

Inside Agitator: A Rhetorical Biography of Stetson Kennedy

Background

The rhetorical biography I am writing grew out of my dissertation, a manuscript of 101,000 words (including references). There are only three monographs on Kennedy, all dating from the 1980s and 1990s. Two are theses by historians and one is a dissertation by a folklorist (recently published in unaltered form by Florida Historical Society Press). Scholars who have examined Kennedy focus primarily on his work as a folklorist for the Federal Writers' Project in the 1930s or his infiltration and exposure of the Ku Klux Klan and the Columbians in the 1940s. These are noteworthy and vitally significant projects in showing how activists such as Kennedy worked from the margins of a repressive society to effect gradual political and cultural shifts. My project fills a research gap in the extant body of work on Kennedy in its focus on three literacies. I trace how Kennedy practiced these literacies in his research and discourse during a snapshot of his career from 1943 to 1947.

For over seven decades, Kennedy fought for social change on a variety of fronts: peace, education, ecology, labor, and civil rights. My manuscript, *Labor, Literacies, and Liberation: A Rhetorical Biography of Stetson Kennedy*¹ focuses on a four-year period that is arguably the most prolific and exciting time in his highly eventful life. During this historical moment, Kennedy worked as Editorial Director for the Congress of Industrial Organizations' Political Action Committee (CIO-PAC). He was also the Southern Research Director for the Anti-Nazi League, and he infiltrated the KKK as a special agent for the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI). In these three jobs and in work for other organizations such as the Southern Regional Council and the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, Kennedy wrote in this four-year span hundreds of articles, press releases, pamphlets, lectures, and even published *Southern Exposure* (1946)—all of which advocate on behalf of the working class and people of color. As I argue throughout the project, these writings demonstrate the development of Kennedy's radical ideology, the refinement of his political economic thought, and the enactment and modeling of literacy varieties—most notably alphabetic, civic, and critical literacies.

For the dissertation, I explored the rich collection housed at the Southern Labor Archives at Georgia State University, and I was awarded a grant to conduct fieldwork at sites in Florida, including Kennedy's home in St. Augustine and his estate along the St. Johns River. While in the field, I examined artifacts in his home (including the ~1,000-page FBI dossier on him) and interviewed his widow Sandra Parks. My dissertation employs a combination of archival artifact analysis, fieldwork, and critical theory to derive a new model of literacy from Kennedy's work, one that is based on the notion of *the thinking subject*. This work contributes to a body of scholarship in rhetorical theory, historiography, and literacy studies by recovering Kennedy's rhetoric and that of working-class people who appear in his work, by theorizing the political economy and ideology of literacy, and by exploring interconnections among the three literacies.

¹ I called the dissertation a rhetorical biography, but as I learned from a member of my committee, it is not truly a rhetorical biography. I will fully explain this emerging genre below.

Scope, Purpose, and Length

While this dissertation manuscript has a number of strengths, I believe that the more ambitious project I envision provides a more worthy contribution to the field. Recently, I have discovered a number of opportunities that make this more ambitious project more exigent and more feasible. One opportunity has to do with primary resources: several years ago, the University of Florida acquired 141 linear feet of archival material consisting of 90 feet from Stetson's home and 51 feet from the University of South Florida. Archivists have been cataloguing the papers, and the work is nearing completion. Some of the papers are still with Sandra Parks at the home she and Stetson shared in St. Augustine. I have access to both sets of papers, and I have examined a substantial amount of this available wealth of data. I estimate this book to be in the range of 100,000 to 115,000 words, inclusive of notes.

Instead of focusing on a four-year period, *Inside Agitator: A Rhetorical Biography of Stetson Kennedy*² will explore Kennedy's early experiences and influences, and it will perform rhetorical analyses of writings spanning his seven decades-long career. My purpose in this work is to show how Kennedy's ideology and critical thought developed, how he positioned himself (and others) as subjects in debates, how he shaped messages to address different audiences, and how his thought and approaches transformed over time. Kennedy was an avid reader and prolific writer. He collected everything he read and wrote; it would not be hyperbolic to say that he was a promiscuous curator of his own legacy. This project will look at selected pieces across his career rather than attempting to be comprehensive (in order to keep the text to a marketable length).

