solve “the world’s problems.” If the United States failed to prove the “superiority of democracy” to “peoples beset by every kind of privation,” the nation would fall short...
of continuing “our Nation’s historic principles.” How was the United States to convince the rest of the world that democracy was the best choice in this postwar world?

The answer, argued Truman, was to deal directly with the issue of civil rights at home. The most persuasive case for U.S. democracy, Truman argued, was to show the rest of the world “practical evidence that we have been able to put our own house in order.” The “nation as a house” evoked what Merrill D. Peterson has called “one of the most famous utterances in American history,” namely, Lincoln’s warning that “[a] house divided against itself cannot stand.” Although this phrase was originally from the New Testament, Lincoln used it to compare the United States to a house divided between North and South, half slave and half free. When the president compared the nation’s current state as a house in need of (re)order, he not only invoked the memory of Abraham Lincoln, but also used the reference to specify the “version” of Lincoln he wished to summon. To an audience assembled at the base of a national shrine to the slain president, Truman insisted that a national commitment to democratic principles would transcend sectional divisions or racial prejudice so that the rest of the world could see firsthand the merits of democracy.

As he moved toward the conclusion of his address, the president returned to spatial and temporal metaphors in order to underscore the present moment as a kairotic one; “Never before has the need been so urgent for skillful and vigorous action to bring us closer to our ideal. We can reach our goal.” Depicting this moment as a singularly opportune one, Truman that insisted that “[n]ever before” had the need for deliberate federal action been greater or the timing better. To inspire this “way ahead,” the president asked his audience to look backward in time. “When past difficulties faced our Nation, we met the challenge with inspiring charters of human rights—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Emancipation Proclamation.” The majority of Truman’s audience would have immediately recognized the first three documents as sacred texts of U.S. democracy. What, however, is to be made of the fourth document on the list—the Emancipation Proclamation, a text that Lincoln authored but appeared nowhere on the national shrine behind him?

Truman’s inclusion of this particular document served at least four rhetorical purposes. First, it subtly rejected Harding’s assessment in 1922 that “the supreme chapter in history is not emancipation” and instead reaffirmed the NAACP’s strategic deployment of the Lincoln Memorial as a site for civil rights activism. Second, it suggested that the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights were not simply foundational texts but “charters of human rights”—rights that extended to “all Americans.” Third, when Truman added the Emancipation Proclamation to this list, he extended the reach of Lincoln’s initial proclamation from a relatively small geographical region to the entire nation and the global stage—a move that reinforced Lincoln’s status as the Great Emancipator even as it expanded the connotation of “all” to, as Truman would state in his final sentence of the speech, “all classes and conditions of mankind.” Fourth, it propelled the audience forward to a new international vision of human rights. In identifying the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a modern-day appropriation of these earlier documents, Truman asserted that this document would be “a great landmark in man’s long search for freedom since its members consist of such distinguished citizens of the world as Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt.” The president’s audience would have heard Mrs. Roosevelt speak just moments before about her work on this
initiative. Thus, when Truman pointed his audience to Mrs. Roosevelt’s physical presence on the dais next to him, he bolstered his own rhetorical authority by linking himself to this outspoken (and yet greatly respected) proponent of civil rights.

Connecting the “inspired charters” produced by “past difficulties” with the present moment, Truman held up these sacred texts as a metaphorical North Star. “With these noble charters to guide us, and with faith in our hearts, we shall make our land a happier home for our people, a symbol of hope for all men, and a rock of security in a troubled world.” Here Truman extended his argument for civil rights from the local to the global. If the nation put “our own house in order,” it would then be able to become a “happier home” for all its citizens, regardless of race. “Home” not only suggested comfort, but also described a place where one could be at ease and at rest—a dwelling place. And if the United States offered a safe harbor for “all Americans,” the nation could then provide an example to other nations seeking a democratic way of life. These spatial and relational images elevated the nation to the global stage as “a symbol of hope” and “a rock of security” in a “troubled world” threatened by Soviet communism.

