

MARY HARRIS "MOTHER" JONES, "SPEECH AT A PUBLIC MEETING ON THE STEPS
OF THE CAPITOL CHARLESTON, WEST VIRGINIA"
(15 AUGUST 1912)

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Abstract: In her "Speech at a Public Meeting on the Steps of the Capitol Charleston, West Virginia," Mother Jones spoke in a radical, "working-class style" that challenged the conventions of polite speech. Jones's use of this style may have been necessary to establish Jones's leadership, to raise awareness of the miners' oppression, and to inspire miners to fight. Yet Jones's speech also resurrects old questions about under what circumstances confrontational or even violent rhetoric is justified.

Key Words: Mother Jones, radical rhetoric, labor movement, "working-class style."

It is the early 1900s. A tiny, gentle-looking, old woman rises to address a crowd of miners and industrial workers. She looks over the audience with a sweet, grandmotherly gaze, smooths her modest floor-length dress and begins to speak. Calling her listeners "cowards" and urging them to fight back against the "blood-sucking pirates" who run the mines, her words were anything but matronly (72, 114).¹ Insulting, indecorous, and violent, Mary Harris ("Mother") Jones was one of the most unlikely yet successful labor agitators in U.S. history. As an elderly woman who never worked in the mines and had no immediate family who did, she clearly was an outsider to the cause.² Nevertheless, she became both a beloved and feared champion of the American labor movement.

Even though Jones battled to improve the lives of working people for more than twenty-five years, she was much more than an advocate for the working-class. Above all, she was a rabble-rouser--a flamboyant, radical speaker who would say virtually anything to stir up a crowd. In response to a speaker who introduced her as "a great humanitarian," Jones retorted: "Get it straight, I'm not a humanitarian, I'm a hell-raiser."³ And Jones did indeed "raise hell." She inspired thousands of workers to stand up for their rights, organize against their employers, and fight to improve their working conditions. Workers adored her and called her "'Jesus Christ come down on earth,'"⁴ while opponents feared her and called her "the most dangerous woman in America."⁵ Eliciting both strong devotion and intense hatred, Jones was a polarizing force, yet she stood--and continues to stand--as an inspiration to the U.S. labor movement.

This essay analyzes one of Jones's most famous speeches--an address she delivered at a labor rally on the steps of the West Virginia State Capitol on August 15, 1912. Some scholars attribute Jones's success as an agitator to the motherly persona she constructed in her speeches. An examination of the address, however, reveals that Jones's rhetoric was often

anything *but* "motherly." Speaking in an aggressive, working-class style, Jones defied the polite, neo-classical rhetorical standards of her day. Engaging in name-calling and polarization, her rhetoric was not typical of the "civil" and "decorous" speech of the day, but rather was feisty, offensive, and even threatening. Mother Jones was an "outsider" in the communities where she spoke, but she effectively identified with her audiences of working-class men, and she positioned herself as a prophet of the working class with appeals to a higher power. Finally, she offered her audience of miners an optimistic vision of the future by assuring them of their ultimate triumph. Like most great social movement leader, she not only articulated the miners' grievances, but also inspired them to fight for a better future.

Mother Jones

Mary Harris Jones's life was marked by extraordinary suffering. The daughter of poor Irish immigrants, she arrived in the United States in 1835. She was five years old at the time.⁶ Her family became American citizens, but her father's job on a railroad crew forced them to move to Toronto, Ontario in 1838. There she attended public school and graduated from high school at the age of seventeen.⁷ After graduation, she taught in Canadian public schools, worked as a dressmaker in Chicago, and eventually resumed teaching in Memphis, Tennessee. While in Memphis, she met an iron molder named George E. Jones. They married in 1861 and within six years, they had four healthy children. Then, in 1867, tragedy struck. Yellow fever swept through Memphis and killed her entire family. As she later recounted, "One by one, my four little children sickened and died. I washed their little bodies and got them ready for burial. My husband caught the fever and died. I sat alone through nights of grief. No one came to me."⁸

Alone, poor, jobless, childless, and widowed, Jones returned to Chicago to take up her old work as a dressmaker. While sewing for Chicago aristocrats, she developed a growing concern for the poor, along with deepening disdain for their rich and powerful bosses. As she noted in her autobiography:

Often while sewing for the lords and barons who lived in magnificent houses on the Lake Shore Drive, I would look out of the plate glass windows and see the poor, shivering wretches, jobless and hungry, walking along the frozen lake front. The contrast of their condition with that of the tropical comfort of the people for whom I sewed was painful to me. My employers seemed neither to notice nor to care.⁹

A desire to fight social and economic injustice began to stir within her. Then, tragedy struck again. The Great Fire of 1871, which destroyed much of the city, left Jones with nothing except the clothes on her back. Her sewing business, her home, and all of her possessions were lost in the flames. Again finding herself alone, poor, and jobless, she took refuge in an old Catholic church. The Knights of Labor held meetings in a building nearby, and Jones, in search of social contact, began to attend the gatherings. In her autobiography, she recalls, "I became more and more engrossed in the labor struggle and I decided to take an active part in the efforts of the working people to better the conditions under which they worked and lived. I joined the

Knights of Labor."¹⁰ With that, Jones's career as one of the nation's most influential labor movement activists took root.

Although well-educated for her time, Jones learned the grievances of industrial workers and the methods needed to rouse them firsthand. She threw herself entirely into the labor cause and traveled throughout the country observing and talking to workers, organizing strikes and marches, and speaking out on behalf of laborers and unions. The origins of her moniker "Mother" are not known. Reference to "Mother Jones" first appeared in a June 15, 1897, *Chicago Evening Journal* account of an American Railway Union (ARU) convention that featured a speech by its president, Eugene Debs. "When he [Debs] finished," the newspaper reported, "white-haired 'Mother' Jones, who occupied a prominent position proposed three cheers."¹¹ One journalist asserted that the ARU gave Jones her nickname, but the title was not used universally until the turn of the century.¹² In August 1897, for example, the *National Labor Tribune* simply called her "Mrs. Mary Jones of Chicago." Nevertheless, from the early 1900s forward, Mary Jones was known as "Mother Jones." By the start of the twentieth-century, as biographer Elliott Gorn remarks, "everyone from miners to Presidents called her Mother."¹³ With Jones's new name came a surge of activism that took her across the country to Alabama, New York, Pennsylvania, Colorado, and West Virginia. With each journey, her reputation grew.

