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# AFTERWORD

**A**fter *Voice of Deliverance* was first published, Clayborne Carson and his team of editors issued the first three volumes of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers Project, an extremely important and ambitious effort to print hundreds of unpublished documents related to King. The editors have done a superb job of assembling, identifying, and organizing these materials.

The introductory essay to the first volume provides valuable new information about King's great-grandfather the slave preacher Willis Williams, King's grandfather A.D. Williams, and King's father. The editors tell us much more than we knew previously about A.D. Williams's substantive leadership in local, state, and national affairs of the National Baptist Convention and the NAACP. A.D. Williams breathed, preached, and lived the Social Gospel.

The first volume of the King Papers Project includes a previously unavailable speech that illuminates and illustrates King's debt to African American traditions. At age fifteen, King won an oratory contest by delivering this eloquent address, "The Negro and the Constitution."

As Dave Barboza notes, "The Negro and the Constitution" strikingly resembles "I Have a Dream." In both speeches, King condemned racial injustice by citing the same authorities—the Bible, the Declaration of Independence, and the Emancipation Proclamation. In "The Negro and the Constitution" King saluted Marian Anderson for breaking racial barriers in 1939 when she sang "America" ("My country 'tis of thee") and spirituals at a massive protest at the Lincoln Memorial. In 1963 Anderson returned to sing at the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington. Of course, King concluded the March on Washington by delivering "I Have a Dream." In keeping with Anderson's triumph in 1939, King finished "I Have a Dream" by merging his voice with the lyrics of "America" and by quoting a spiritual. He closed "The Negro and the Constitution" and "I Have a Dream" with the same vision of a utopia that would arise after the demise of racism.

By the time King delivered "The Negro and the Constitution" in 1944, none of these techniques were new. All of them—including the appeals to the Bible, the Declaration, and the Emancipation Proclamation; the use of "America"; and the concluding utopian vision—appear in the jeremiads of Frederick Douglass, Francis Grimke, William Crogman, Ida B. Wells, and other African American leaders. Many of these speakers combined the appeals, just as King did in "The Negro and the Constitution" and "I Have a Dream."

Most telling, King wielded the appeals movingly at age fifteen, before he went to college.

The first two volumes of the King Papers Project also feature the single extant essay that King wrote at Morehouse College and a large number of essays written during his years at Crozer Theological Seminary and Boston University. King wrote these papers—the vast majority of which include plagiarized passages—in the highly stilted academic style that his professors adored. It is difficult to believe that anyone as eloquent as King could ever have written prose as tortured as some of these papers are. But he did. And his teachers rewarded him for it.

If one judges from this substantial body of King's graduate essays, most of his graduate professors (especially at Crozer) appear to have retarded his eloquence rather than enhanced it. Certainly King's essays about ancient Sumerian cosmogony, the Babylonian god Marduk, and Zoroastrian mystery cults have virtually nothing to do with the civil rights movement.



Instead of meandering through the philosophical marsh of these student essays in search of King's authentic ideas—a feat attempted by Eugene Genovese—I suggest another approach.

When King arrived at Crozer, he found himself, for the first time, surrounded largely by white people. He adapted so well that he graduated at the head of his class, won a special award, and was accepted as a PhD student at Boston University.

King did so by developing what, in a famous passage in *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. DuBois calls "double-consciousness" or "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others." DuBois adds, "One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings."

For the benefit of his professors, King created the congenial, bright persona of a conscientious student responsive to his professors' ultraliberal views on the Bible and Christian doctrine. In Fall 1949, adapting to his professors' extreme doctrinal liberalism, he even wrote a paper that denied the physical resurrection of Christ—a core Christian doctrine whose "authenticity," he claimed, lacks "external evidence" and "is found wanting."

But did he actually believe that?

In the previous summer and in following summer he preached repeatedly at his father's church in Atlanta. It is impossible to think that he stood in the pulpit of Ebenezer Baptist Church and announced that the dead Christ stayed buried forever. Had he done so, he would have been immediately and permanently expelled from Ebenezer Church and all other Baptist circles. The same fate would have awaited him had he interpreted the Bible as folklore in any of the numerous sermons he delivered during his years as a graduate student at Crozer and Boston. Such ostracism never happened because he never challenged Baptist orthodoxy from the pulpit. Indeed, all evidence suggests that, in his sermons and in the worship services that he led, King consistently upheld black Baptist doctrines—from his first sermon to his last.

Even though King's Crozer papers seldom featured substantive arguments, the papers regularly earned grades so high that he graduated at the top of his class. How did that happen? For many of the papers (including the one about Christ never rising from the tomb), King relied on a strategy familiar to college students: currying favor with professors by telling them exactly what they want to hear. His papers received high grades mainly because he



impressed his professors in person and because his papers echoed their opinions. (One can determine their views in part by reading their articles and books, including those published before King appeared in their classes.)

Outside the purview of his Crozer professors, King manifested another identity, much of which existed, in DuBois's terms, "behind the veil"—or outside whites' eyesight.

