

Southern States Communication Association Research Profile: The Virtual Martin Luther King (vMLK) Project



The vMLK project serves to expand scholars, students and public audiences' understanding of 1) specific aspects of civil rights history in North Carolina, 2) the nature of civic and political engagement, both in the 1950s and 1960s and today, 3) the transformative and affective aspects of public address, particularly in relation to issues of racial justice, and 4) the importance of sound in developing immersive experiences. Assessment of the project is informed by audience feedback and survey data in relation to the following: documenting and recovering the history and everyday experience of African American/Black life; innovating the use of digital tools to provide audiences with historical and cultural knowledge; providing audiences with sound-centered experiences of civic and political engagement and transformation; providing pedagogical materials for teachers and students in the areas of civil rights history, social studies, public address and visual/digital rhetoric.

On February 16th, 1960, shortly after the start of the Greensboro sit-ins, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered the speech, "A Creative Protest" at the White Rock Baptist Church in Durham, NC. Despite the historical and rhetorical significance of what became more commonly known as the "Fill Up the Jails" speech, no known recording exists. The Virtual Martin Luther King Project (vMLK) began as a partnership between the White Rock Baptist church congregation and scholars at NC State University, led by Dr. Victoria J. Gallagher. The result was a public recreation of King's speech at the current church sanctuary on June 8, 2014. Featuring a voice actor, Mr. Marvin Blanks, the recreation event attracted over 250 people, including individuals who had attended the speech in 1960, area politicians and activists, members of the Durham Ministerial Alliance, congregation members, and members of the NC State community. Based on the sound recordings of the recreation, the vMLK Project utilizes advanced digital and audio

technologies to afford scholars, students and citizens an opportunity to engage this speech through presentation of six components: 1) historic context, 2) individual listening and 3) collective sound experiences, 4) virtual reality and 5) gaming platform experiences, and 6) the “your creative protest” feedback opportunity.

Since its first public exhibition in February 2015, the vMLK Project has been experienced by over 30,000 people through site-based exhibitions and countless more through the project website: <https://vmlk.chass.ncsu.edu/guide>. Each academic year, approximately 1,000 students experience the project through their public speaking curriculum, leading up to their advocacy speech assignment. The vMLK Project was exhibited at the Museum of American History at the Smithsonian in October 2017 and, among other awards and recognitions, received a two year NEH Digital Projects for the Public Production Grant.