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Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Black Folk Pulpit

Keith D. Miller

Clearly, Clayborne Carson, Ralph E. Luker, and their staff at the Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers Project are engaged in the most painstakingly thorough and laudable investigation ever made into Martin Luther King, Jr.'s years as a graduate student.

The most important question that Carson and his colleagues raise is not why King plagiarized but how his magisterial language developed. Even the preliminary findings of the project help refute the fallacious answer offered by a squadron of King scholars.¹

Virtually an entire generation of researchers has repeatedly argued that King's intellectual development, ideas, and oratory grew from his philosophical and theological studies in graduate school. Biographers and academics have persistently claimed that King's reading of famous Euro-American philosophers (especially G. W. F. Hegel) and theologians (especially Walter Rauschenbusch, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Paul Tillich) inspired his thought and his language and thus the civil rights movement itself.

This view is wrong.

What is most striking about Carson's report is its dramatic demonstration of the *absence* of influence by well-known Western philosophers and theologians (whom I call the Great White Thinkers) on the mature King who led the civil rights movement. Surely Carson's evidence indicates that King's dissertation did not deeply engage his intellectual interests. Neither did several of his term papers. Moreover, he absolutely ignored the assumptions and rules about language that the university had patiently coached him to observe, including the bedrock rule of print culture: "Thou shall not use someone else's language without acknowledgment."

While the discovery by Carson and his colleagues has made headlines, we should not be surprised to learn that King's intellectual evolution and language have little to do with the largely abstruse conceptions of the Great White Thinkers. Instead, as I demonstrate in a new book, King's world view and discourse sprang from two major sources: the sermons of Harry Emerson Fosdick and other liberal white

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¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers Project, "The Student Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Summary Statement on Research," *Journal of American History*, 78 (June 1991).

preachers, and the African-American folk pulpit of King's father and grandfather, both of whom were folk preachers.² Though systematically scorned, ignored, patronized, or dismissed by most King researchers and most other students of religion, African-American folk religion shaped King more than any other influence.

Prevented from learning how to read and write, slaves developed a highly oral tradition of folk preaching. Black folk preachers could not own their sermons because they did not write them down. Instead, they borrowed sermons from each other on the assumption that everyone creates language and no one owns it. For example, "The Eagle Stirs Her Nest" and "Dry Bones in the Valley," two sermons King heard as a child, were initially delivered at least as early as the 1860s, have been recorded many times, and can still be heard in black churches.³ A large community shares those two sermons (and, for that matter, spirituals such as "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"), for only with the arrival of print have people come to view language as private property to be copyrighted, packaged, and sold as a commodity.

In the folk pulpit, one gains an authoritative voice by adopting the persona of previous speakers as one adapts the sermons and formulaic expressions of a sanctified tradition. Like generations of folk preachers before him, King often borrowed, modified, and synthesized themes, analogies, metaphors, quotations, illustrations, arrangements, and forms of argument used by other preachers. Like other folk preachers, King typically ended his oral sermons (and almost every major speech) by merging his voice with the lyrics of a spiritual, hymn, or gospel song.

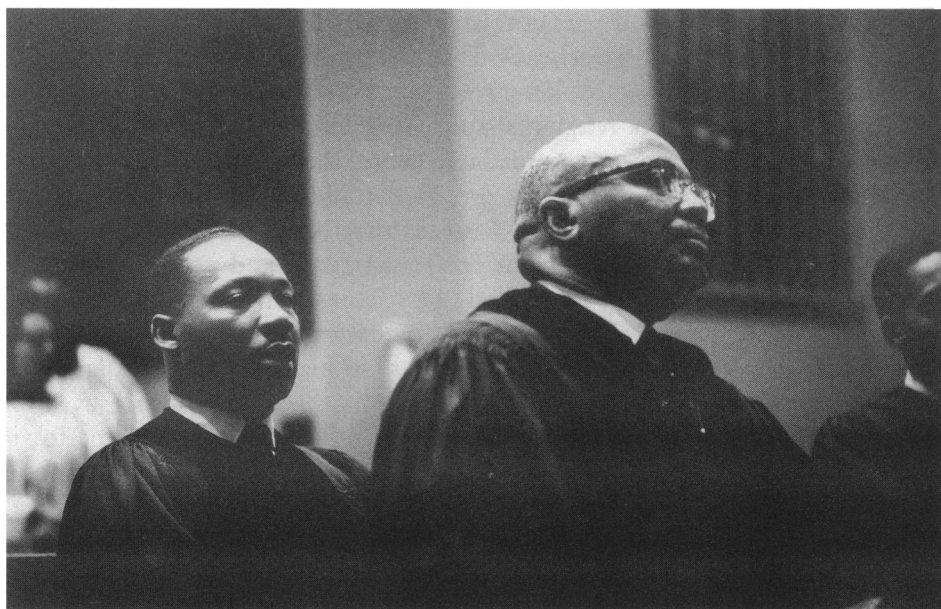
As a very young undergraduate, seminarian, and doctoral candidate, King ventured outside the universe of African-American orality to negotiate his way through the unfamiliar terrain of intellectualized print culture. Thoroughly schooled in folk homiletics, he resisted academic commandments about language and many ideas espoused by his professors and the Great White Thinkers. As part of his resistance, he began the process of creatively translating into print the folk procedures of voice merging and self-making. He had trouble at first. Composing graduate papers and a dissertation about erudite metaphysical topics, he wrote a peculiarly crabbed, stilted, self-conscious prose that does not sound remotely like the King his friends knew or the later King. (For that reason, his dissertation and other graduate papers have never before been published.)

