

## VOICE MERGING AND SELF-MAKING: THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF "I HAVE A DREAM"

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"I Have a Dream" is a profoundly paradoxical speech. Martin Luther King, Jr. invokes a national past of Jefferson and Lincoln and embraces Old Testament prophets and Christianity as he presents an entire inventory of patriotic themes and images typical of Fourth of July oratory. Yet King devotes the first half of his address not to celebrating a dream but to cataloguing a nightmare, not to hailing the bounty of the present but to damning the horror of a status quo that demeans all black Americans. No other liberal or radical in this century has approached King's success in defining the stock motifs of nationalism and Biblical religion as demands for massive social change. How do we explain this success?

King scholars interpret King's ideas and persuasiveness mainly as reflections of what King's biographer Stephen Oates calls "theological erudition" gained in a white seminary and in his Ph.D. program at Boston University School of Theology (289).<sup>1</sup> For example, historian Harvard Sitkoff maintains, "[King's] training in systematic theology had left him with an appetite for transcendent ideas, for theoretical constructs"; according to Sitkoff, this training also exerted considerable force in shaping the civil rights revolution (60). At least two entire books, one by Kenneth Smith and Ira Zepp, another by John Ansbro, examine King's graduate studies course by course in an attempt to comprehend the development of King's politics, theology, and discourse. Claiming that King's doctoral curriculum allowed his mind to flourish far beyond the constraints and limitations imposed in his hometown of Atlanta, Donald Smith seems to speak for a number of King scholars in declaring, "Atlanta is a thousand miles from Boston, but for Martin Luther King the distance was measurable in intellectual light years" (43). Even that most painstaking scholar, David Garrow, whose richly detailed biography of King earned a Pulitzer Prize in 1986, implicitly accounts for King's rhetorical and political achievements in large measure as a function of his reading of Hegel, Marx, Thoreau, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr and other white thinkers.<sup>2</sup> And even King's friend, the distinguished black preacher and scholar Henry Mitchell, implies that, while King's delivery embodied the cadences of the black pulpit, the lion's share of his intellectual training derived from white academe (91).

This essay tacks in another direction. I maintain that King's persuasiveness stems not from ideas expounded at Boston University but from the typological epistemology of the black folk pulpit and from the methods of voice merging and self making that proceed from that epistemology. Instead of viewing King's thought and rhetoric as an outgrowth of Hegel's dialectic, Thoreau's dissent and Niebuhr's social analysis, I propose treating "I Have a Dream" as an updated expression of the *Weltanschauung* of American slaves. Marshalling this argument necessitates a consideration of the persistent themes and typology of the slaves, the practice of voice merging and self making in black folk preaching, King's general relationship to the folk pulpit, and voice merging and self making in "I Have a Dream."

### EPISTEMOLOGY OF SLAVE RELIGION

Noting the vividness and immediacy of a black sermon, one scholar remarks the preacher's ability to talk "to his congregation about Moses and Daniel at mid-day as though he had eaten breakfast with them" (quoted in Pipes 141). This immediacy is also apparent in the spiritual that asks: "Didn't the Lord

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Oates (23-41, 46-47, 56), William Miller (26-35), and Zepp.

<sup>2</sup> Garrow does so in his biography, *Bearing the Cross*. However, essays by Garrow and Cone argue that scholars have substantially underestimated King's debt to the black church.

deliver Daniel?/ Why can't He deliver me?" Lawrence Levine explains this quality of identification as an expression of what Mircea Eliade terms sacred time:

. . . for [slaves and other] peoples in traditional societies religion is a means of extending the world spatially upward so that communication with the other world becomes ritually possible and extending it temporally backward so that the paradigmatic acts of the gods and mythical ancestors can be continually re-enacted and indefinitely recoverable. (31-32.)

[Slaves] extended the boundaries of the restrictive universe backward until it fused with the world of the Old Testament and upward until it became one with the world beyond. (32-33.)