In 1903, Jones led a 300-person march comprised mostly of children from Kensington, Pennsylvania to Theodore Roosevelt's home at Oyster Bay, Long Island--a distance of 125 miles. Meant to draw attention to the plight of child laborers, this demonstration thrust Jones into the national spotlight. The United Mine Workers *Journal* stated, "The New York press, and indeed the press of the whole country, has given the child labor problem columns where they would not otherwise have devoted lines to this [s]ubject."¹⁴ No small part of this attention centered on Jones herself. Her actions and statements came under national scrutiny, and as she later recalled in her autobiography: "Reporters quoted my statement that Philadelphia mansions were built on the broken bones and quivering hearts of children. The Philadelphia papers and the New York papers got into a squabble with each other over the question. The Universities discussed it. Preachers began talking about it."¹⁵ Inspiring both hatred and admiration, Mother Jones had become a well-known figure.

In subsequent years, Jones's fame continued to grow. Between 1904 and 1911, she became an official speaker for the Socialist party, assisted in the foundation of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and campaigned to free Mexican revolutionaries jailed in the United States. In 1911, she kicked off her most vigorous efforts on behalf of organized labor. Over the next four years, she took part in a series of strikes and demonstrations that placed her even more in the public eye. The attention she received stemmed in no small part from her fiery speaking ability. Only five feet tall and 100 pounds, Jones was far from a threatening physical presence. Dressing in conservative black dresses and sporting neatly styled white hair and glasses, she appeared to be more of a demure grandmother than a defiant agitator. When she spoke, however, her feisty spirit came out.

Reports of Jones's speeches depict her speaking skills as nothing short of extraordinary. In 1914, writer Lawrence Lynch remarked, "Her eighty or more years have not dimmed her eye, weakened the strength of her personality or tempered the boldness of her language. She is the woman most loved by the miners and most feared by the operators . . . she wields a greater power over the miners than does any other agitator."¹⁶ Indeed, miners reported that "she

could talk blood out of a stone"¹⁷ or "permeate a group of strikers with more fight than could any living human being."¹⁸ Written accounts of Jones's speeches surely do not convey their power. One observer who heard her voice reported that "the intensity of it became something you could almost feel physically." Another witness said that "no matter what impossible ideas she brought up, she made the miners think she and they could do anything."¹⁹ Jones was a masterful speaker. Yet she spoke without scripts or advanced preparation.²⁰ She was an outsider to the cause, yet she appears to have possessed a greater ability to verbalize workers' grievances and inspire their action than any of the carefully practiced insiders who came before her. Given the turbulent situations in which Jones tended to speak, these remarkable rhetorical skills were all the more impressive.

West Virginia Mining and the Conflict of 1912

Although the Industrial Revolution began well before the end of the nineteenth-century, society was still adjusting to the transformations that it brought about in 1912.²¹ The shift from an agrarian to an industrial nation created a variety of social and economic changes. Behind all these changes was the rise of corporate capitalism. By the start of the twentieth-century, small companies increasingly were supplanted by big conglomerates. Virtually all of these businesses needed manpower and coal to fuel their operations. With monopolies driving out competition, scores of workers moved from rural areas into the cities to find work with these new industrial giants. Many others relocated to mining communities beyond the city limits. By 1900, more than half of the country (36 to 40 million men, women, and children) were employed in the industrial workforce. Less than ten percent of these workers were unionized.²² Factory workers often toiled long hours in dangerous conditions and received little more than starvation wages. Those who stayed out of the cities and mined the coal faced even worse conditions. Crippling work schedules, hazardous conditions, and substandard wages plagued the mineworkers. The American working-class was in decline. The rich were becoming more and more powerful, while the poor were becoming ever more vulnerable.²³

In the spring of 1912, Mother Jones was traveling throughout the West and the Pacific Northwest organizing railroad employee strikes.²⁴ One day, she noticed a newspaper story stating that the West Virginia Paint Creek Coal Company had refused to renew a contract with their unionized miners. The miners had gone on strike, and the company had begun to evict mining families from their homes. Jones, who had helped the Paint Creek miners organize in 1904, took a personal interest in the case. As she later recalled, "I cancelled all my speaking dates in California, tied up all my possessions in a black shawl—I travel light—and went immediately to West Virginia."²⁵ By the time she arrived, the situation had become a crisis.

The West Virginia mining business of 1912 was booming. In 1888, the state's annual coal production was 6,000,000 tons; by 1912, that figure had risen to 70,000,000 tons.²⁶ Demand was soaring, but competition from coal companies in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and especially within West Virginia itself were threatening profits. Mine operators saw union activity as a threat to their ability to compete and increase company revenues. In the case of Paint Creek, the operators' fears were well founded. The Paint Creek Coal Company shared the Kanawha River Valley of West Virginia with the Cabin Creek Coal Company. Only eight miles apart, the two mining operations were in direct competition. However, Cabin Creek miners

were non-unionized and worked for less pay than the unionized workers at Paint Creek. Workers' pay at both companies was very meager.²⁷

In 1912, West Virginia miners earned about thirty-eight cents per ton. This rate was roughly two-thirds the amount given to the lowest paid workers in other states. But with a steady flow of farmers, African Americans, and immigrants looking for work, mine operators were able to keep wages low.²⁸ Thus, when the Paint Creek contract expired on April 1, 1912, workers demanded pay raises. Claiming that a wage increase would destroy the company's ability to compete with nearby Cabin Creek, the operators refused to modify the old contract, which precipitated the strike.²⁹ In the wake of this conflict, the unorganized Cabin Creek miners also began making demands, including union recognition and acknowledgement of their rights of free speech and assembly.³⁰ Denied these demands, Cabin Creek workers joined the Paint Creek strike. In an effort to regain control, the operators of the Paint Creek and Cabin Creek mines took action.

