

Epistemology of a Drum Major: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Black Folk Pulpit

We do not understand the persuasiveness of Martin Luther King, Jr., our most important twentieth-century rhetor, because we do not understand his relationship to the black folk pulpit. This failure has occurred for two reasons. First, rhetorical scholars and theorists largely neglect black preaching, leaving the folk pulpit to the attention of folklorists, who analyze metrical phrasing and oral formulas but who generally bypass larger theological, epistemological, rhetorical, and political considerations.¹ Second, while everyone realizes that King's delivery and some of his stylistic devices (such as anaphora) stem from his black Baptist heritage, King scholars routinely ignore larger dimensions of his discourse that clearly reflect his training in the folk pulpit. Instead of investigating his intellectual and rhetorical roots in the black church, they mistakenly ascribe his ideas and his persuasiveness to his formal education in a white seminary and in a Ph.D. program at Boston University School of Theology.²

Actually, King's persuasiveness derives in large measure from his ability to adapt distinctive rhetorical procedures and epistemological assumptions of black folk preaching. I will explore King's relationship to the folk pulpit by examining slave theology and epistemology, the rhetoric and epistemology of the folk pulpit, and King's adept use of that rhetoric and that epistemology in several addresses. Then I will analyze in some detail "The Drum Major Instinct," a late King sermon whose taped conclusion was played at his funeral and heard by an estimated one hundred and twenty million people listening on television (Oates 497).

Slave Theology and Epistemology

Inasmuch as the tradition of the black folk pulpit began during slavery, we would do well to comprehend the universe of slave religion. Lawrence Levine explains this universe as a commodious and expansive one that encompassed both heaven and earth and that merged the Biblical past with the present. Slaves sympathized with the struggles of Daniel, Joshua, Noah, Jonah, and Moses; strongly identified with the Israelites held captive in Egypt and later in Babylon; and treated these figures as contemporaries. One popular spiritual asked:

He delivered Daniel from de lion's den,
Jonah from de belly of de whale,
And de Hebrew children from de fiery fumace,
And why not every man? (Levine 51)

According to John Lovell, slaves valued Daniel, who refused to bow to kings and lions because his life served as "proof that all men can resist slavery and be delivered" (260). Blacks dissolved geographical and historical distance because, in Levine's words, ". . . the sacred world of the slaves was able to fuse the precedents of the past, the conditions of the present, and the promise of the future into one connected reality" (51). The meaning of slave religion is not simply theological in the way described by Levine (30-54), Lovell (223-243), and others; the meaning is also epistemological, for the slaves'

¹ See, for example, Rosenberg and Davis. Rosenberg and other folklorists expend much energy defining oral formulas and debating whether or not folk sermons fit into a European box called the Parry-Lord hypothesis.

² For King scholars who attribute King's theology and rhetoric to his graduate studies, see, for example, Oates, William Miller, Hedgepeth, Ansbro, Donald Smith, and Kenneth Smith and Ira Zepp. See also Fox 283.

conception of the sacred world offered a means of self-knowledge. The process of identifying with the hardships and the eventual triumphs of Daniel, Jonah, David, Noah, and especially the enslaved Hebrews provided blacks a method of self-understanding: their lives resembled those of Old Testament heroes who faced grim odds and oppression but who finally achieved resplendent success. In this sacred universe, one locates and defines a self by consulting Biblical narrative and by expecting an eventual Biblical-style liberation either on earth or in heaven.

Rhetoric and Epistemology of Folk Sermons

A similar sacred world and a similar process of self-location and self-definition prevails in the black folk pulpit, notably in the employment of Biblical themes and imagery, the recirculation of sermons, and the practice of embedding.

