

# The Independent Scholar

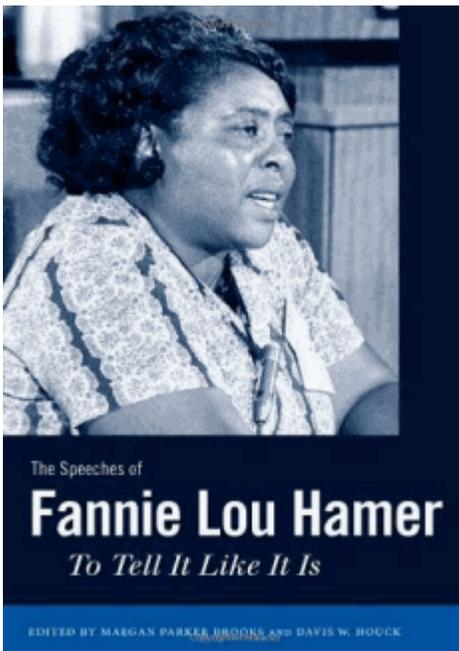
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**Maegan Parker Brooks and Davis W. Houck, editors, *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To Tell It Like It Is*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011, xxxii, 221 pp., acknowledgements, appendix, bibliography, index. hardcover, \$38. ISBN 978-1-60473-822-3.**

Reviewed by Stephanie Harp



Firebrand civil and human rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer never minced words nor softened her stances for the comfort of her audience. From segregationist Mississippi Senator James O. Eastland to presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, she challenged leaders to live up to this country's founding ideals and rebuked them when she smelled hypocrisy. In accepting his first nomination for the presidency, Bill Clinton famously quoted her saying she was "sick of tired of being sick and tired." Now in *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer*, editors Maegan Parker Brooks (NCIS member) and Davis W. Houck have compiled complete transcripts from twenty of her twenty-eight known recorded speeches and testimonies from fifteen years of public oratory, along with an oral history interview with her, and one with her daughter. Through this collection of her local and national addresses, the reader is able to trace her unexpected path to prominence.

In this book, through her own words, Hamer comes alive. For the reader who never had the opportunity to hear her speak – other than in YouTube videos or news clips of archival footage – these transcripts are a treat. Her voice leaps off the page through her trademark style of "image-making, testifying, dissembling, mimicry, and circumlocution" (p.xxiii). Editors Brooks and Houck are communications scholars, and that in this book, through her own words, Hamer comes alive. For the reader who never had the opportunity to hear her speak – other than in YouTube videos or news clips of archival footage – these transcripts are a treat. Her voice leaps off the page through her trademark style of "image-making, testifying, dissembling, mimicry, and circumlocution" (p.xxiii). Editors Brooks and Houck are communications scholars, and that is the perspective that informs their presentation as they examine Hamer's use of rhetoric, grammar, and turns of phrase. They intend for their volume to encourage readers to reconsider the role of speech in advancing the civil rights struggle and to engender a renewed appreciation of grassroots activists like Hamer, who often were overlooked in favor of such prominent figures as the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X (p. xxii).

A largely self-taught Delta sharecropper, born in 1917 as her parents' twentieth child, Hamer said, "I had never heard, until 1962, that black people could register and vote" (p. 150). Her first attempt to register that same year resulted in her subsequent expulsion from her sharecropper's job and home of

eighteen years. Sixteen bullets were fired into the house where she later was staying. When she and fellow activists attended a 1963 voter registration and education workshop in South Carolina, upon their return to Mississippi they were arrested and severely beaten at the hands of police. In speech after speech, the account of her jail experience is harrowing. The beating and subsequent sham of a trial exemplify how out of balance the so-called justice system was for African Americans in 1960s Mississippi. Readers not familiar with details of the civil rights struggle will find the accounts of murders and blatant injustices both educational and eye opening, as is the almost superhuman bravery of Hamer and her fellow activists when she worked with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (a grassroots alternative to the all-white Mississippi Democratic Party), Head Start, and her Freedom Farm Cooperative, founded in 1969 to help Sunflower County, Mississippi, families obtain food and other needs. She was a sought-after contributor to the women's rights movement, helping in 1971 to found the National Women's Political Caucus.

In describing the harsh conditions facing African Americans in Mississippi and, by extension, throughout the South, Hamer asked, "now how can a man be in Washington, elected by the people, when 95 percent of the people cannot vote in Mississippi?" (p. 62). She herself launched multiple, unsuccessful bids for political office. The legacies of slavery, Jim Crow, and white supremacy were still in full force in the 1960s and into the 1970s as white southerners struggled, with increasing futility, to retain the control over their black neighbors that they had enjoyed throughout centuries of enslavement and for another one hundred years after emancipation. When southern police who beat Hamer, other civil rights workers, and ordinary African Americans were figures to be feared, where could one turn for protection from harm? Hamer used stories like these to effectively illustrate the dramatic differences between the experiences and perspectives of white Americans and African Americans in what she called, "the land of the [lynching] tree and the home of the grave" (p. 82), and therefore the urgent need for change.

She even was leery of John and Robert Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, exposing their sometime lack of attention to violence and civil rights. Even as they were being lauded by others, Hamer knew – and discussed – the delay with which they responded to the actual violations on the ground in Mississippi and elsewhere. Much like the contemporary criticism leveled at the "Great Emancipator" Abraham Lincoln for his less-than-pure views on enslavement and equality, Hamer perceived hesitancy and political motives in the actions of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson.