Fortunately King escaped the confines of his professors' strange, artificial tongue and their ivory-tower theological formalism. After leaving the academy, he sounded exactly like himself as he seized Fosdick's and others' sermons for the purpose of transferring black demands for freedom into an idiom acceptable to his main audience—white listeners.

The King Project provides examples of how this process began. Discussing the first set of boxed excerpts, Carson explains that King "even adopted [Edgar S.] Brightman's first person pronoun" when King wrote: "We must grant freely, how-

² Keith D. Miller, *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Its Sources* (New York, 1991).

³ Bruce Rosenberg, *The Art of the American Folk Preacher* (New York, 1970), 28, 155–62, 200–208.



Martin Luther King, Jr., and Martin Luther King. © 1964 *Flip Schulke*.

ever, that final intellectual certainty about God is impossible.”⁴ Actually, King’s merging of his voice and identity with that of Brightman, a respected theologian, roughly resembles the practice of folk preacher E. O. S. Cleveland, who merged his voice with the lyrics of a popular gospel song:

THANK GOD, I Know How To Fly. Yes—I KNOW How To Fly.
Yes Yes—Yes—I KNOW HOW TO FLY. DO YOU KNOW HOW TO FLY? . . .

Some glad morning when this life is o’er, I’ll fly away
To a home on God’s celestial shore, I’ll fly away.⁵

The last two lines above and several concluding lines of Cleveland’s sermon form the lyrics of the song “I’ll Fly Away.” But who is the “I” of “THANK GOD, I Know How to Fly”? The “I” designates Cleveland, but this “I” becomes the narrative voice of “I’ll Fly Away” as Cleveland fuses his identity with the speaker of “I’ll Fly Away.” In roughly similar fashion, King practices voice merging when he merges his “we” with Brightman’s “we” and blends his narrative identity with that of Brightman.

King’s voice merging continued when he returned to the South and developed black preachers’ traditional message of deliverance into the central theme and over-

⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Place of Reason and Experience in Finding God,” [Sept. 13, 1949—Nov. 23, 1949], folder 17, box 112, Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers (Mugar Memorial Library, Boston University); cited in King Project, “Student Papers of Martin Luther King,” excerpts, set A; *ibid*.

⁵ E. O. S. Cleveland, *The Eagle Stirring Her Nest* (n.p., 1946) (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York, N.Y.), 71.

arching framework for the entire civil rights movement. He remained a folk preacher throughout his public career. In the final two sentences of his last speech, he thundered, "I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!" The last sentence forms the opening line of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," both a patriotic standard and a popular hymn. In King's speech, "mine eyes" designates King's eyes but also the eyes of the narrator of the song; the personal pronoun "mine" signifies both King and the narrator. Through this remarkable act of voice merging and self-making, King, like Cleveland, creates an authoritative, expansive self by merging his identity with that of the narrator of a religious song. King converges his voice and his identity not only with the narrator but also with Union soldiers who vocalized the lyrics as they walked into the Civil War and with every choir member and churchgoer who ever sang the words. In that speech and in countless previous addresses (including "I Have a Dream"), the mature King created a voice and a self by expertly fusing his persona with those of earlier selves sanctioned by hallowed religious and nationalist traditions.

Resisting his professors' rules about language and many notions of the Great White Thinkers, King crafted highly imaginative, persuasive discourse through the folk procedures of voice merging and self-making. Reanimating the slaves' world view, he prodded John F. Kennedy and most of white America to listen for the first time to the slaves' time-honored cry for racial equality. By doing so, he gave whites their best—and possibly last—chance to solve what had always been this nation's gravest and most tortuous problem: racial injustice. King's paradoxical ability to revive the words of others in order to become himself enabled the United States to begin the task of healing the grievous wound of racism. Voice merging kept Jefferson's dream alive.