As Lewis Baldwin explains, King always loved Southern, African American cooking. Bringing along their hearty appetites, he and other black seminarians often relaxed at the home of J. Pius Barbour, an African American minister and editor of *National Baptist Voice*, a publication of the National Baptist Convention. In a letter to his mother, King described these visits: "I eat dinner at Barbors home quite often. He is full of fun, and he has one of the best minds of anybody I have ever met." Barbour regularly provoked listeners with his extremely vivid and ardent opinions. (For example, in a 1955 letter to King, he breezily dismissed a major theologian: "Tillich is all wet. There is no 'being-itself.'") Richard Lischer notes that King and his fellow seminarians relished their intellectual exchanges with Barbour so much that, with smiles on their faces, they dubbed his household "Barbour University."

During King's years at Crozer, Barbour never officially taught a course at the seminary. Further, the Crozer curriculum encompassed Mahayana Buddhism and the Eleatic School of Greek philosophy, but not black America. In the town of Chester, Pennsylvania, the nearby but separate physical locations of Crozer Seminary and Barbour University suggest the African American "double-consciousness" or "twoness" described by DuBois and manifest in the lives of the black seminarians.

Outside Barbour University and inside Crozer, what did King learn? He matured as a person, probably in part from the friendships extended by certain professors, most notably George Washington Davis. At Crozer he almost certainly read Harry Emerson Fosdick and other leading homilists in earnest. Rather than retarding King's eloquence, these preachers increased it.

During his years at Boston University, King maintained his African American identity by preaching in black churches in New York City, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C. He served as an apprentice to William Hester, an African American minister in Boston. King's roommate at Boston, Phillip Lenud, told Lewis



Baldwin that King learned from Howard Thurman and respected him. At Boston, King and other African American students organized a Dialectical Society and held meetings to dissect philosophical and theological issues.

Included in the second volume of the King Papers Project, King's papers at Boston University also contain plagiarized passages and also repeat his professors' views. Thoughtful ideas, however, appear more often in these papers than in the earlier ones. Substantive argumentation sometimes substitutes for his previous, encyclopedia-like summaries of famous tomes. While King's dissertation includes standard theological prose, big portions of it feature plagiarized passages and the arid, mind-numbing style that he practiced at Crozer.

During a 1954 visit to Detroit—while in the middle of writing his dissertation—King delivered his earliest surviving sermon, "Rediscovering Lost Values." Patricia Larsen Wilson notes that, despite King's academic training, this vibrant and outstanding sermon features enthusiastic callbacks from African American listeners; a simple, broadly inclusive theme with ample development and repetition; and memorable phrases repeated again and again and again—all earmarks of folk preaching.

"Rediscovering Lost Values" is dramatically unlike King's academic essays and dissertation. Not only do the vocabulary and sentence structure differ hugely but so does the arrangement. The recursive form of the folk sermon propels King over and over to revisit the same theme, often with the same simple phrases. DuBois's notion of "double-consciousness" or "twoness" is the best available theory to explain the large discrepancy between a dutifully dry, sometimes erudite dissertation and a folk sermon that ignites a black congregation.

The third volume of the King Papers Project offers a magnificent set of documents that vividly evoke the yearlong struggle of the Montgomery bus boycott. While recent memoirs by Robert Graetz and Solomon Seay add to our understanding of the boycott, their books pale before JoAnn Robinson's indispensable *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*. For the initial decision to boycott, the little-known Robinson and her Women's Political Council deserve more credit than anyone else, including Rosa Parks and King.

During King's leadership of the almost flawless Montgomery



crusade, any possible remaining impact of his professors' unorthodoxy disappeared during a late-night epiphany in his kitchen. This experience—whose importance David Garrow wisely stresses in his stellar biography of King—absolutely confirmed his African American Baptist orthodoxy.

The boycott surprised many Northern white intellectuals, who, as Walter Jackson explains, never anticipated a vigorous African American grassroots campaign. Tony Badger declares that Southern white moderates were generally ineffectual before, during, and after the boycott.

But, as the third volume of the King Papers Project demonstrates, many pacifists, radicals, churches, and unions in the North leaped to support the Montgomery protest. Stymied by the Dixiecrats' choke hold on the United States Senate, they immediately recognized the campaign as a crack in the stout wall of Southern segregation.

The boycott succeeded partly because many of its national supporters—black and white—had spent years pondering Gandhi. In a valuable book, Sudarshan Kapur documents a growing awareness of Gandhi in the African American community that occurred decades before Rosa Parks's arrest. In 1931 DuBois praised Gandhi. The *Pittsburgh Courier* and other African American newspapers eagerly tracked Gandhi's career, publishing numerous articles about nonviolence and civil disobedience in India. In 1931 a *Courier* editorial writer openly longed for an African American Gandhi. A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin joined Howard Thurman and others in pondering how to implement Gandhi's methods in the United States.