In their thoroughly documented introduction, filled with succinct summaries of Hamer's life events, the civil rights struggle in general, and well-chosen anecdotes, Brooks and Houck analyze her rhetorical approach and ground it in her life story. Like the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., her oratorical style evolved from a lifetime spent in black Baptist churches and thus she knew how to appeal both to emotions and to higher purposes. Because she spoke from her lived experiences, she almost never needed notes, preferring to speak extemporaneously, skillfully weaving stories and making points to most effectively reach the particular audience she was addressing at any given time. She captivated listeners at the 1964 Democratic National Convention's credentials committee in Atlantic City with the story of her attempt to register to vote, and her jailing and beating at the hands of police. Elsewhere, she described the young woman who, just having proudly graduated from high school in 1971 and looking at her new diploma, was gunned down by white supremacists in Drew, Mississippi (pp. 140, 142). To black southerners, she talked about shared experiences; to white northerners, she issued challenges to rethink their places of privilege and comfort, and their beliefs that the North was a more enlightened place: "Until I'm free in Mississippi, you're not free in no other place," and, "And if you think you are free, you drive down to Mississippi with your Wisconsin license plate and you will see what I am talking about" (pp. 81, 125). Here she spoke to a largely black audience, but was

addressing white listeners: "So I don't care if you're white as your shirt or black as a skillet, we are made from the same blood, brother. And you're going to have to deal with it" (p. 87).

Unlike some later movement leaders who tended toward separatism, Hamer was solidly on the side of lifting all poor people, regardless of skin color or background. "And I'm not fighting for a black Mississippi; I'm fighting for a people's Mississippi," she said in 1969 (p. 89). In later speeches, she connected both poverty and race to issues as diverse as abortion, hunger, education, and fighting communism in Vietnam. Continuing in the vein of the post-World War I and especially post-World War II discontent among early civil rights activists, Hamer asked why America was fighting for democracy abroad but lacked it at home.

Hamer knew she held the moral high ground and did not cede a single inch of it. As her daughter later said, "she stood for what's right; she tried to help anybody – she didn't pick, she didn't discriminate" (p. 208). Again and again, she asserted that she had no wish for payback for the injustices done to her and to her fellow African Americans: "I refuse to bring myself down to the depths of hell to hate a man because he hated me" (p. 115). Black Americans repeatedly have been called upon to forgive and to be better than those who oppressed them. Hamer knew that if she let herself be consumed by hatred, she would be the one to suffer; her haters would not. She said, "I don't want to be equal to the people that rape my ancestors, dead, kill out the Indians, dead, destroyed my dignity, and taken my name" (p. 117). That was not the sort of equality she sought.

The fact that she almost never wrote her speeches ahead of time was a legacy both of her desire for authentic immediacy and of the oral traditions of a largely illiterate culture of Delta sharecroppers. Though she herself had enough formal education that she could read and write well, many people in her life could not; it was from them that she learned her rhetorical style, and to them that she often spoke. The importance of this volume lies in the effort put forth by the editors to collect and verify these recordings. Hamer's considerable collected papers (the index of her correspondence, alone, runs seventy-four pages) include campaign flyers, financial records, and resumes, but no folders of her handwritten drafts of speeches because they do not exist. Offering her words, exactly as she spoke them, was the only way to collect and to make accessible her formidable rhetorical powers. Because she spoke to audiences in the language of her everyday life, Brooks and Houck have chosen "southern black vernacular" to describe Hamer's speech, emphasizing traits that, taken together, are more descriptive of Hamer's style than other common labels such as African American Vernacular English, Black Dialect, or Ebonics. They posit that, because of Hamer's background, the lexical, grammatical, and syntactical qualities of her speech provide an alternative model to the more widely known oratory of the period (p. xxiii). Her informal style drew criticism from more educated blacks and whites, including Roy Wilkins of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and Vice President Hubert Humphrey. Campaign manager Charles McLaurin told her not to pay attention to the critics, assuring her, "You're somebody, you're important." Without a doubt, Hamer was a fearless, determined, persistent woman who knew the obstacles she faced but was unwilling to let them deter or silence her. She remained unflinching in her sharp clarity of meaning.

The book's index lists biblical references, an unusual inclusion but one appropriate to Hamer's weaving together of biblical lessons, life experiences, shared oral expressions, and core topics. Criticized for a supposed lack of focus in her speeches, Hamer's circumlocution rather served to draw her audiences into the trajectory of her thoughts. The editors have chosen speeches showing her range of topics, style, and audience, and always with her trademark bite, effectively comparing her

various speeches and highlighting her skill. Among her research specialties, Maegan Brooks focuses on "the rhetoric of social change, with particular emphases on the roles gender, race, class, and sexuality play in amplifying/silencing voices in the public sphere." Davis Houck similarly researches the New Era and early New Deal, among other areas, emphasizing race, gender, class, and sexuality. They employ some language specific to their specialty, but not so much as to be off-putting to a reader not versed in the field.

The excellent introductions to the individual speeches, in combination with the texts, allow the reader to trace Hamer's life, goals, and challenges. Those not previously familiar with her story may wish for an additional source of biographical information, such as a timeline of significant dates, to connect the speeches to one another and to the larger events of the 1960s and 1970s, without the need to return to the book's introduction to fill some gaps. At times, reading from speech to speech gives the impression of leaping through time, without a clear sense of her activities in the interims between the speaking events. Photos of Hamer, her family, fellow activists and collaborators, and significant locations in her life also would have been a welcome addition to further illuminate her stories and the people in them.

But Hamer is so alive in her words, so vibrant and vivid, that even without photographs, the reader easily can imagine her commanding stage after stage, by turns shocking and electrifying both black and white audiences with her no-holds-barred telling it like it was. For the very ordinariness of her life before she rose to national fame, for her experiences so representative of the time, place, and people around her, Fannie Lou Hamer should hold to her rightful place among the leaders of her day. This volume shows us the reasons why.

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