Table of Contents

The following comprises the working Table of Contents for *Inside Agitator*:

Preface

Here, I will explain the exigency and purpose of the project, describe my methodology, and provide an overview of the book's structure.

Chapter One: Ideological Development

This first chapter narrates Kennedy's life with a focus on elements that shaped his worldview. It provides a condensed biography (~40 pages) to give context to the subsequent chapters. I will write about some significant experiences that had an impact on his thinking and actions—e.g., his family dynamic, radicalizing moments in his youth, collecting payments for his father's furniture store, his year living on the beach in Key West, the way his family disowned him, his love interests, his house being firebombed by the KKK, his arrests, and his eight years traveling the world. In addition, I will discuss his early activism. At Robert E. Lee High School, he founded an egalitarian fraternity that awarded a trophy for humanitarian work. At the University of Florida, he founded a chapter of the American Student Union, founded the Intercollegiate Peace Council, and was involved in the Young Communist League and North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy. Stetson was always an avid reader. I will provide a list of some readings (including Marx, Nietzsche, Veblen, some of the Southern "Radical Gospel" writers—such as Rupert Vance, C. Vann Woodward, and W. J. Cash—and folklorists such as Allan Lomax and Benjamin Botkin) and discuss evidence from his papers that demonstrates their influence. In the early years, Stetson wrote fiction and poetry. Later, he devoted

² The title refers to a phrase Kennedy used to describe himself. Labor organizers were often deemed "outside agitators," in order to portray them both as strangers to the South and as Communists.

himself to collecting folklore and being a journalist. Naturally, the transformation from literature to rhetoric both emerged from and changed the trajectory of his professional life and his thinking. I will conclude the chapter by outlining the various organizations with which Stetson worked and the positions or tasks he performed in conjunction with these organizations with the purpose of theorizing their possible influences on him.

Chapter Two: Writings on Culture and Nature

Stetson's writing covered a wide range of topics, but his two major passions were civil rights and labor. In this chapter, I lead into those larger topics with a view of other causes Stetson pursued, predominantly education, history, folklore, peace, and the environment. As an adolescent, Stetson wanted to be a zoologist, but he decided that the human species was the one that needed his help the most. He maintained an interest in nature, and many of his writings advocated care for the natural world. He spoke out against war and the military-industrial complex, and he worked tirelessly for peace organizations. In his early years, he collected folklore, and he worked for several years in the Federal Writer's Project. His book *Palmetto Country* (1942) displays his careful observation of his natural and cultural environment and his penchant for what I call radical historiography (that is, rewriting history to portray the "losing side"). Later in his life, he worked in development for a college and several non-profits that sought to educate and train workers, so education and literacy were also important causes to him. The evidence I present here shows the wide range of content and the development of his rhetoric in causes that were important to him, and I will conclude by a brief exploration of how these interests, particularly his love of the natural world, threaded through his work in labor and civil rights.

Chapter Three: Laboring for the Labor Movement

Because of its focus on the work Stetson did for the CIO-PAC, this chapter incorporates a great deal of the research I performed for the dissertation. Because labor history is relatively unfamiliar to those not working in labor studies, I will provide a brief context of the zeitgeist of labor in the 1940s. I will explore Stetson's use of vernacular discourse and folklore to address workers. The CIO-PAC tasked him with writing educational pieces about voting rights and voting issues, and I will analyze these efforts, particularly texts such as a pamphlet called "Plain Facts about the Poll Tax," an article called "3.2 Democracy in the South," and his 1946 book *Southern Exposure*. In addition to civic education, Stetson wrote about workers' rights to a living wage, humane working conditions, and benefits. His involvement with the early years of the CIO's Operation Dixie brought him into the world of labor organizing, so I will explicate writings on behalf of workers across the South, particularly those in textile mills. His work for labor causes continued throughout his life, as evidenced by one of many examples—his marching with Sandra on behalf of Florida migrant workers who were protesting against Publix Grocery Stores a few years ago. At the end of the chapter, I tie his work in labor and civil rights together through a discussion of disenfranchisement and divisive anti-union tactics. For example, the CIO promoted racial integration, and the mill owners kept workers weak in part through white supremacist propaganda.