Use of Biblical Themes and Imagery

Consider three popular sermons: "Moses at the Red Sea," "The Eagle Stirs Her Nest," and "Dry Bones in the Valley." "Moses at the Red Sea" takes as its theme the escape of the Israelites through the Red Sea away from Pharaoh's army.³ First preached during the years of slavery, "The Eagle Stirs Her Nest" compares God's ministrations to the Hebrews in the wilderness to an eagle's care of its young. God tends to the Chosen People like a mother eagle who stirs her eaglets out of her nest; allows them to make their initial, faltering attempts at flight; and then soars down to rescue them as they fall.⁴ "Dry Bones in the Valley" elaborates and applies Ezekiel's vision of human bones rattling together as they miraculously reassemble—a process Ezekiel equates with the reawakening of the Israelites held captive in Babylon.⁵

The theme of Exodus offered hope to slaves and to subsequent generations of blacks who often regarded slaveowners and later white racists as Pharaohs and who viewed the Hebrews' God as their God and the Hebrews' story as their story.⁶ "The Eagle Stirs Her Nest" and "Dry Bones in the Valley" also offer hope. By expounding "The Eagle Stirs Her Nest," folk preachers explain instances of God stirring the nest of the complacent and swooping down to save the needy, who sometimes find themselves lost in the wilderness. By propounding "Dry Bones in the Valley," preachers serve as Ezekiels illuminating many varieties of spiritual death and revival and thereby revitalizing the dry bones among their congregations; for, as one anonymous preacher declares, "You'll find dry bones in the church" as well as in the valley ("Dry Bones"). In the sacred world of the folk pulpit, blacks oppressed by the semi-slavery of segregation

³ For the Biblical text of "Moses at the Red Sea," see Exodus 14.

⁴ For the Biblical text for "The Eagle Stirs Her Nest," see Deuteronomy 32:10-11. For the origin of the sermon during slavery, see Lyell 135-136.

⁵ For the Biblical text of "Dry Bones in the Valley," see Ezekiel 37:1-4. For the origin of the sermon during slavery, see White 54.

⁶ See Levine 37-38, 50-51; Franklin, "Moses at the Red Sea"; King, "Death of Evil on the Seashore." King often called his opponents Pharaohs. Levine's contention that the slaves' sacred world was "shattered" in the twentieth century (158) is simply mistaken with regard to the folk pulpit.

could conquer time and erase geography by participating in the Exodus, becoming momentarily lost in the wilderness, and experiencing spiritual death and renewal under Babylonian captivity.

The rhetorical power of these great sermons stems in part from preachers' ability to use Old Testament narrative imagery as architectonic structures sturdy enough to organize entire homiletic presentations yet malleable enough to allow for speakers' individual interpretations and applications. While providing overarching forms easily recognized by churchgoers, the durable narrative imagery also clarifies many immediate examples of oppression, spiritual vexation, revival, and liberation.

Recirculation of Sermons

The widely acclaimed Rev. C.L. Franklin and at least five other preachers have recorded "Dry Bones in the Valley"; three others have had their versions of this sermon published. Franklin and at least two other pastors have recorded "The Eagle Stirs Her Nest"; two other ministers have published their renditions of this sermon.⁷ Undoubtedly many other preachers also delivered these homilies, for observers record having heard them proclaimed by clergy who lacked tape recorders, phonograph studios, and publishing houses.⁸ And, as Bruce Rosenberg explains, numerous other sermons also circulated widely (28).

The ubiquity of various folk sermons has an epistemological significance, for homilists activate the sacred world not only by projecting a common set of Biblical characters and scenes into the present but also by introducing the persona of those who have already preached the powerful analogies from *Ezekiel* and *Deuteronomy*. Just as church members define themselves by understanding Biblical narrative and by identifying with Biblical figures, so, too, do Franklin and other pastors shape and validate themselves by adopting the legitimated persona and the sanctioned rhetoric of others who deliver the Word. A common storehouse of homiletic materials enables a minister to locate and define a self by repeating and adapting sanctified language, developing authority by merging a voice with those already held to be authoritative. By borrowing sermons, folk preachers gain, or at least enhance, their right to speak.

Embedding

Folk preachers also locate and define themselves through the procedure of embedding scripture and religious lyrics into their sermons and by elaborating those materials and welding them to their own. Frequently ministers conclude their sermons by leading congregational singing of the hymn of invitation. Often this practice involves the interweaving of the pastor's voice and message with that of the hymn.