One of these actions was to evict miners and their families from the company houses. Armed with guns, company guards forcibly removed scores of mining families. With nowhere else to go, many workers moved to a tent colony set up by the United Mine Workers Union (UMWA) at nearby Holly Grove. Bound together by terrible conditions and shared feelings of animosity towards the operators, the workers developed a sense of solidarity and a bitter willingness to fight. By the end of May, Jones had arrived and violence had erupted.

Miners and guards started to attack each other. Guards assaulted and shot miners, and miners shot and assaulted guards. For weeks, the Paint Creek and Cabin Creek strike zone grew more and more violent. The Kanawha Valley became a site of absolute carnage. With more than fifty people killed or injured, the strike would eventually be remembered as "one of the longest and bloodiest labor conflicts in American history."³¹ By all accounts, Jones played no small part in the escalation of violence.³² Throughout the summer, she delivered speeches in open-air meetings that drew thousands of listeners. Transcripts of these messages suggest that she did much to encourage violence by the miners. Although she paid lip service to peaceful protest, her speeches easily might be read as powerful incitements to violence.

In a speech on August 1, 1912, for example, Mother Jones issued one of her typical challenges to the workers: "We are law-abiding citizens, we will destroy no property, we will take no life, but if a fellow comes to my home and outrages my wife, by the Eternal he will pay the penalty. I will send him to his God in the repair shop. (Loud Applause.) The man who doesn't do it hasn't got a drop of revolutionary blood in his veins."³³ Later, she announced, "I am not going to say to you don't molest the operators. It is they who hire the dogs to shoot you. (Applause.) I am not asking you to do it, but if he is going to oppress you, deal with him."³⁴ While somewhat ambiguous, Jones's words were clearly more of a battle cry than a plea for peace. In fact, on one occasion, she reportedly held up a mine guard's coat that was covered in blood and said, "This is the first time I ever saw a goddamn mine guard's coat decorated to suit me." She then tossed pieces of the coat into the crowd.³⁵ One observer stated that she urged miners to take violent action and claimed that he heard her say to a group of reluctant men, "Get your guns, you cowardly sons of bitches, and get into the woods."³⁶ Such reports capture the anger, vituperation, and provocative tone of Jones's speeches. They also demonstrate the volatile climate of the Kanawha Valley.

In the valley, emotions were running high and talk of additional violence was common. Then, at the beginning of August, state militia arrived in the strike area to help restore peace by confiscating the weapons of both guards and miners. According to Jones, the militia sided with mine operators. "They suspended every civil right. They became despotic. They arrested scores of miners, tried them in military court, without jury, sentenced them to ten, fifteen years in the Moundsville prison," she recalled.³⁷ Under these horrific conditions, Jones delivered her August 15 speech.

In preparation for her speech, Jones "called six trusty American men" and told them to travel up and down the creek and notify all miners that she wanted them to attend a meeting in Charleston, West Virginia at one o'clock on August 15. She prepared a list of demands for West Virginia Governor William E. Glasscock, which she intended to read to him in person. The men were told not to bring any weapons. On the day of the speech, Jones reported that "the camps turned out in full" and that she successfully led the men to the steps of the state capitol building.³⁸ There she demanded that the governor come out to hear her. He refused, but she stayed on the steps and addressed the gathered miners.³⁹

Without the governor present, her supposed target audience was absent. However, with a large crowd of miners in attendance, Jones still pretended to address the governor. In her hour-and-a-half speech, Jones demanded that the governor remove the mine guards and warned him that if he did not defend the miners, they would fight for their rights themselves. Speaking to the miners, she berated the enemy, pointed out how their rights have been abused, and assured them of their ultimate victory. The speech illustrated both Mother Jones's confrontational style and her unique ethos as a grandmotherly "outsider" who came to be one of the most influential voices of the American working class.

Jones's August 15 Speech

In his classic essay, "Requirements, Problems, and Strategies: A Theory of Persuasion for Social Movements," Herbert Simons outlined the rhetorical implications of both moderate and militant strategies in social movements. "If moderates employ rhetoric as an alternative to force," Simon's wrote, "militants use rhetoric as an expression, an instrument, and an act of force."⁴⁰ Harassing, disrupting, threatening, and cajoling, militant speech attracts attention and energizes followers who lack access to centers of political power. Militant speech may be divisive, splitting the movement itself into oppositional factions with "seemingly antithetical strategies."⁴¹ Yet for those who embrace the militant strategy, that choice commits them to an all-out fight and signals to the world their determination to prevail.

As rhetorical scholars Robert Scott and Donald Smith have noted, militant strategies are "inherently symbolic." They may polarize audiences, but they also "carry a message" about the dedication of the activists and may help to spread a movement's ideas.⁴² Sometimes, as rhetorician Franklyn Haman has argued, militant speech may be seen as the only alternative for social protestors who have been excluded from the "channels of rational communication." In these situations, radical speech actually may serve a "positive function" in a democratic society.⁴³ As many scholars have observed, militant speech can have a cleansing and revitalizing effect on democratic discourse, breaking down barriers to participation and introducing new perspectives and ideas.