As Kapur notes, in 1943 the globetrotting E. Stanley Jones spoke at Randolph's Institute on Nonviolence. Sometimes called "the greatest Christian missionary since Paul," the charismatic and indefatigable Jones lived in India and repeatedly tried in person to convert Gandhi to Christianity. Jones might as well have tried to convert a stone wall. Not only did Gandhi, a devout Hindu, refuse Christian baptism, he also wrote an entire book attacking all missionaries and imploring them to leave India immediately. Refusing to listen, Jones continued to proselytize every available Indian. Jones also defied Gandhi by writing best-selling books that baptized Gandhi against his will. In *Mahatma Gandhi: An Interpretation*, Jones explicitly rejected the notion that nonviolence and civil disobedience were Hindu activities—a position that would



have shocked Gandhi and millions of his followers. Instead, Jones claimed, nonviolence and civil disobedience were innately Christian pursuits.

Albeit illogical, Jones's decision to Christianize Gandhi helped prepare Americans for the Gandhian/Christian civil rights struggle in the United States. Like Fosdick and Thurman, Jones contributed mightily to keeping the pacifist flame alive in America despite the horrors of World War II. He also influenced King, who often repeated a passage on nonviolence that Jones included in *Mahatma Gandhi: An Interpretation*.

Jones's autobiography provides the only record of his single encounter with King. According to Jones, when they met at a church convention, King thanked Jones for writing *Mahatma Gandhi: An Interpretation* and for helping King understand Gandhi.

For Jones, for the Gandhians from Howard University, and for King, Gandhi was always a Christian. Gandhi's Hinduism never mattered.

The Montgomery bus boycott also succeeded because liberal white churches had not entirely forgotten race. In *The Social Gospel in Black and White* Ralph Luker revises our understanding of the white Social Gospel by explaining Washington Gladden's and Walter Rauschenbusch's attention to race. These two leaders protested racism far more often than I thought when I wrote *Voice of Deliverance*. (Because this is a reprint edition, not a revised edition, of *Voice of Deliverance*, I was not able to change the substance of the text.)

For King's years after Montgomery, the most important recent work is Andrew Young's autobiographical *An Easy Burden*. Young writes very little about the last twenty-five years of his own illustrious life, concentrating instead on his time with King, whom Young portrays from the Albany campaign of 1962 until the assassination. Although Young's memoir is not startling, he, like Ralph Abernathy, provides a valuable inside perspective. He candidly explains tensions among SCLC leaders. He also reveals the warm side of King that often emerged in long, late-night conversations in hotel rooms. Both philosophical and humorous, these dialogues seem an extension of Barbour University, with King playing the loving, bantering role of Barbour. Young also reveals, sometimes unwittingly, the undeniable sexism of SCLC, which significantly damaged the movement by denigrating the gigantic contributions of such women as Dorothy Cotton and Septima Clark.



In a significant investigation of King's sermons, Richard Lischer emphatically contrasts King's radical final years to his previous career. Instead of appealing to America's civil religion—a stance first taken in "The Negro and the Constitution" and perfected in "I Have a Dream"—King increasingly became a Hebrew prophet bent on denouncing America's gross failures. Although Lischer mischaracterizes my views, his main argument is convincing. He examines King's later sermons in much more detail than I do. Ed Appel supplies a strong essay that accounts for King's late radicalism by applying Kenneth Burke's conception of comic frames and tragic frames.

Though Greg Moses and others keep trying, efforts to study King as a philosopher still have not succeeded.

However, Frederick Sunnemark, a Swedish scholar, is now writing a dissertation about the philosophical paradoxes (or contradictions) of King's rhetoric and their energizing effect on his listeners and readers. Sunnemark's work is promising. (Also worth reading is Richard King's philosophical exploration of the movement.)

While James Cone's *Martin and Malcom and America* remains easily the best book-length examination of the complex relationship between King and Malcolm X, John Lucaites and Celeste Condit supply an extremely illuminating essay on King's and Malcolm X's contrasting conceptions of equality.

In provocative essays, Richard Johannesen and Rebecca Howard investigate the relationship between King's language and general issues of intertextuality and plagiarism.

As well as publishing a valuable study of civil rights in Louisiana, Adam Fairclough provides the best short book about King's whole career. Offering a useful critique of King's recent reputation, Fairclough argues that, in death, King has become everything to everyone. Pacifists cherish his stout opposition to violence. Socialists prize his tendency toward socialism. African Americans embrace him. Conservatives enshrine him as a great exemplar of the American civil religion that he invoked so successfully. One could add that advocates of Affirmative Action now hail him as a proponent for their cause (which he endorsed in *Why We Can't Wait*) while opponents of Affirmative Action illogically cite him as a supporter of their position.

Strangely, while many Americans want to use King's image as



a talisman to eliminate racism, many seem equally determined to ignore violence and poverty. Like A.D. Williams, King maintained that racism, violence, and poverty are inextricably intertwined. These "triple evils," he insisted, must be attacked together. He made this argument in his Nobel Prize Lecture and hammered it during the last year of his life as he denounced the Vietnam War and organized the Poor People's Campaign.

Unfortunately, this message has gone largely unheeded.  
One can always hope that someday it will be heard.

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