According to Frederick Douglass (159-160) and many subsequent observers, slaves affirmed the inseparability of the sacred and the secular through the double meaning of spirituals, which pointed both to salvation in heaven and to freedom on earth. Slaves strongly identified with the Hebrews suffering from bondage in Egypt and embraced what Eugene Genovese terms "a pervasive theme of deliverance" (252), confident that the God who liberated the Hebrews would eventually unlock their own shackles.<sup>3</sup> As Genovese explains, slaves often blended Moses and Jesus "into the image of a single deliverer, at once this-worldly and otherworldly" and "associated Moses with all great historical events, including the most recent" (252).

This telescoping manifests what can only be termed a typological view of history, typology constituting, in Linda Peterson's words, "a system of interpretation in which characters, events, and sacred rituals of the Old Testament are treated as prefigurations of Christ, but in popular practice the types were also applied to the lives of individual Christians" (304). In George Landau's view, the advantage of this system is that it organizes all of history and provides access to the central meaning of human experience; furthermore, one may employ typology to place an audience in what Landau describes as a "completely ordered world" (40).

## VOICE MERGING AND SELF MAKING IN BLACK FOLK PREACHING

In the black folk pulpit ministers often create their own identities not through original language but through identifying themselves with a hallowed tradition. In his MLA award-winning study, *The Art of the American Folk Preacher*, Bruce Rosenberg declares that experienced pastors borrow homiletic material from many sources, including the sermons of their predecessors and peers. Some sermons are ubiquitous and long-lived: one began at least as early as 1868 and was still preached during the 1960s and 1970s (Lyell 135-136; Rosenberg 28, 155-162; Franklin); another has been recorded by at least four different preachers; and a third by at least seven different speakers, not to mention the occasions these floating homilies appealed to ministers who lacked recording studios (Rosenberg 28-29). Pastors profit from their audiences' familiarity with sermons, for familiarity enables churchgoers to participate more freely through speaking, clapping, gesturing or dancing (Rosenberg 105).

Preachers also engage in voice merging at the end of their sermons. Like their slave predecessors (Genovese 267-268), contemporary black preachers often conclude their sermons by chanting and then singing. (Such a finale is appropriate because a hymn of invitation to join the church customarily follows the sermonizing, the ritual of invitation serving as the climax of the worship experience.) For example, I once heard a black Baptist minister finish his presentation by stating:

Some people sing because they're in the shower.  
Some people sing because they're a movie star.  
Some sing because they've got a record contract.  
But not me.

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<sup>3</sup> See also Levine 30-55 and Raboteau 250-251.

I sing because I'm happy.  
I sing because I'm free.

Then he chanted:

If His eye is on the sparrow,  
Then I know he watches me.

At that point the congregation joined him in singing the lines of his chant, which constitute the words of a beloved hymn. Consider this question: When the preacher declares, "I sing because I'm happy," who is the "I" of the sentence? The "I" is obviously the homilist himself, the person who has delivered God's Word. But the "I" is also the narrative voice of the hymn. In addition the "I" is each person in the pew who identifies with the sentiments of the lyrics and who vocalizes the lyrics. The "I" is also the voice of each churchgoer who sang the hymn in years and decades gone by, including those who are now dead. The "I" of the pastor merges with the narrative voice of the hymn and with past and present Christians who sing or have sung it. The minister creates a self as his identity converges with those of others. A typological epistemology makes this convergence possible by affirming that knowable and repeatable types of human experience recur from generation to generation. Using the lyrics of spirituals, gospel songs and hymns, a black Baptist clergyman creates a self as his identity converges with those of others.<sup>4</sup>

## KING AND THE FOLK PULPIT

King's maternal grandfather, Rev. A. D. Williams, was a whooping and moaning folk preacher who doubled as a political activist. He organized a boycott that put a racist newspaper out of business, defeated a city bond proposal that ignored black schools and served as the chief NAACP fundraiser in Atlanta (King, Sr. 85-87, 100-101; Watson). Establishing himself in the folk pulpit, Martin Luther King, Sr. began his homiletic career when he could scarcely read and write; like his father-in-law, he agitated for social change, leading a 1935 voting rights march to Atlanta's city hall and supporting the demands of black teachers for salaries comparable to those of white teachers (King, Sr. 98-101, 104-107). Preaching in the church King co-pastored with his father the last eight years of his life, both Williams and King, Sr. worked to save souls for heaven and to achieve racial equality on earth.