With her insults, ridicule, and even threats of violence, Mother Jones no doubt polarized listeners. Yet her confrontational language also helped attract attention to the miners' plight, and it forged a strong bond between herself and her audience of male, working-class miners. Along with her appeals to a higher power, Jones's identification with her listeners helped position her as a prophet of the working class, and her optimistic vision of the future inspired the miners to stand up for themselves. In the early-twentieth century, it was still rare for a woman to deliver political speeches in public, much less to speak in a confrontational style. To do so was to risk appearing unwomanly, perhaps even crazy.⁴⁴ Yet Mother Jones defied those conventions, rejecting the polite speech of the privileged classes and speaking in a "working class" style that was rambling, satirical, and indecorous. Instead of conforming to standards of "refinement, elevation, and taste," Mother Jones spoke in the "impertinent" style of a disaffected radical.⁴⁵

Jones's Radical Style

Jones's speech of August 15, 1912, was typical of her rally addresses. Displaying no clear organization, the speech was delivered in an extemporaneous style, with a number of digressions, asides, and personal anecdotes. Her words seemed to flow off the top of her head, often in reaction to something shouted out by her audience. Recalling an earlier experience in Colorado, for example, she claimed that she never feared the Governor or his militia, even after she was "put out at twelve o'clock at night . . . by seven bayonets" and told "never to come back" (61). Her audience applauded and cried: "Tell them again. Tell them about it" (61). Jones did just that, recalling how she "went back next day" and taught the Governor that "it won't do to tamper with women of the right metal" (62). At another point in the speech, she asked: "Do you find a minister preaching against the guards?" (31) The audience replied, "They are traitors, moral cowards" (32). Jones responded: "He will preach about Jesus, but not about the guards" (33). Like a Southern Baptist preacher, Jones participated in a sort of call-and-response with her audience, in effect involving them in the construction of her speech. Unlike many of the more polished speakers of her day, Mother Jones did not speak from a carefully prepared manuscript. Rather, she fed off the reactions of her listeners.

Far from refined or tasteful speech, Jones's address was filled with fighting words designed to insult, ridicule, and offend. Foregoing propriety, Jones consistently mocked political, corporate, and even religious leaders. Her speech abounded with name-calling; former president Grover Cleveland became "Old Grover" (10), while Theodore Roosevelt became "Teddy, the monkey-chaser" (29). In Jones's speech, the Governor of Colorado was reduced to "a corporation rat" (61), the hired agents of the mine owners were "blood-hounds" (40), and mine operators were "villains" (59) and "merciless money pirates" (65). She even ridiculed the local preachers: "Let me tell you, them fellows are owned body and soul by the ruling class, and they would rather take a year in hell with Elkins [former West Virginia Senator who died in 1911] than ninety-nine in heaven" (31). Jones spared no one from insult, not even the miners themselves. Suggesting that those not committed to the cause were cowards, she shamed them into action: "You ought to be ashamed of yourselves, actually to the Lord you ought, just to see one old woman who is not afraid of all the blood-hounds" (59).

As scholars Charles Stewart, Craig Smith, and Robert Denton explain, radical movement leaders often use polarizing rhetoric, reducing complex realities into simply "us versus them"

dichotomies and suggesting that "there is no middle ground, no neutrals, in the struggle between good and evil."⁴⁶ This is precisely what Mother Jones did with her ridicule and name-calling. Heaping abuse not only on the mine owners but also politicians and even local religious leaders who supported them, Jones forced everybody to choose sides. In Mother Jones's rhetoric, there was no such thing as neutrality in the conflict between the mine owners and the workers. One either supported the miners or became an enemy of the cause.

In short, Jones was a master of what James Darsey has described as the "rough-and-tumble" democratic style of radical labor. Like Eugene Debs, Jones's rhetorical style was distinguished by "unsparing directness," language "bordering on the prurient," and "unrelenting sarcasm."⁴⁷ Unlike Debs, however, Jones had never worked in the industry she sought to organize, and she had a very different persona--that of an elderly woman, even a grandmotherly figure. Jones clearly was an "outsider" to the miners' cause, yet that did not seem to hurt her credibility. Indeed, she effectively exploited that "outsider" status to her rhetorical advantage.

Jones's Outsider Advocacy

Jones's age, sex, and employment history all marked her as an outsider to the labor cause. Unions typically barred female membership, and many coal miners believed that a woman without mining experience possessed no real qualifications to speak for their cause.⁴⁸ Jones was well aware of this skepticism. She mentioned it in her speeches ("Now some guy down the road will say, 'What does Mother Jones know about mining, anyway?'"),⁴⁹ and she lamented it in her private correspondence. (In a letter to a friend she once wrote: "Those fellows don't want a woman in the field.")⁵⁰ Nevertheless, her words seemed to move the miners more profoundly than those of any other speaker of the time. To some, this fact is confounding. As one of her biographers wondered: "What was this charm? Why should an aged but eloquent old woman have a hold on half a million miners? . . . How could she, often without benefit of credentials, move into myriad disputes and not be spurned by the clannish miners?"⁵¹

Dale Fetherling answers these questions in straightforward fashion, saying: "It was because she was a woman and because she was so intensely personal in a culture which cherished these qualities."⁵² He explains that most miners' families were matriarchies. Miners, he says, were raised by controlling women and were accustomed to taking orders from their mothers and their wives. They expected women to boss them around and chide them when they disobeyed. Such behavior was a sign of love. Fetherling argues that this explains much of Jones's oratorical power. Jones consistently ordered miners to behave in particular ways, and she habitually derided them when they failed to meet her demands. References to the miners as "cowards," "traitors," and not real "men" pervaded her speeches.⁵³ Yet she always indicated that her anger grew out of love and a deep concern for her "family" of miners. Calling workers her "boys" and emphasizing that she would fight for them "until [their] chains are broken,"⁵⁴ Jones presented herself as the powerful matriarch of the miners' "family." In a sense, she reflected her audience's image of the ideal mother.