In the final moments of his speech, Truman concluded by linking Abraham Lincoln’s memory and the symbolic status of this particular location when he confidently asserted, “Abraham Lincoln understood so well the ideal which you and I seek today.” To Truman’s immediate audience, it would have been impossible to listen to these words and not also see the current president’s body dwarfed by the giant statue of the Great Emancipator behind him. Even to those assembled several blocks (or miles) down the National Mall or those listening via radio, it would have been difficult to forget the symbolic significance of Truman’s physical location. Thus, when Truman concluded his speech with a quote from Lincoln himself, it was as if the martyred sixteenth president was speaking instead of Truman. Two presidential bodies—one living, the other carved in stone—proclaimed to the nation and the world that the United States had a moral duty to extend freedom and democracy not just to its own citizens but to all people.

“As this conference closes,” Truman continued, “we would do well to keep in mind his words, when he said:

if it shall please the Divine Being who determines the destinies of nations, we shall remain a united people, and we will, humbly seeking the Divine Guidance, make their prolonged national existence a source of new benefits to themselves and their successors, and to all classes and conditions of mankind.98

At first glance, this particular passage seems like a conciliatory way to conclude remarks that Truman knew would, at the very least, make Northern politicians nervous and Southern Democrats angry. Indeed, here Lincoln stressed his desire that the nation would “remain a united people,” a statement that reflected the “Savior of the Union” image Southern Democrats cherished. However, the larger context of Lincoln’s words is important and reveals yet again how Truman used this particular occasion not just to advance his civil rights agenda, but also to set forth his Cold War foreign policy to the nation and the world. Prior to the passage that Truman quoted, Lincoln thanked his guests for their assurances of the sympathy and support . . . in an important crisis which involves, in my judgment, not only the civil and religious liberties of our own dear land, but in a large degree the civil and religious liberties of mankind in many countries and through many ages.
Here Lincoln argued that the Civil War directly affected “not only the civil and religious liberties” within the United States, but also the rights and liberties of citizens in other countries around the world. This was the exact same argument Truman would make eighty-five years later. Lincoln continued, “You well know, gentlemen, and the world knows, how reluctantly I accepted this issue of battle forced upon me, on my advent to this place, by the internal enemies of this country.” Although Lincoln referred specifically to the sectional divide between the North and the South, and the resulting Civil War, Truman would express similar sentiments about his unexpected ascendance to the presidency and the actions he took to combat racial prejudice and lynch law during his tenure as chief executive. Indeed, even the day before he delivered this address to the NAACP, Truman wrote to his sister, Mary Jane, that he wished he “didn’t have to make it... Mamma won’t like what I say because I wind up quoting old Abe. But I believe what I say and I’m hopeful we may implement it.”

In many ways, Truman was quite reluctant to address these civil rights issues because of his personal history and his own inexcusable racial prejudice. And yet, Truman advocated for civil rights because of his allegiance to the Union transcended any sectional affiliation. As president, Truman believed it was his job to ensure that all citizens, regardless of race or religion, enjoyed the liberties guaranteed to them in the U.S. Constitution. Anything less would be a direct violation of his oath of office.

Thus, when Truman told his audience that they would do well to “keep in mind [Lincoln’s] words,” he was not merely reminding his audience that the slain president wanted to unify the country, although he did. Even more, Truman channeled Lincoln’s hope for a “united people,” calling his audience to rededicate themselves to the democratic values first set forth in the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and even the Emancipation Proclamation. Relying on Lincoln’s argument as evidence for his own, Truman suggested that the nation’s “prolonged national existence” in a postwar world required a specific response: extending civil rights and human freedom at home and abroad. Yet again, Truman invoked the emancipatory connotations of “all” and yet pushed them even further. Not only did “all Americans” deserve the rights laid out in the nation’s “inspiring charters of human rights,” but these liberties should be extended to “all classes and conditions of mankind” around the globe. Concluding his speech with this quote from the nation’s sixteenth president, Truman reaffirmed Lincoln’s symbolic status as the “Great Emancipator” even as he directed his audience to the visual and material elements of the speech situation to support his argument for extending civil rights to “all Americans.”

The public response to Truman’s address further underscored the inherent relationship between the president’s text and the contexts he supplied as evidence—namely, the symbolic significance of the Lincoln Memorial and his own record on the issue of race. An article in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch specifically noted the speech location:

President Truman chose an excellent place and occasion for his assertion of the importance of “positive safeguards for civil rights.” He spoke in the shadow of the marble memorial to his great predecessor, whose Emancipation Proclamation first gave the very first of civil rights—freedom—to many thousands of Americans.