King's initiation in the folk pulpit occurred when he attended church every Sunday as a child until becoming an ordained minister before leaving home for seminary. Although King scholars frequently portray his mind as a virtual *tabula rasa* before his matriculation at white graduate schools, King's rhetoric and leadership do not comport with such an interpretation.

Rather, his political crusades, ability to revive the Hebrew/Pharaoh typology, delivery, style and voice merging all reflect the black folk pulpit. Devoting his life to the struggle against segregation begun by his father and grandfather, he updates the identification of slaves with the Hebrew people by habitually labelling his segregation opponents as Pharaohs; by repeatedly preaching "Death of Evil on the Seashore," a sermon that celebrates the Israelites' escape from Egypt and the drowning of Pharaoh's army; by being called a "black Moses" by many (including white journalists); and, in his final speech, "I See the Promised Land," by explicitly identifying himself with Moses in his opportunity to gaze upon the Promised Land but not to enter it. In his many sermons and speeches (including "I Have a Dream"), his delivery consistently features two time-honored trademarks of black sermonizing: first, a calm-to-storm manner that begins in measured, professorial phrases and swings gradually to a powerfully emotional climax; and second, call-and-response interaction with listeners that sends and returns an electrical charge back and forth between pulpit and pew (Harrison and Harrison). His use of a cornucopia of schemes and tropes manifests a common practice in the folk pulpit, where schemes and tropes often help both preachers and churchgoers to remember the content of sermons. King also concluded not only sermons but virtually every major speech

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<sup>4</sup> During King's lifetime and before, the vast majority of black Baptist clergy were male. Recently, black women have begun to don Baptist pulpit robes.

and many other addresses by merging his voice with the lyrics of hymns. And, as I explain elsewhere, he often borrowed sermons from other preachers.<sup>5</sup>

## VOICE MERGING AND SELF-MAKING IN "I HAVE A DREAM"

According to Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, "A stereotyped metaphorical expression can come to life again in the mouth of certain speakers because it is presumed that, when they use it, it cannot have its usual banal meaning" (407). I claim that voice merging, self making, and the typological epistemology underlying those practices enabled King to reanimate stereotyped expressions in "I Have a Dream"--the same expressions that other liberals and radicals have failed to reawaken, in part because their speeches lacked typological resonance and did not evoke any Eliadean sense of sacred time. I will examine three instances of voice merging in King's oration, the first involving Amos, the second Isaiah, and the third, "My country tis of thee."

### Amos

Consider the first instance:

There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, "When will you be satisfied?"  
 We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality.  
 We cannot be satisfied as long as our bodies . . . cannot find lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities . . .  
 We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro in Mississippi cannot vote. . . .  
 No . . . we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream. (218-219.)

Who are the "we" of this anaphora? The devotees of civil rights--the muted group of disenfranchised blacks whom King represents. In this speech more than any other, King succeeds in articulating the needs and demands of an oppressed people and by doing so makes visible those who are invisible and renders powerful those who are powerless. The national audience understands King's voice as the voice of millions of black people.

But who constitutes the "we" of the last sentence? Again, the devotees of civil rights because this "we" concludes the series of lines beginning with "We can never be satisfied. . . ." But this line harnesses the most famous exclamation of the Old Testament prophets--Amos's cry, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream!" So Amos is also speaking here as King merges Amos's persona with his own. This union reflects back to the preceeding sentences of the anaphora: The "we" who cannot be satisfied until justice reigns are the same "we" who seek lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. The typologically identical voices of King and Amos call for justice to roll down like waters and for Congress to build irrigation ditches by mandating desegregation in all motels and hotels. King lends an unimpeachably authoritative tone to the aspirations of a muted group by enlisting Amos as a spokesman for their hopes.