Rhetoric scholar Mari Boor Tonn has elaborated on Fetherling's ideas. Tonn analyzes Jones's speeches as examples of "militant motherhood"--that is, motherhood that exhibits a

commitment to both nurturance and militancy. In her study of Jones, Tonn demonstrates that Jones's words reflected the maternal purposes of physical preservation, fostering emotional and intellectual growth, and developing group identity and social responsibility. This motherly nurturance, Tonn argues, comforted miners and made them feel protected. At the same time, Jones assumed a militant stance that empowered miners and prepared them for confrontational action. Jones's "motherhood," Tonn explains, nurtured miners so that they would feel secure enough to stand up to their oppressors. Rather than encouraging acceptance of authority, Jones's mothering promoted dissent and opposition to "social codes" and "mores" that kept the miners down. She nurtured her "boys" so that they would "value" their lives and feel empowered to "resist domination."⁵⁵

Still, many men did not approve of women participating in political causes. Jones herself lamented that miners often resisted women who tried to help them to organize, and she recognized that in order to succeed she needed more than a motherly persona.⁵⁶ In her speech of August 15, 1912, she did more than establish herself as the matriarch of the miners' "family." She also identified with the struggles of the miners, appealed to a higher power, and offered the miners an optimistic vision of the future.

Jones's Identification

Jones did not present herself solely as the miners' "mother." She also identified with the miners themselves, assuming the role of their spokesperson.⁵⁷ Shifting her speaking voice from the second or third person to the first, she frequently situated herself *within* the group of men: "We can't forget that *we* are men" (158). "In the mines is where *our* jobs are. *We* are going to get more wages" [emphasis added] (76). Tonn argues that this use of the first-person plural "we" is characteristic of motherly talk. To encourage proper behavior, she says, mothers often address their children as "we" (e.g., "*We* are going to eat all of *our* vegetables").⁵⁸ In some instances, Jones did use the second person to promote desired behavior from her "boys." Yet more commonly she declared that "We want the right to organize" (88) or "We don't intend to surrender our liberty" (26), positioning herself as the voice of the miners themselves.

Jones went to great length to demonstrate her credentials as the voice of the miners. She emphasized that she had worked, suffered, eaten, and talked with the miners. She presented herself as one of the men--even to the point of distancing herself from other political crusades led by women. At one point in the speech, for example, she stated:

I have worked, boys, I have worked with you for years. I have seen the suffering children, and in order to be convinced I went into the mines on the night shift and the day shift and helped the poor wretches to load coal at times. We lay down at noon and we took our lunches, and we talked our wrongs over, we gathered together at night and asked "How will we remedy things?" We organized secretly, and after a while held public meetings. We got our people together in those states. . . . And I am one of those, my friends, I don't care about your woman suffrage and the temperance brigade or any other of your class associations. (58)

Here, Jones's "we" was not didactic. She used the language of togetherness to bracket her otherness; she was someone who actually had gone "into the mines on the night shift and the day shift" (58) and loaded coal. In fact, she took on the very belief system of her miner audience. In saying, "I don't care about *your* woman suffrage" [emphasis added] (58), she stepped outside of her female identity and depicted women's issues as something that did not interest her. In so doing, she aligned herself with the views of her audience, many of whom opposed women's rights. Thus, Jones constructed herself as something more than a strong-willed mother. She also constructed herself as a miner. As she put it: "I know what I am talking about. I am not talking haphazard, I have the goods" (58). In this sense, "I have the goods" did not mean "I have motherly qualities." It meant, "I have the qualities of a miner." The distinction is important and evident in other aspects of her speech. In particular, Jones's strategy of identifying with her audience complemented her representation of the labor movement as a crusade sanctioned by God.

Jones's Appeal to a Higher Power

Jones's audiences were steeped in Christian religion. Miners who lived in mine-operated housing, as in Paint Creek and Cabin Creek, typically worshiped at Christian churches set up by the mine operators.⁵⁹ Jones surely was aware of this fact, as her speeches frequently invoked the Christian God.⁶⁰ Her August 12, 1915, address was no exception.

Jones filled her speech with appeals to a higher power and suggested that she and the miners were on a holy crusade. This strategy helped her to move beyond her outsider status and establish her cause as unquestionably righteous. For example, near the start of the speech, she stated, "The labor movement was not originated by man. The labor movement, my friends, was a command from God Almighty" (23). This claim granted her the right to advocate for the miners' cause in two important ways. First, by stating that she and the miners were carrying out God's will, Jones unified herself and the men. She and the miners had been chosen to do God's work together. They all were joined together by the word of God, and Jones had been chosen to lead them. Second, describing the labor movement as a command from God precluded the argument that Jones was not qualified to lead. Under the authority of the Lord, Jones was not acting out of her own free will. She supported the labor movement because God commanded her to do so. In this sense, Jones was a prophet of the Lord. Those who questioned her right to lead the crusade questioned the will of God.

Jones's prophetic voice represented an important tradition in American public address and the rhetoric of reform. As Darsey has demonstrated, social movement leaders from the American revolutionaries to Robert Welch employed the prophetic voice to cast their actions as the will of God and to link their crusade to a higher power. This "messenger formula," in which a speaker credits God with his or her words and actions, elevates the ethos of both the speaker and message.⁶¹ As the voice of the Lord, the speaker demands respect and the message requires obedience.

Such prophetic appeals appeared throughout Jones's August 15, 1912, address. At one point, she told a story about an African American miner named Sy, who supposedly sensed that God had directed Jones's work in the labor movement:

There was a good old darkey there, and said, "Oh," said Sy, "I done talked to the Lord for a week, and the Lord jest come and whispered in my ear last night, and said, 'Sy, Sy, Sy, I have done had a talk with Mother about that graft. Come down tomorrow night.'" Sy said, "O, Lord Jesus, don't fail to let Mother come," and I went. He said Jesus didn't lie. Jesus said, "Mother come here for sure, she take care of that money, and wouldn't let them fellows get it for nothing." At once the fellows said Amen. (85)

In this story, God told Sy that He had spoken to Jones and had commanded her to attend a union meeting and break up illegal money handling practices. The tale offered testimony in support of Jones's claim that she was acting under the authority of God. Couching the argument in the voice of another further served to lend it credibility. After all, *she* was not asserting that God had directed her actions; Sy was making the claim. The narrative form also made the story memorable and increased its chance of being passed on to individuals who were not in the audience.⁶² All who accepted the tale could not easily question her right to lead the movement. Thus, Jones's appeals to a higher power and use of the prophetic voice helped unify the miners behind her leadership. She then cemented her leadership position by offering an optimistic vision of the future.