Consider, for example, the lyrics of "I'm Going Through" by R.E. Winsett:

I'm going through. Yes, I'm going through.
I'll pay the price whatever others do.

⁷ For "Dry Bones in the Valley," see Rosenberg 28, 200-208; Cleveland, "Dry Bones in the Valley"; Davis 136-142; Franklin, "Dry Bones in the Valley"; and "Dry Bones." For "The Eagle Stirs Her Nest," see Rosenberg 28, 155-162 and Cleveland, "The Eagle Stirring Her Nest."

⁸ See, for example, Spillers 14-15, Holt 201-204, and Moody 71.

I'll take the way of the Lord's despised few.
I've started with Jesus and I'm going through.⁹

Now consider how Franklin closes his sermon by interweaving his voice with that of the narrator of the hymn as Franklin leads his church in singing, interjecting sermonic comments along the way:

I'm going through. . .
I'll pay the price whatever others do.
I'll take the way of the Lord's despised few.
I started with Jesus and I'm going through.
Some people don't want to pay the price. . . .
They feel like sacrifice is too much. . . .
You that turn away from God
You are paying a greater price
Than I'm paying by travelling with Jesus.
For you see, the man who turns his back on God
Is not only paying with your body. . .
But paying with your soul. . . .
And what does it profit a man to gain the whole world' And then lose his soul? . . .
I wondered about what my reward would be.
I'd heard about crowns.
I'd heard about slippers.
I'd heard about golden streets and golden gates. . . .
I'm going through. Yes, I'm going through. . . .
I started with Jesus and I'm going through.
("Never Grow Old")

When Franklin proclaims,

You that turn away from God
You are paying a greater price
Than I'm paying by travelling with Jesus

Who is the "I" of this statement? The "I" is Franklin, but the "I" is also the voice of the hymn--a voice that Franklin repeats and elaborates throughout the passage. Threading the lyrics into his sermon and rethreading his sermon into the lyrics, this famous folk preacher creates a seamless quilt of discourse.¹⁰ Into the quilt he also sews a verse of scripture, "And what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and then to lose his soul?"¹¹ Franklin locates his homiletic self within religious lyrics and scripture and extends lyrics and scripture with his homiletics. In the sacred universe of the folk pulpit, Franklin, "I'm Going Through," and the New Testament speak in the same voice as Franklin constructs an expansive persona with and within the rhetoric sanctioned by his religious community.

⁹ See Winsett.

¹⁰ For other examples, see Rosenberg 18-19 and Moody 72-74

¹¹ For this passage, see Mark 8:36, Luke 9:25, and Matthew 16:26

King and the Folk Pulpit

King's formal education led him to the works of Hegel, Marx, Walter Rauschenbusch, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, and other Euro-American thinkers and exposed him to a school of Biblical scholarship that relied heavily on the reconstruction of the historical contexts of Biblical authors and events. Along with King's professors, these philosophers, theologians, and Biblical critics interpret history as a set of distinct chapters and distinct human beings. In this "common sense" view, the dynamics of history may be long-lasting or even eternal, but historical and/or Biblical situations, occurrences, and personalities are unique and non-repeating.

Although King scholars attribute his persuasiveness to his graduate studies, King's addresses often proceed from an interpretation of history decidedly different from the one he encountered in seminary and at Boston University. Instead of reflecting white theology and epistemology, King frequently adopts the epistemology and voice merging of his grandfather, father, and other black folk preachers. Like Franklin and other masters of the folk pulpit, King develops his own voice by repeating, merging, expanding, and intertwining various historical identities. The epistemology of slave religion empowers him to do so because, like slave preachers and later folk preachers, King characteristically shatters barriers of time and circumstance, treats all meaningful human experience as contemporaneous, and develops a self within well-known and richly resonant patterns of human personality. As I explain elsewhere, King frequently borrows sermons, adjusting homiletic material to the needs of the civil rights movement. And he regularly embeds lyrics and scripture into his oratory, concluding sermons with hymns and capping speeches with hymns and spirituals.¹² Consider, for example, King's closing of "The Meaning of Hope":