The Chicago Defender, a prominent African American newspaper, was explicit about the significance of Truman’s placement: “[Truman] stood in the shadow of that great
liberator, Abraham Lincoln, at the Lincoln Memorial and delivered a second emancipation speech to the throngs who had come to hear him.”101 The Atlanta Daily World suggested that the Lincoln Memorial offered a location for reaffirmation of national values, noting that Truman’s address, “broadcast over all major networks to the nation, was made from the grounds of Lincoln Memorial where thousands assembled for a spiritual re-dedication of America to the ideals and principals upon which the United States was founded.”102

Still others remarked how important it was that the President of the United States, himself a former Southerner, was the one delivering this message to the U.S. public. In a July 4, 1947 editorial, the Kansas City Call, a nationally prominent black newspaper headquartered less than ten miles from Harry Truman’s home in Independence, Missouri, declared the president’s speech to be “the most forthright speech on race relations ever made by a President in modern times.” The paper also made note of Truman’s decision to address the NAACP in person, writing, “There was a time when it would have been considered ‘too radical’ for the chief executive of the land to appear before a gathering dedicated to fight for equal rights for Negro citizens.” But while “[o]ther presidents have sent messages of greeting to the association . . . Truman is the first to appear in person.” To conclude, the paper opined:

When Truman went to Washington, he forgot the customs and habits of Missouri and became a true representative of democratic governmnt [sic]. In his speech at the Lincoln Memorial Sunday, he stated in words similar to those used for years by the Negro press and the NAACP that the United States must make democracy work at home before it can preach it abroad.103

But perhaps the most telling account comes from a letter Dorothy W. Chance of Memphis, Tennessee, wrote to the president following his address. In it, Mrs. Chance explained why the president’s speech was so significant to her—and for the entire nation:

It is only a couple of months now since I was in Japan with the American Red Cross. I am an American Negro. It was often difficult to answer interrogating Japanese who wanted to know more about our democracy and why we as Negroes who “are Americans too” are segregated and discriminated against. I listened to many of our soldiers try to explain to them the stages of American History, of Negro slavery, its abolition and the progress of the race that is being made today. But always they were as able as we to point to phrases in the Emancipation Proclamation and the Constitution of the United States of America—“the liberty and justice to all” phrases. It was not simple to try to explain American democracy in the light of all the questions they asked us. Your speech today brought more faith and hope than all the speeches I’ve ever heard anywhere. My prayers are for you that your words will not fall on deaf ears of those who are able to help make civil rights a realization for all people, and that all Americans will always be worthy of equal civil rights.104

For Dorothy Chance and millions of African American citizens the president’s speech to the NAACP on June 29, 1947, offered at least a hope that the United States of America would take steps to secure the rights and liberties guaranteed in the nation’s foundational documents, steps that would enable the nation to make the case for democracy to the world.