Jones's Optimistic Vision of the Future

Building on the appeals to God, Jones presented a decidedly hopeful vision of the future in her August 15 address. With the Lord on the miners' side, victory was assured. To make this argument, Jones invoked the Old Testament story of the birth of Jesus:

This fight that you are in is the great industrial revolution that is permeating the heart of men over the world. They see behind the clouds the Star that rose in Bethlehem nineteen hundred years ago, that is bringing the message of a better and nobler civilization. We are facing the hour. We are in it, men, the new day, we are here facing that Star that will free men, and give to the nation a nobler, grander, higher, truer, purer, better, manhood. . . . I see that hour. I see the Star breaking your chains; your chains will be broken, men. (106-107)

In her prophetic voice, Jones explained that God had raised a star over Jesus to show the world where its savior lay. Now, she asserted, He has raised the same star above the miners. Like Jesus, they had been assigned the task of leading the world to "a better and nobler civilization" (106). And like the Son of God, they could not fail.

This optimistic depiction of the future bolstered Jones's position within the movement. God, she suggested, had blessed her and the miners' efforts. He would guide them to victory, but He expected Jones and the men to work together as a unified group. She told her audience:

Now, my boys, you are mine, we have fought together, we have hungered together, we have marched together, but I can see victory in the heavens for you. I can see the hand above you guiding and inspiring you to move onward and

upward. No white flag--we cannot raise it, we must not raise it. We must redeem the world. (64)

Jones and the miners have "fought" (64), "hungered" (64), and "marched" (64) as one, and God would reward them for their collective efforts. The Lord was behind the struggle, and He supported them not as individuals, but as a group (e.g., "We must redeem the world") (64). This assertion bound Jones to the miners' cause and strengthened the sense that she was part of their group, not some "outsider."

At one point in her speech of August 15, Jones compared the labor movement to the biblical story of the Israelites' flight from Egypt. She said that God had sent a prophet who "organized [the enslaved Israelites] into a union" (23). Only after they organized into a unified whole did the Lord come to the Israelites aid: "They got together and the prophet led them out of the land of bondage and robbery and plunder into the land of freedom" (23). Jones stated that God has applied the same standards to the labor movement. After telling the story of the Israelites' escape, she said, "And so it is. That can well be applied to the State of West Virginia" (24). She then talked about how she organized the Paint Creek miners, thereby casting herself in the role of the prophet and the miners in the role of the Israelites. God did not help the Israelites until they accepted the prophet who came to organize them. Thus, Jones suggested that God would not help the miners until they welcomed her--the prophet sent by God to lead them. Such claims not only established Jones's right to lead the miners, but also presented an optimistic view of the future. The Lord would ensure that the miners would come out on top, at least so long as they welcomed Jones as their prophet and leader. In this sense, Jones's depiction of the future, combined with her appeal to a higher power and her identification with the miners, all helped her to gain acceptance as a leader, despite her status as an "outsider." And Jones's leadership not only changed the nature of the labor movement in the early twentieth-century, but also left a lasting legacy of "radical" labor speech.

The Legacy of Jones's August 15 Speech

After Jones's speech, she and the miners returned to the strike zone and Governor Glasscock made no public response. As days passed, the situation steadily grew worse. By the end of August, property damage, assaults, and shootings were happening nearly every day.⁶³ Miners recruited workers from outside of the Kanawha Valley to fight for their cause, and mine owners brought in more than one hundred additional guards to battle against them. The strike area was becoming a war zone, and the governor could ignore the situation no longer.⁶⁴

On September 2, Glasscock declared martial law. Roughly twelve hundred troops descended into the strike zone, began to confiscate weapons, and started to arrest, try, convict, and imprison striking miners. Over the next eleven months, martial law was lifted, then reestablished two more times. Jones spent nearly two months in military confinement, and the U.S. Senate began to investigate the West Virginia conflict. By the end of the ordeal, the UMWA had spent some \$602,000 on the strike and approximately 50 people had been killed.⁶⁵ In the end, however, the miners at Paint Creek and Cabin Creek did win an agreement that improved workers' conditions.

Strikes continued in West Virginia for years to come and laborers continued to suffer from low salaries and terrible working conditions. Yet with her speech on August 15 and other inspirational talks, Mother Jones inspired thousands of people to fight for their rights and convinced them that they had power to change their own situations. Shortly after her August 15 address, *Miners' Magazine* remarked that "'when the history of the labor movement is written and there is recorded the glad tidings of labor's emancipation, the name of 'Mother' Jones will shed a halo of luster upon every chapter.'"⁶⁶ The magazine may have overstated her impact, but Mother Jones did change the course of the labor movement in the early twentieth-century, particularly in the most depressed and dispirited coal mining regions of the nation. As Gorn explains, "Hundreds of thousands of American workers fought for and received better wages and working conditions during her years of activism, and they embraced a renewed ideal of democratic citizenship."⁶⁷

Today, Mother Jones does not regularly appear in history textbooks or high school curricula. However, she achieved important effects that we ought to recognize. Jones motivated people to join together and battle for a cause that was larger than themselves. She inspired them to risk their jobs, their possessions, their very lives to fight against their oppressors. As Fetherling explains, "Her forte was knowing how to arouse men to a fighting pitch, how to stir them to a realization of their plight and their power."⁶⁸ Jones's "working-class eloquence" may not have been civil or decorous by the standards of polite speech that prevailed at the time. But it did give hope to thousands of working-class citizens that their voices would finally be heard. It also helped to "break the stranglehold" of an "essentially republican" notion of eloquence and "displace it with a rough-and-tumble, democratic, extemporaneous, middle-class public speech."⁶⁹

The issues of social and economic injustice that Mother Jones addressed remain with us today. Most likely, there will always be people who lack the resources and power necessary to change their oppressive conditions. Jones's story demonstrates how even an "outsider" can become the voice of an oppressed group of people. At the same time, the rhetoric of Mother Jones raises questions about when "radical," even violent speech, might be necessary and justified.