Chapter Four: Incivilities for Civil Rights

Arguably, much of the magnitude of Stetson's work lies in the area of civil rights for minorities. From stories on lynchings written in college to his work for the Anti-Nazi League and Anti-Defamation League to his "Gerrymandering Is the New Poll Tax" speech before the Legislative Redistricting Hearings in St. Augustine six weeks before he died, Stetson fought the good fight when it came to advocating immediate and total *de facto* equality and civil rights. He demanded the United States live up to its claims to democracy by writing extensively about the realities of the Jim Crow

South. Often, his audiences were segregated even by publication, so whether he wrote for the NAACP's *The Crisis* or for the (white) liberal magazine *The Nation*, he adapted to each rhetorical situation with fervor and (more often than not) with aplomb. I will focus on three of his books (*I Rode with the Klan/The Klan Unmasked*, *Jim Crow Guide to the USA/Jim Crow Guide: The Way It Was*, and *After Appomattox*), his work with Paul Robeson and Howard Fast on *We Charge Genocide*, and several key pieces concerning his infiltration of the Klan and other anti-terrorism efforts. Kennedy's rhetoric addressed issues such as white supremacist terrorism and integration. He highlighted the disenfranchisement measures used in the South to maintain the status quo, he mocked the absurdities and inhumanity of segregation, and he enumerated the many systemic and systematic acts of violence that made the South's "slavocracy" a form of genocide.

Chapter Five: Takeaways

The concluding chapter will theorize the impact of Stetson's work, both in the historical moment and through the enduring influence of his radical legacy. A number of pieces on Stetson or his work have appeared in the public eye frequently in the past two decades: 1) *StoryCorps* (his is the first interview in this NPR series); 2) *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything* (a book on behavioral economics); 3) *Coming of Age: The Story of Our Century by Those Who've Lived It* (an oral history book); 4) *Drunk History* (a TV comedy show that profiled Stetson in its pilot episode); 5) June 2014 segment of *Monumental Mysteries* (on the Travel Channel); 6) a forthcoming (2015) segment on the American Heroes Channel; 7) *Klandestine Man* (a forthcoming documentary). Clearly, his work speaks to various audiences even now. From assisting the Attorney General of Georgia to drive the Klan underground to presenting disenfranchisement information that the Vice President used to help repeal the poll tax, Stetson on occasion saw expedient, tangible results from his efforts. Sometimes, that is, expert effort met optimal opportunity. Other efforts were not as kairotic. In fact, much of his work did not see publication in his lifetime, sometimes because it was too viscerally polemic. Yet whether rhetoric has the intended effect upon audiences cannot form the only or even the best measure of its importance. Popularity, that is, does not equal success. I approach this analysis from a materialist view that understands rhetorical artifacts as dynamic and that theorizes the ongoing impacts a body of writing can have on new audiences with each new reading. We have a number of takeaways from Kennedy's rhetorical legacy. From him, we learn how to read and think critically, how to translate our thoughts into actions, how to reinvent ourselves, and how to survive as dissidents in a pseudo-democracy. His life models the maintaining of courage in spite of violence, persistence in spite of apathy, and ethics in spite of law.

Appendices:

- *Timeline*: major events in Stetson's personal and professional life juxtaposed with concurrent events in US and the world.
- *Resume/Curriculum Vitae*: a composite compiled from 30+ versions of Stetson's employment history, lists of awards and writings, as well as other documents.
- *Bibliography and Filmography*: lists all of Stetson's known published writings, as well as audio and video files of interviews, lectures, award conferrals, and other resources.