But isn't King merely employing a looser comparison, some version of analogy? No. If Christians treated the Bible as a source of analogy, the Christian worldview would never have proven persuasive; for, as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca explain, analogy functions as "an unstable form of argument" (393) and

<sup>5</sup> Although King's book of sermons, *Strength to Love*, omits these lyrics, they are present in scores of transcripts of King's oral sermons. These transcripts are available in the archives of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta. For speeches ending in lyrics, see, for example, "Give Us the Ballot," "Birth of a New Age," "Our God Is Marching On," "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," and "I See the Promised Land."

Time after time King borrowed homiletic material from preachers. Although he occasionally borrowed non-homiletic material, he virtually never borrowed from the philosophers and theologians cited by King scholars.

refutation of an analogy by extension is "nearly always possible" (387). Why? In the case of analogy, either set of terms is susceptible to challenge; by contrast, in the case of typology, the first set of terms may not be challenged because it is Biblical and Biblical truth serves as its own warrant and proof. Furthermore, believers view Biblical truth as applying necessarily to the present. The task of the Christian--in this context King--is simply to discern the proper correspondence between Biblical and contemporary circumstance. This divinely ordained form of truth-seeking is much harder to refute than the straightforward use of analogy.

## Isaiah

The second instance of voice merging occurs in the most famous passage of King's oratory:

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that my four little children will one day . . . not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together (219).

Who is the "I" of this anaphora? The "I" is surely King, a man with four young children who is delivering a speech. But who is the "I" of the last sentence? This dream is not simply King's dream. Isaiah initially sketched the eschatological scene of valleys exalted, mountains laid low and rough places made plain. Jesus reaffirmed this prophet's powerfully imaginative conception by quoting this example of Isaiah's visionary language. Then Handel enshrined Isaiah's imagery in the words of *The Messiah*. Uniting his persona with those of Amos, Isaiah, Jesus and the narrative voice of *The Messiah*, King constructs an identity by fitting himself into a set of prearranged, overlapping forms. Underlying this process of self-making is the typological epistemology of the folk pulpit, specifically the assumption that personality reasserts itself in readily understandable and invariable patterns that govern all human history, patterns exemplified in scripture, music, liturgy, prayers and sermons.

And joining King's choir of the prophets, Jesus, the narrative voice of *The Messiah*, and the muted group is the most distinguished of all possible members, God Almighty. King orchestrates the divine voice into his ensemble through several methods. First, his status as a Baptist minister helps to generate such a voice. (Six years earlier King literally donned his pulpit robe to speak to a crowd of twenty-five thousand people gathered at the same spot on the Washington mall in a Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom organized to demand the right to vote.) Second, his reiteration of Biblical revelation expresses God's Word because Jews and Christians insist that God speaks directly through the mouths of the prophets and, in the case of Christians, through the pronouncements of Jesus Christ, who is God incarnate.

Third, King's use of the vocal dynamics and anaphoric style of the black pulpit reinforces and heightens the religious overtones of the address. Significantly, King begins his oration by invoking patriotic authority, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Emancipation Proclamation. Religion does not enter the speech overtly until Amos speaks at the halfway point. Engaging in the customary practice of folk preachers, King begins to accentuate rhythm and vocal contrasts halfway through his presentation. When the words of Amos emerge, so do the cadences of the black pulpit. At the same point King begins to pack series of anaphoras against each other, seven series in all. King's chockablock use of this scheme recalls the abundant schemes of the highly oral (and therefore somewhat formulaic) tradition of black folk homiletics.