I know about [God].
 I know that He can lift you up
 From the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope.
 I know about Him.
 I've seen the lightning flash.
 I've heard the thunder roll. I've felt sinbreakers dashing,
 Trying to conquer my soul.
 But I heard the voice of Jesus saying,
 Still fight on. . . . (9-10)

The final six lines and several subsequent lines of King's sermon form the first verse and chorus of the hymn "Never Alone" by B.B. McKinney.¹³ One can ask, who is the "I" of "I've seen the lightning flash"? The "I" is the person who knows about God, the person delivering the entire sermon--the King who earlier noted his return to Alabama and his impending Poor People's Campaign in Washington, D. C. But the "I" is also the voice of the hymn, as King, like Franklin, fuses his persona with the narrative voice of treasured lyrics.

¹² Although King's collection of sermons, *Strength to Love*, omits concluding hymns, they appear in transcripts of his oral sermons. Since the hymns usually serve as hymns of invitation, they are more appropriate to delivered sermons than to published sermons. One can only accept a hymn of invitation to join a church while attending church, not while reading a book. Transcripts of King's addresses are available at Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta, hereafter referred to as the King Center. For speeches ending with lyrics, see for example, "Birth of a New Age," "Give Us the Ballot," *Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution*, "If the Negro Wins, Labor Wins," "I Have a Dream," "Our God is Marching On," "A Time to Break Silence," and "I See the Promised Land."

¹³ See McKinney, Hymn #400

In a famous speech following the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama--the triumphant conclusion of a campaign that prompted Congress to pass the landmark Voting Rights Act¹⁴--King also engages in voice merging:

I know you are asking today,
 "How long will [justice] take?"
 I come to say . . . it will not be long. . . .
 How long? Not long because you still reap what you sow. . .
 How long? Not long cause mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord,
 Trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored. . . .
 Our God is marching on. ("Our God is Marching On" 230)

Here King embeds a well-known aphorism of Paul--"You reap what you sow"¹⁵--and expands his identity by blending it with the lyrics of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," which serves both as a patriotic standard and as a hymn. The "mine" of "mine eyes" is both King and the narrative voice of the song.

On many occasions King yokes Biblical quotations together in a way that clearly scandalizes the method of reconstructing texts that his seminary professors had patiently coached him to observe. Instead of painstakingly reviewing the historical contexts of Biblical authors and situations, King time after time compresses scriptural voices--especially Old Testament oracles--into a single prophecy. Consider a diversity of Biblical texts:

But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid.
 --*Micah 4:04*

. . . what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?
 --*Micah 6:08*

Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.
 --*Amos 5:24*

The lion shall lie down with the lamb.
 --*Isaiah 11:06 (First Isaiah)*

Toward the end of a long anaphora condemning slums and segregated housing, King orchestrates these memorable declarations:

Let us be dissatisfied until every state capital houses a governor who will do justice, who will love mercy and who will walk humbly with his God.
 Let us be dissatisfied until from every city hall justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

¹⁴ For a detailed analysis of King's Selma campaign and its relationship to the passage of the voting rights legislation, see Garrow.

¹⁵ See Galatians 6:07

Let us be dissatisfied until the day when the lion and the lamb shall lie down together, and every man will sit under his own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid. ("Where Do We Go From Here?" p. 251)

Note King's skill in wedding the eschatological visions of First Isaiah and Micah in the same sentence: as the lion and lamb lie down together, every man sits nearby under his own vine and fig tree and is not afraid either of other humans or of lions, who are now tame. Here Amos, Micah, First Isaiah, and King all speak the same words with the same meaning.

In another address, "A Christmas Sermon on Peace," King merges all these excerpts from Amos, Micah, and First Isaiah together with another segment from Micah, eschatological imagery from Second Isaiah (who lived more than a generation after First Isaiah) that Jesus repeats, and a poetic line from Job.¹⁶ To self-respecting, liberal Biblical scholars, such as those who trained King, such preaching would amount to intellectual mayhem and historical mishmash. But King ensembles never sound like mishmash. His choir of Amos, Micah, First Isaiah, Second Isaiah, Jesus, and Job performs a beautiful chorale because the sacred world of the folk pulpit empowers an imaginative preacher to erase distinctions and to conflate Biblical oracles as a minister locates and defines a self through traditional, highly decontextualized religious language.