Competing Texts

Works about Stetson Kennedy

No published or in-progress work directly competes with this study. Peggy Bulger's book, *Stetson Kennedy: Applied Folklore and Cultural Advocacy* (2017, FHS Press), focuses on his work as a folklorist and does not cover his life past 1960. Kennedy's work as a public intellectual spans 1936 to 2011, seventy years in which he was involved in major political events and social movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Kennedy knew and worked with people such as Richard Wright, Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Zora Neale Hurston, Martin Luther King, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Langston Hughes, Pete Seeger, Howard Fast, Paul Robeson, Myles Horton, Woody Guthrie, and Howard Zinn. His is a story that really *must* be told. Ultimately, Sandra Parks and I plan to edit Stetson's memoirs, a volume he called *Dissident at Large*. He wrote two volumes at different periods in his life—one he called *White Boy* and one he called *Dissident at Large*. Sandra is very supportive of my work, and she has assured me that the field is wide open for me to pursue this biography. Sandra has single-handedly revived interest in Stetson over the past decade, and my work will enable these new audiences and others who do not yet know him to access his legacy.

Other Rhetorical Biographies

Inside Agitator aligns with a genre of scholarship called *rhetorical biography*. This genre analyzes a public figure's discourse with the aim of showing his or her significance, providing a model of a type of rhetoric, tracing his or her influences, or making connections to other rhetors. I have examined seven examples of this genre. Not all of them are called rhetorical biographies, but they all fit at least some of the criteria. The first four listed below were written by communication scholars. However, I argue that since there is such overlap in the areas of rhetorical history and rhetorical theory between communication and rhetoric and composition, there is no reason that rhet-comp could not make just as much of a contribution to a body of work profiling single rhetors. In addition, I did find several biographies in rhetoric and composition that fit the genre relatively well. If few scholars in rhetoric and composition are doing work like this, and scholars in the field are familiar with relevant texts from communication studies (and of course they are), then this book will break new ground. Furthermore, since professors of communication are already familiar with this genre, they would provide an additional market, as I discuss below. The emergence of this genre suggests that a few people have run the race, but there may be more waiting at the gate. Publishing this book in the near future will make us forward-thinking without being *avant garde*.

Four rhetorical biographies I have found all deal with radical thinkers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. You will note also that of these four, two are women and two are men; also, two are white and two are African American. I list them in order of publication (oldest first).

- *Eugene V. Debs: Spokesman for Labor and Socialism* by Bernard Brommel (Charles H. Kerr, 1978, 265 pgs.) contributes to the many other biographies on the famous socialist by analyzing new material from Debs's home in Terre Haute. Brommel notes that other biographers have "ignored more of Debs's rhetoric supporting these causes [strikes, union organizational battles, presidential campaigns, etc.], [so] I plan to focus my study upon what he said and wrote in order to better evaluate the influence, or lack of it, that he had in his time" (9). This text is arranged chronologically, as are some but not all of the other texts.

- *Emma Goldman* by Martha Solomon (Twayne's United States Authors Series, 1987, 155 pgs.) focuses attention on Goldman's achievements as a rhetorician of anarchist thought and as a rhetor in her own right. Goldman spoke extensively from the 1890s to the 1930s on anarchist thought, literature, contraception, sexual equality, and peace. This relatively thin volume provides a brief biography of Goldman's colorful life before explicating her political and philosophical essays, essays on contemporary issues, her dramatic criticism, her historiography, and finally assessing her impact as a rhetor.
- *Malcolm X: Inventing Radical Judgment* by Robert E. Terrill (Michigan State University Press, 2004, 255 pgs.) enriches the field of "Malcolm Studies" (Terrill's term) by avoidance of treading ground already covered. Rather than providing a biography (the basic lines of which are familiar to most), Terrill devotes the first chapter to analyzing four key prophetic speeches by Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, David Walker, and Nat Turner that form an ideological backdrop for Malcolm's thought. Terrill, through examining speeches both from the Nation of Islam period and after Mecca, theorizes that Malcolm X employed the canon of invention to model interpretation and judgment for his audiences.
- *A Voice That Could Stir an Army: Fannie Lou Hamer and the Rhetoric of the Black Freedom Movement* by Maegan Parker Brooks (University Press of Mississippi, 2014, 336 pgs.) adds to a growing body of work on Hamer, a fiery civil rights leader from Mississippi. Brooks uncovers Hamer texts and interviews those close to Hamer to provide readers a chronicle of "how she employed symbols—images, words, and even material objects such as the ballot, food, and clothing—to construct persuasive personae, to influence audiences, and to effect social change" ("Maegan Parker Brooks, PhD"). Brooks arranges her study chronologically in order to show the progression of the movement in which Hamer acted as a leading figure. Because of this focus, the book acts as a biography of the organization as much as of Hamer.