Through his catalogue of an American nightmare in the first half of the oration, King maintains that the finest secular presences, including Jefferson and Lincoln, have failed miserably. The "architects of our republic," he declares, offered a "promissory note" to all Americans, guaranteeing the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; but for black people the note proved "a bad check," a check "marked insufficient funds" (217). By replacing secular authority with divine authority in the second half of "I Have

a Dream," King suggests that God Almighty, whose patience has finally expired, will now overrule secular forces and install justice without delay. If God ordains justice to roll down like waters, the flood must eventually cross the Mason-Dixon line. Why? Because goodness inevitably asserts itself, even in the secular world, for in the end the sacred and secular worlds are inseparable.

Such a conception of good and evil revives and reiterates the holistic vision of slaves, not the principle of synthesis valorized by Hegel, the complexities of love dissected by Anders Nygren, the theological abstractions beloved by Tillich, the ambiguities embraced by Niebuhr or other notions and precepts of white philosophers and theologians repeatedly alleged to have empowered King to direct a civil rights revolution.<sup>6</sup>

### "My Country, Tis of Thee"

The final examples of voice merging and self making happen, not surprisingly, at the end of "I Have a Dream." The civil rights leader apparently develops his conclusion by adjusting and honing a passage from Archibald Carey. Consider the final portion of Carey's 1952 address to the Republican National Convention:

We, Negro Americans, sing with all loyal Americans:

My country, tis of thee,

Sweet land of liberty,

Of thee I sing.

Land where my fathers died,

Land of the Pilgrims' pride,

From every mountain side

Let freedom ring!

That's exactly what we mean--from every mountain side, let freedom ring. Not only from the Green Mountains and the White Mountains of Vermont and New Hampshire; not only from the Catskills of New York; but from the Ozarks in Arkansas, from the Stone Mountain in Georgia, from the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia--let it ring not only for the minorities of the United States, but for . . . the disinherited of all the earth--may the Republican Party, under God, from every mountain side, LET FREEDOM RING! (153-154)

Through voice merging Carey harnesses "America the Beautiful" as an agent not for self-satisfaction but for radical political change, uniting his identity with the patriotic narrative voice of our unofficial national anthem. Largely preoccupied with King's training in white graduate schools, King scholars ignore Carey. Yet King's peroration adapts and refines Carey's visionary proclamation:

This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning:

My country, tis of thee,

Sweet land of liberty,

Of thee I sing.

Land where my fathers died,

Land of the pilgrims' pride,

From every mountain side

Let freedom ring!

So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire.

Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York.

Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania. . . .

<sup>6</sup> If knowledge of Euro-American thought equipped one to guide a movement for racial justice, one wonders why Tillich, Niebuhr, and King's professors of philosophy did not lead the revolution themselves. They failed to do so because their philosophy and theology did not point toward a massive political undertaking.

Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia.  
 Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee.  
 Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill in Mississippi.  
 From every mountain side, let freedom ring (219-220).

Note that the "Let freedom ring" sequence seems to continue "America the Beautiful." This extension is both stylistic and metaphorical. King employs the last three words he (and Carey) quoted from the song to establish his concluding anaphora, "Let freedom ring." The extension is metaphorical as well, for both "America the Beautiful" and King's oration compare freedom to a mighty bell whose peal echoes across every mountain in the country. The effect of King's stylistic and metaphorical repetition is to add another verse to the anthem as he merges his voice with that of "America the Beautiful": The "my" of "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" refers to King as well as to the narrative voice of the song.

But that's not all. Hailing Carey's utopian future, King envisions a day when Americans will dismantle social barriers and merge voices and identities by singing "America the Beautiful." King simultaneously engages in voice merging with the lyrics of the anthem and reflects on the possibility of massive voice merging that would collapse all racial distinctions.

In his final sentence King reinforces this entire rhetorical process by quoting yet another source:

... when we allow freedom to ring...from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children--Black men and white men, Jews and gentiles, Protestants and Catholic, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual:

Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last! (220).

Again King projects a future when brotherhood triumphs over racial and religious separation; where identities converge; and where the typological epistemology of the black folk pulpit reigns, enabling every American to merge voices and thereby to create a self and a nation.<sup>7</sup>

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