"The Drum Major Instinct"

When King presented "The Drum Major Instinct" to Ebenezer Baptist Church, he ended the sermon by indicating what he wished his eulogist to say upon his death. After his assassination two months later, his friends and family decided to play this portion of "The Drum Major Instinct" at his funeral.

Much of King's sermon derives from the 1952 sermon "Drum Major Instincts" by J. Wallace Hamilton, a prominent, liberal, white Methodist homilist.¹⁷ Both Hamilton and King focus on the last verses of Mark 10, which tell of James's and John's request of Jesus that they sit on His right hand and His left hand in His glory. Both Hamilton and King interpret the request as selfish, and both attribute the selfishness to a universal human desire to feel important, to be a drum major at the head of a parade. Hamilton (26) and King (260) recall Alfred Adler's postulate that the longing for recognition serves as the "dominant" impulse of human personality. King's account of the early appearance and later development of this desire mirrors Hamilton's:

Hamilton: We begin early to ask life to put us first.

Our first cry as a baby was a bid for attention. . . . All through childhood the drum-major instinct is a major obsession; unashamedly, children ask life to grant them first place; they are little bundles of ego. . . . (26-27)

In adult life we still have it; we never quite grow out of it. . . . We like to do something good, and we like to be praised for it. . . . The warm glow we feel when we hear ourselves applauded, when we see our names in print, is vitamin A to our ego.

¹⁶ See "A Christmas Sermon on Peace" 258. The passages are Amos 5:24, Micah 6:08, Micah 4:03, Isaiah 11:06 (First Isaiah), Micah 4:04, Isaiah 40:04 (Second Isaiah) and Luke 3:05, and Job 38:07.

¹⁷ Hamilton attracted a wide following in his church in St. Petersburg, Florida and for over two decades also preached around the nation for several months every year. According to his widow, Florence Hamilton, Hamilton and King never met, though Hamilton "had great respect and admiration" for King. Hamilton died in 1968. For more information about Hamilton, see Morrison.

King scholars totally ignore Hamilton. While their oversight is unwarranted, it also indicates King's skill in uniting his voice with Hamilton's. In King's hands, Hamilton sounds exactly like King.

Praise has never made anybody unhappy; we like it even when we know we don't deserve it. We like it when we don't believe it and . . . we dislike it only when we hear it bestowed too much on others. (27-28)

King: And you know we begin early to ask life to put us first. Our first cry as a baby was a bid for attention. And all through childhood the drum major impulse or instinct is a major obsession. Children ask life to grant them first place. They are a little bundle of ego. . . . Now in adult life, we still have it, and we really never get by it. We like to do something good. And you know we like to be praised for it. . . . And somehow this warm glow we feel when we are praised, or when our name is in print, is something of the vitamin A to our ego. Nobody is unhappy when they are praised, even if they know they don't deserve it, and even if they don't believe it. The only unhappy people about praise is when that praise is going too much toward somebody else. (260)

King (260-261) also follows Hamilton (28-29, 31-32) in claiming that the quest for attention pushes people to join too many organizations and to succumb to the glibness of advertisers. Extending Hamilton's mixed metaphor beyond the topics of Hamilton's text, the civil rights leader then cites examples of conformity, materialism, and status-conscious snobbery in American life (261-263) and attributes these practices to "the uncontrolled, perverted use of the drum major instinct" (263). Like Hamilton (32), King views racial prejudice in part as the consequence of the selfish desire for superiority (263). And, like Hamilton, he observes the same egocentrism in world affairs. Whereas Hamilton detects the impulse in Mussolini (32-33), King notices it in the relentless nuclear arms race, the "bitter, colossal contest for supremacy" that threatens worldwide conflagration "within a matter of seconds" (264). Like individuals, King argues, ". . . nations are caught up with the drum major instinct" (264); the United States is a chief offender as it conducts a "senseless, unjust war" in Vietnam (265). Merging his voice with the Psalmist, King reports God's ability to stop war by commanding, "Be still and know that I'm God" (265).¹⁸