In a public speaking course, you would never be taught to imitate Jones's rambling and indecorous style. Instead, you would be taught to organize your speeches carefully, make reasoned arguments, and show respect for your audience. Certainly you would never be taught to advocate violence, call your opponents names, or crudely mock your listeners. The fiery language of Jones's "working-class style" would be considered inappropriate in most formal speaking situations.

Yet there are times and situations that seem to invite radical speech. As rhetorical scholars have argued since at least the late 1960s, the "jolting, combative, and passionate" rhetoric of the agitator is sometimes necessary to call attention to social injustices or to motivate the oppressed.⁷⁰ As Scott and Smith contended, "civility and decorum" can sometimes serve as "masks for the preservation of injustice," and under those circumstances the rules of polite or civil discourse may serve only to protect the status quo.⁷¹ Mother Jones employed a radical rhetoric to attract attention to the miners' cause and to motivate them to stand up for their rights. Does that mean that her confrontational style of speech was justified and ethical? That question will continue to be a difficult one for students of rhetoric and social movements.

As rhetoric scholar Franklin S. Haiman has argued, there is an inevitable conflict between the rights of protestors and the rights and safety of other citizens. Generally, Haiman claims, we should resist efforts to replace "reason and democratic decision-making" with confrontational rhetoric, or what Haiman calls "the rhetoric of the streets."⁷² Yet rhetorical scholars remain reluctant to draw a clear line between persuasive and coercive rhetoric, nor is there agreement about when confrontational or even violent rhetoric might be justified. Mary "Mother" Jones represents yet another case study that forces us to reflect upon the rules of democratic deliberation and when, if ever, protestors might be justified in violating those rules. Clearly, Jones's agitative style proved effective in rallying workers and in making Jones herself a recognized (if unlikely) leader of the American working class. Yet whether she was justified in urging her followers to violence remains an open question.

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Notes

1 Mary Harris Jones, "Speech at a Public Meeting on the Steps of the Capitol Charleston, West Virginia," in *Speeches*, ed. Edward Steel, *The Speeches and Writings of Mother Jones* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988). Steel states that "all the speeches in this collection are or purport to be transcriptions taken by stenographers who were present on the occasions. . . . The coal operators of the Kanawha Valley hired a stenographer to take down Mother Jones's remarks at a series of public meetings in 1912, and the transcriptions were preserved both in manuscript and in public documents" (xiii). Here and elsewhere passages in "Speech at a Public Meeting on the Steps of the Capitol Charleston, West Virginia," are cited with reference to paragraph numbers in the text of the speech that accompanies this essay.

2 See Dale Fetherling, *Mother Jones the Miners' Angel: A Portrait* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974) 167; and Elliott J. Gorn, *Mother Jones: The Most Dangerous Woman in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 4.

3 See Gorn, *Mother Jones*, 3.

4 *Boston Herald*, Sept. 11, 1904 as cited in Fetherling, *Mother Jones the Miners' Angel*, 29.

5 Peter C. Michelson, "Mother Jones," *Delineator*, May 1915, 8.

6 See Mary Harris Jones, *The Autobiography of Mother Jones*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: Charles H. Kerr and Company, 1972). Jones claims to have been born in 1830. However, biographer Dale Fetherling notes that "a UMW *Journal* profile of April 25, 1901, and a biographical article in the *Wilkes-Barre Record* for March 30, 1901 give her birth date as 1843." Irish geological records do not provide a conclusive date of her birth. See Fetherling, *Mother Jones the Miners' Angel*, 228n5.

7 Biographical information reported here is found consistently in various sources including Fetherling, *Mother Jones the Miners' Angel*; Gorn, *Mother Jones*; Jones, *Autobiography*; Priscilla Long, *Mother Jones, Woman Organizer* (Cambridge, MA: Red Sun, 1978); and Edward Steel, ed., *The Correspondence of Mother Jones* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985).

8 Jones, *Autobiography*, 12.

9 *Ibid.*, 13.

10 *Ibid.*, 14.

11 *Chicago Evening Journal*, June 21, 1897, as cited in Gorn, *Mother Jones*. For discussion of how Mary Jones became Mother Jones, see Gorn, *Mother Jones*, 57-69.

12 Dorothy Adams, "Through West Virginia with Mother Jones," *Denver Republican*, August 11, 1901, 13 as cited in Gorn, *Mother Jones*, "Notes," 261.

13 Gorn, *Mother Jones*, 58.

14 *UMW Journal*, Aug. 6, 1903, 1 as cited in Fetherling, *Mother Jones the Miners' Angel*.

15 Jones, *Autobiography*, 73.

16 Lawrence R. Lynch, "The West Virginia Coal Strike," *Political Science Quarterly* 4 (1914): 626-663, 645.

17 *UMW Journal* September 26, 1912 as cited in Steel, *Correspondence*.

18 Fred Mooney, *Struggle in the Coal Fields*, edited by James W. Hess (Morgantown: West Virginia University Library, 1967).

19 See Fetherling, *Mother Jones the Miners' Angel*, 9-10.

20 See Steel, *Speeches*.

21 Information on the Industrial Revolution was obtained from Fetherling, *Mother Jones the Miners' Angel*; and Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003).

22 McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 15, 32.

23 See *Ibid.*

24 Information on the context of Jones's address was obtained from Fetherling, *Mother Jones the Miners' Angel*; Gorn, *Mother Jones*; Long, *Mother Jones, Woman Organizer*; and Jones, *Autobiography*.

25 Jones, *Autobiography*, 148.

26 See Fetherling, *Mother Jones the Miners' Angel*, 86.

27 See *Ibid.*, 85-86; and Ronald Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 134, 138, 153, 178-182.

28 *Ibid.*, 134, 138, 153, 178-182.