Through this analysis of Harry S. Truman’s speech to the NAACP on June 29, 1947, I have demonstrated how a rhetorical theory of deixis orients the critic to the bodies, places, and temporalities implied in and displayed through speech. Because every rhetorical act is
unique, a deictic approach to close textual criticism will operate differently in every instance. In this example, however, deixis reveals the persuasive power of presidential presence in place. Speaking from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, Truman activated the symbolic resonances of Lincoln’s political legacy and the memories embedded in this particular location while linking his own ethos—as expressed through his rhetorical authority as president of the United States and his personal history with race relations—to the NAACP. Truman’s address to the NAACP was notable not simply because of what he said, but precisely because he, a son of the South, was speaking on behalf of the organization at a site originally designed to promote national unity—and silence Lincoln’s stance on slavery and emancipation. As David McCullough has written, “That someone of his background from western Missouri could be standing at the shrine of the Great Emancipator saying such things was almost inconceivable.” In fact, it is precisely because of these inherent tensions that Truman’s speech was so remarkable—and rhetorically significant. Only Truman could speak on this occasion, to this audience, in this place, on this issue. Only Truman could speak at the Lincoln Memorial.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that a rhetorical theory of deixis reveals the rhetorical dynamics within the fabric of spoken discourse, dynamics that often refer to what is outside the text to make sense of what is within it. Identifying the deictic indicators within a speech text enables the critic to pinpoint where, how, and why a speaker activates the physical elements of the speech situation as a material means of persuasion. Simply put, a rhetorical theory of deixis points to, displays, and shows forth how texts speak in and through their contexts. This theoretical and methodological orientation offers some important insights into the principles of close textual analysis, the relationship between text and context, the practice of archival recovery, and the role of the critic. First, it offers a program of close textual criticism motivated by a critical sensitivity to bodies, places, and moments in time. This perspective takes Bühler’s “I/here/now” triad as a starting point and yet pushes beyond a simple identification of a speaker’s references to speaker, location, and temporality. It understands rhetoric as an embodied practice that is situated in place, located within a particular temporal moment, with political ideologies, material effects, socioeconomic relationships, and bodily sensations interwoven throughout. Second, it pays particular attention to how texts activate their contexts and, at the same time, how contexts produce texts. This approach extends the bounds of context beyond simply providing the historical background to a particular speech act, inviting the critic to understand the rhetorical situation as materially real, as a living, breathing “multi-celled organism.” Third, it obliges the critic to answer recent critical questions posed by in situ criticism, rhetorical fieldwork, and ethnography by recourse to archives so as to recover the sights, sounds, and embodied experiences the audience experienced firsthand. As many scholars have noted and any person who has done archival research knows well, the archive is itself a rhetorical phenomenon, a space that often protects privilege and conceals what might be the most important pieces of context. But what it offers far outweighs these challenges. Through speechwriting drafts, internal memos, audio recordings, fuzzy photographs, and yellowed newspaper clippings stapled together, the critic is ushered into another time and place, a moment that cannot be reproduced and
yet is reflected in “the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image.”

Fourth, and finally, a rhetorical theory of deixis affirms the critic’s role in reconstructing the material dimensions of the rhetorical situation. Deixis offers the critic a way to identify where and how a speaker uses language to assemble a “foreground upon a background” of the speech setting—a metaphorical and literal display of the bodies, locations, objects, and temporalities the rhetor chooses to amplify through speech. Although it is impossible to reconstruct a historical speech event fully, a deictic approach to close textual criticism provides a theoretical and methodological approach to uncovering how texts speak in and through their contexts. For scholars interested in (re)discovering all the material means of persuasion, deixis offers a way to begin.

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Notes


20. Carole Blair, “Reflections on Criticism and Bodies: Parables from Public Places,” *Western Journal of Communication* 65, no. 3 (2001): 288. For several important essays theorizing material rhetoric(s), see Dana Cloud, “The Materiality of Discourse as an Oxymoron: A
34. Foley, “Time for Epideictic,” 211.
41. Stawarska, “‘You’ and I,’ ‘Here and ‘Now’: Spatial and Social Situatedness in Deixis,” 402 (emphasis original).

45. For a helpful discussion of how place has played a vital role within the Western intellectual tradition, see Edward Casey, The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).


50. White, Kaironomia: On the Will to Invent, 14.


53. Doreen Massey, Space, Place, and Gender (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 261.

54. Massey, Space, Place, and Gender, 5.


59. This strategy is best outlined in a memo Clark Clifford wrote to the president dated August 17, 1947 (available online at http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/1948campaign/large/docs/documents/index.php?pagenumber=1&documentdate=1948-08-17&documentid=1-2&studycollectionid=Election). Clark Clifford to Harry S. Truman, August 17, 1948; Political File; Clifford Papers; Truman Library.


63. Leuchtenburg observes that Truman’s actions on race relations as a public official in Missouri and as U.S. senator “appears to have derived both from conviction and from self-interest.... Truman always had to bear in mind that there were a great many African-American voters in Missouri.” William E. Leuchtenburg, The White House Looks South: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, Lyndon B. Johnson (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 157.


74. Walter White to Marian Anderson, March 24, 1939. NAACP Papers; Collection: Papers of the NAACP, Part 02: 1919–1939, Personal Correspondence of Selected NAACP Files; Series: Personal Correspondence of NAACP Officials; Folder: 001464-019-0686 (Walter White Correspondence March 1939), ProQuest History Vault.