Again echoing Hamilton (33), King returns to the Gospel of Mark by examining Jesus's response to the request of James and John (265). Instead of rebuking his followers, Jesus urges them to be first in goodness and morality; or, as King restates Jesus's principle, ". . . he who is greatest among you shall be your servant" (265).¹⁹ King reinforces the point by explaining, ". . . everybody can be great because everybody can serve" (265). Describing Jesus's lack of credentials, King spotlights His lowly origins and His worldly failures. Extending for three paragraphs, this account corresponds to a portion of a 1950 theological text by another prominent white preacher, Harold Bosley.²⁰ Compare:

Bosley: Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another obscure village. He worked in a carpenter shop until He was thirty, and then for three years He was an itinerant preacher. He never

¹⁸ See Psalms 46:8-10. This scripture is not unknown in the folk pulpit. See Hughes and Bontemps 252.

¹⁹ See Mark 10:43 and Matthew 23:11.

²⁰ Bosley served first as pastor of Mount Vernon Place Church in Baltimore then as minister of First Methodist Church in Evanston, Illinois. He also preached to other churches and to various denominational gatherings. King scholars disregard Bosley.

wrote a book. He never held an office. He never owned a home. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place where He was born. He had no credentials but Himself. (56)

King: He was born in an obscure village, the child of a poor peasant woman. And then he grew up in still another obscure village, where he worked as a carpenter until he was thirty years old. Then for three years . . . he was an itinerant preacher. . . . He never wrote a book. He never held an office. . . . He never owned a house. . . . He never went two hundred miles from where he was born. . . . He had no credentials but himself (266).

Sandwiched between these sentences and six others from Bosley (or possibly another source), King adds, "They called him a rabble-rouser. . . . He practiced civil disobedience; he broke injunctions" (266).²¹ These assertions weld King's concerns to his source by implicitly defending King's own practice of civil disobedience and his own violation of judicial injunctions.

Furnishing directions for his eulogist, King concludes his message by largely abandoning his homiletic sources while retaining the drum major metaphor. He instructs the eulogist *not* to discuss his achievements, not even to mention his Nobel Peace Prize and his "three or four hundred other awards"; such distinctions are "not important" (267). Instead the eulogist should affirm that King "tried"--not succeeded but, more modestly, tried--"to give his life serving others" (267)--an endeavor that, as King has just explained, everyone can undertake. He continues,

I want you to be able to say that day
That I did try to feed the hungry.
I want you to be able to say that day
That I did try . . . to clothe those who were naked.
I want you to say on that day
That I did try . . . to visit those who were in prison (267).

This statement amplifies King's voice with phrases Jesus employs as He separates those who inherit the Kingdom from those who do not. Those on Jesus right hand receive His blessing because, in His words,

. . . I was hungry and you gave me food. . .
I was naked and you clothed me. . .
I was in prison and you came to me. (*Matthew 25:36-37*)

When they aver that they never saw Jesus hungry or naked or in prison, He explains, "As you did it to the least of these [i.e. the neediest], you did it to me." Then He dismisses those on His left hand because they failed to supply His needs by failing to care for the needy.²²

King sustains the climax of his peroration by seamlessly incorporating lyrics into his sermon, fusing his identity with the "I" of the first verse and chorus of a popular gospel song by Alma Androzzo:

If I can help somebody as I pass along,
If I can cheer somebody with a word or song,

²¹ Bosley attributes this passage to an unknown author. If the passage floated elsewhere, King may have borrowed it from another source. But King did not originate this description of Jesus. Here, as with the material from Hamilton and Androzzo, King did not identify his source or explain that he is using a source.

²² For the entire passage, see Matthew 34-46.