I also found a few rhetorical biographies written by figures in rhetoric and composition. In 1997, Donald C. Stewart and Patricia L. Stewart published a rhetorical biography of composition scholar Fred Newton Scott (1860–1931). In this biographical study, *The Life and Legacy of Fred Newton Scott* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 235 pgs.), Stewart and Stewart examine Scott's essays, speeches, and books, which demonstrate not only his prolific career as a composition scholar and writing program director, but also his use of empirical methods and cognitive science to enrich and expand the field of writing studies. This book is arranged into fifteen brief, chronological vignettes encapsulating Scott's life and career.

Michelle Hall Kells crafted *Hector P. Garcia: Everyday Rhetoric and Mexican American Civil Rights* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2006, 228 pgs.) to recover the voice of Garcia, an influential physician-activist. Garcia's rhetoric advocated for the civil rights of veterans and Hispanic Americans after World War II. He skillfully traversed the boundaries between Anglo and Latino worlds to operate at different rhetorical registers. He addressed the working poor as well as Presidents Kennedy and Johnson in order to improve socioeconomic and health outcomes for Mexican Americans. Kells presents the life of Garcia topically, arranged according to various causes and initiatives in which Garcia was involved.

Finally, *You Can't Padlock an Idea: Rhetorical Education at the Highlander Folk School, 1932–1961* (The University of South Carolina Press, 2014, 198 pgs.) serves as a rhetorical biography of the

Highlander Folk School. As you know, Stephen A. Schneider examines the use of collective-action frames in four major strategies of the school, including drama, journalism, literacy education, and music education. These focal points collectively acted as an underpinning for two major social movements of the twentieth century. Analogically, the work I envision—*The Long Minute: A Rhetorical Biography of Stetson Kennedy*—works to provide a rhetorical biography of a figure rather than an organization; the concept, nevertheless, is the same.

The appearance of these rhetorical biographies in lists of several major university presses in the field indicates that the addition of Kennedy's work to this body would contribute to a proven niche. Some of the figures profiled are associated with particular movements (e.g., Hamer with Black Freedom, Debs with labor, and Scott with writing studies), but Kennedy's work crosses into several different areas of concern, demonstrating his continuing widespread relevance to contemporary debates in social justice.

Likely Readership

This study contributes to the field of rhetoric and composition in the areas of rhetorical history/historiography, archival research, rhetorical theory, and cultural rhetorics. It models the methodology of rigorous historical recovery through using a reflective, inductive, materialist approach contextualized in an historical zeitgeist. In addition, the text will appeal to scholars who research cultural rhetorics and social movements, both of which are of course richly interdisciplinary areas. Not only will this book serve as a model of research and a source to be cited in parallel studies, but it will also be useful in upper-level undergraduate and graduate courses in research methods, rhetorical history, rhetorical theory, public rhetoric, social movements, or cultural rhetorics.

I have already mentioned that communication studies scholars would form another audience. This book ideally fits their perennial interest in social movements, public spheres, and rhetorical theory. A third group that would find this book of interest is made up of scholars of the American South. USC Press has long met the needs of the many programs in history, American Studies, and American Literature that focus on the Southern United States, and in this book I address the volatile social and political issues that Kennedy addressed in Southern states, his home region. Kennedy had a love-hate relationship with his region, and Southernists in literature, sociology, and history will be drawn to my analyses of the context and content of Stetson's work. Yet another group that would gravitate toward Kennedy's views are activists and organizers in labor, civil rights, peace, and literacy organizations. Kennedy's tactics speak to their need for flexible, radical approaches to direct action for social justice. All in all, this book would speak to a diverse readership of researchers, teachers, students, and organizers.