29 See Lynch, "The West Virginia Coal Strike," 632-633.

30 See Gorn, *Mother Jones*, 172.

31 See Gorn, *Mother Jones*; and Lynch, "The West Virginia Coal Strike," 641.

32 See Gorn, *Mother Jones*; and Fetherling, *Mother Jones the Miners' Angel*.

33 Mary Harris Jones, "Speech at a Public Meeting on the Levee Charleston, West Virginia," in *Speeches*, ed. Steel, 64.

34 *Ibid.*, 60.

35 Howard B. Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 1969), 27-29.

36 Fetherling, *Mother Jones the Miners' Angel*, 87.

37 Jones, *Autobiography*, 160.

38 *Ibid.*, 169.

39 Accounts of Jones's August 15, 1912 speech do not mention her immediate audience. Other than the miners, reports do not acknowledge any other audience members. However, Jones's address indicates that other observers were in the crowd. At one point in the speech, she states, "I want the businessmen to listen" (Jones, "Speech at a Public Meeting," 87).

40 Herbert W. Simons, "Requirements, Problems, and Strategies: A Theory of Persuasion for Social Movements," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56 (1970): 1-11, 8.

41 *Ibid.*, 8. 11.

42 Robert L. Scott and Donald K. Smith, "The Rhetoric of Confrontation," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 55 (1969): 1-8, 7.

43 Franklyn S. Haiman, "The Rhetoric of the Streets: Some Legal and Ethical Considerations," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 53 (1967): 99-114, 105.

44 See Martha Watson, *Lives of Their Own: Rhetorical Dimensions in Autobiographies of Women Activists* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), 3.

45 James Darsey, "Eugene Debs and American Class," in *Rhetoric and Reform in the Progressive Era: A Rhetorical History of the United States*, v. VI, ed. J. Michael Hogan (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2002), 253.

46 Charles J. Stewart, Craig Allen Smith, and Robert E. Denton, Jr., *Persuasion and Social Movements*, 4th ed (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 2001), 161-162.

47 Darsey, "Eugene Debs and American Class," 253-256.

48 See Mari Boor Tonn, "Militant Motherhood: Labor's Mary Harris 'Mother' Jones," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 82 (1996): 1-21, 3.

49 Mary Harris Jones, "Speech at a Convention of the United Mine Workers of America, Indianapolis, Indiana, Jan. 29, 1916" in *Speeches*, ed. Steel, 178.

50 Mary Harris Jones, "Letter to William Bauchop Wilson, Nov. 15, 1901" in *The Correspondence of Mother Jones*, ed. Steel, 16.

51 Fetherling, *Mother Jones the Miners' Angel*, 167.

52 *Ibid.*, 167. For discussion of the mother-centeredness of miners' families, see pages 167-169.

53 See Steel, *Speeches*.

54 Jones, "Speech at a Public Meeting on the Levee" in *Speeches*, ed. Steel, 60.

55 Tonn, "Militant Motherhood," 410, 423.

56 Mary Harris Jones, "Speech at the Convention of the United Mine Workers of America Indianapolis, Indiana," in *Speeches*, ed. Steel, 6.

57 Since Richard Gregg's 1971 essay, "The Ego-Function of the Rhetoric of Protest," scholars of rhetoric have examined the ways in which speakers use identification to garner support from social movement followers. Gregg's essay argued that one of the primary purposes of social movement rhetoric is to create and maintain "egos" or shared identities among movement participants. The rhetoric of protest, Gregg explained, largely functions to

allow movement leaders to establish their own identities and at the same time to shape the identities of their followers. Jones's use of the first-person plural served this purpose in that it allowed her to create an identity as one with the miners and to mold miners' identities into righteous victims who were assured success. See Richard Gregg, "'The Ego-Function of the Rhetoric of Protest,'" *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 4 (1971): 71-91.

58 Tonn, "Militant Motherhood," 414-415.

59 See Fetherling, *Mother Jones the Miners' Angel*, 169.

60 See Steel, *Speeches*.

61 James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 16-17.

62 Discussion of the power of narratives is prevalent within communication research. For seminal essays, see the work of Walter Fisher including: Walter R. Fisher, "Toward a Logic of Good Reasons," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 64 (1978): 376-384; "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument," *Communication Monographs* 51 (1984): 1-22; and "The Narrative Paradigm: An Elaboration," *Communication Monographs* 52 (1985): 347-367. Also see John Louis Lucaites and Celeste Michelle Condit, "Reconstructing Narrative Theory: A Functional Perspective," *Journal of Communication* 35 (1985): 90-108. For an example of an essay on the rhetorical function of narratives, see William F. Lewis, "Telling America's Story: Narrative Form and the Reagan Presidency," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73 (1987): 280-303.

63 Information about the events following Jones's speech was obtained from Fetherling, *Mother Jones the Miners' Angel*; Jones, *Autobiography*; Long, *Mother Jones, Woman Organizer*; and Gorn, *Mother Jones*.

64 Fetherling, *Mother Jones the Miners' Angel*, 92.

65 See Fetherling, *Mother Jones the Miners' Angel*, 103; and Lynch, "The West Virginia Coal Strike," 641.

66 *Miners Magazine*, Sept. 26, 1912, 1 as cited in Gorn, *Mother Jones*.

67 Gorn, *Mother Jones*, 302.

68 Fetherling, *Mother Jones the Miners' Angel*, 211.

69 Darsey, "Eugene Debs and American Class," 257.

70 Mary G. McEdward, "Agitative Rhetoric: Its Nature and Effect," *Western Speech* 32 (1968): 36-37. See also J. Michael Hogan and Dave Tell, "Demagoguery and Democratic Deliberation: The Search for Rules of Discursive Engagement," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 9 (2006): 479-487.

71 Robert L. Scott and Donald K. Smith, "The Rhetoric of Confrontation," 8.

72 Franklin S. Haman, "The Rhetoric of the Streets: Some Legal and Ethical Considerations," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 53 (1967): 99-114.