If I can show somebody he's travelling wrong,
Then my living will not be in vain. (267)

He also presses into service the "I" and the text of the third verse of Androzzo's lyrics (267).²³

Virtually every sentence of "The Drum Major Instinct" embodies the epistemology and rhetoric of the folk pulpit. King locates and defines his expansive identity and his message primarily through Hamilton's homiletics. When King begins his presentation by saying, "This morning I would like to use as a subject from which to preach 'The Drum Major Instinct'" (259), the "I" of this sentence reiterates the "I" and the identity of Hamilton. King continues by recapitulating much of Hamilton's Biblical exegesis, portions of Hamilton's contemporary application of the lesson, and several of his illustrations. The image of the drum major and the notion of the drum major instinct function architectonically for both speakers by providing a sturdy, flexible, and memorable (albeit mixed) metaphor that unites otherwise disparate observations about babies, status-seeking, consumerism, crime, church life, race relations, and international conflict.²⁴

When King later explains, "I know a man . . ." and analyzes the man by adopting Bosley's text ("He was born in an obscure village. . ."), he combines his identity with Bosley's by harnessing Bosley's text to delineate what he--King--knows. After employing the Psalmist to prophesy to national leaders, he next incorporates the language of Jesus and the lyrics of a gospel song.

In this sermon and others, King's voice merging involves a process of self-subordination that seems to enact the theme of self-effacement and servanthood that Jesus, Hamilton, and King all proclaim. By directing a chorus of Hamilton, Bosley, the Psalmist, Jesus, and the narrative voice of "If I Can Help Somebody," King modestly subordinates himself to the religious language sanctified by his liberal Protestant community and becomes the servant of that language and that community. This process of self-subordination is especially obvious in his conclusion. Instead of asking his eulogist to rattle off his glittering triumphs--which one would certainly expect in a eulogy for a world-famous Nobel Prize winner--King paradoxically demonstrates both his humility and his noteworthiness through New Testament language (complemented by gospel lyrics) that can and should obtain with all Christians.

Black preachers, of course, had practiced a similar kind of self-subordination for many generations in their humble and often anonymous sermonizing.²⁵ Paradoxically, Afro-American folk preachers subordinated themselves to established religious language in order to create expansive personas for themselves and their listeners as they adapted and sustained the slaves' sacred world.

Their efforts have met with scorn, misunderstanding, and--perhaps more commonly--profound inattention from the white public and white intellectuals alike. But folk preachers played a major role in maintaining hope in the black community despite the horrific brutality of slavery and the egregious

²³ For these lyrics, see Androzzo. King scholars overlook his embedding of "Never Alone," "If I Can Help Somebody," and other hymns, spirituals, and gospel songs. In some cases his use of lyrics is entirely obvious; in others scholars may ignore his use of lyrics in part because of King's skill in intermingling his words with those of songwriters.

²⁴ Unlike "Dry Bones in the Valley" and "The Eagle Stirs Her Nest," which were well-known to black churchgoers, "The Drum Major Instinct" was not familiar to King's congregation, who had never heard Hamilton. Still, like folk preachers before him, King locates himself through a homiletic message previously approved by a religious community, in this case the community of mid-century liberal Protestantism.

²⁵ Just as no one knows who wrote the spirituals, no one knows who initiated "Moses at the Red Sea," "Dry Bones in the Valley," "The Eagle Stirs Her Nest," or the oral formulas prominent in black Protestant homiletics.

Franklin, however, was not anonymous, for he preached around the country and recorded several dozen sermons on the Chess, Checker, and Jewel labels.

injustice of segregation. They did not simply spout oral formulas, as folklorists sometimes assume. And they did not prove irrelevant to the intellectual, oratorical, and political development of a young Martin Luther King, Jr., as most King scholars assume. Rather, as King sat in the pew of his boyhood church and heard the pronouncements of his father and guest preachers, he experienced the good fortune of learning the procedures and assumptions of the black folk pulpit. And the rhetoric and epistemology of the folk pulpit--not that of Euro-American philosophy, theology, and Biblical historiography--enabled him to harmonize seemingly disparate voices and to shape seemingly unrelated personas into a coherent and imaginative self sufficiently powerful to help remake a nation.²⁶

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