78. Edward S. Casey observes certain places provide “an active material inducement [that draws out] out the appropriate memories in that location.” In this instance, Truman’s presence in place simultaneously rejected one memory—Harding’s 1922 dedication—even as it affirmed the other—Marian Anderson’s 1939 concert. Edward S. Casey, “Public Memory in Place and Time,” in Framing Public Memory, ed. Kendall R. Phillips (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 32.

79. Walter White to David K. Niles, April 11, 1947; WHCF: OF 413; National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [1 of 2], Box 1382; Truman Papers, Truman Library. In the end, however, Ms. Anderson would not sing at the event due to a health issue.


82. David K. Niles to Matthew J. Connelly, June 16, 1947; Elsey Papers, Box 17; Folder: 1947—June 29—NAACP Speech; Truman Library. Interestingly, Niles’ memo to Connelly is identical to an earlier memo Niles received from Philleo Nash, a special assistant in the White House who was also African American. For more discussion of Nash’s role in writing this speech, see Pauley, “Harry Truman and the NAACP: A Case Study in Presidential Persuasion on Civil Rights,” 223.

83. Miscellaneous Note, no author, no date; Elsey Papers, Box 17; Folder: 1947—June 29—NAACP Speech; Truman Library.


85. White to Niles, April 11, 1947.

87. “Truman Asks Equality for All Americans,” Universal News Vol. 20, Rel. 52, Story 1, June 30, 1947, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bdNMhmVqCU&feature=youtu.be. In a memo to Niles, White informed him that “Arrangements will also be made to have the ceremony photographed for newsreels and possibly to have the entire occasion televised.” White to Niles, April 11, 1947.

88. Truman, “Address Before the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.” All successive quotations from here unless otherwise noted. Deictic indicators have been shown in bold and italics.

89. See Dudziak, Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy.

90. For more on Truman’s March 12, 1947, speech, see Denise M. Bostdorff, Proclaiming the Truman Doctrine: A Cold War Call to Arms (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008).

91. “4th Draft, 6-29-47,” Address to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; PSF, Box 38; Truman Papers, Truman Library; “Original Reading Copy Used by President Truman at the Closing Session of the 38th Annual Conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C.”; PSF, Box 24; Truman Papers, Truman Library.

92. To listen to Truman’s speech as captured via radio, please visit the recording provided by the University of Virginia’s Miller Center (http://millercenter.org/president/truman/speeches/speech-3345). This particular line begins at ~10:39.


94. Truman’s final description of “freedom from fear” was an obvious reference to FDR’s 1941 State of the Union Address, one that the audience would be well aware of not just because of the historical proximity between 1941 and 1947, but also because of Norman Rockwell’s iconic paintings depicting FDR’s “Four Freedoms.” These four images were printed on the cover of the Saturday Evening Post in February and March of 1943, circulated widely as war bond posters, and came to represent basic human rights enjoyed by U.S. citizens. Thus, when Truman argued that state and local governments had denied millions of citizens “full freedom from fear,” he acknowledged that these images of U.S. democracy popularized by Rockwell and espoused by the U.S. government were unidentifiable to black Americans. For more on the relationship between these cover images and FDR’s 1941 State of the Union address, see James J. Kimble, “The Illustrated Four Freedoms: FDR, Rockwell, and the Margins of the Rhetorical Presidency,” Presidential Studies Quarterly 45, no. 1 (2015): 46–69.

95. Petersen, Lincoln in American Memory, 132, 308.


99. Harry S. Truman to Mary Truman, June 28, 1947; Post-Presidential File; Truman Papers; Truman Library.

100. “Mr. Truman on Civil Rights,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, June 30, 1947.


102. “Gov’t Must Insure Rights to All—Truman Stresses ‘All Americans’ Must Benefit,” Atlanta Daily World, July 1, 1947.
103. “Truman’s Speech Makes History,” The Call, July 4, 1947. Clipping found attached to a letter from Emmett A. Scanlan, Jr. to Matt Connelly, July 7, 1947; PPF 200; Folder: 6/29/47—Speech at the Closing Session of the 38th Annual Conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (Pro); Truman Papers; Truman Library.

104. Dorothy W. Chance to Harry Truman, June 30, 1947; PPF 200; Folder: 6/29/47—Speech at the Closing Session of the 38th Annual Conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (Pro); Truman Papers; Truman Library.


