

“The Most Dangerous Negro in America”: Rhetoric, Race and the Prophetic Pessimism of Martin Luther King Jr.

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Abstract: In this essay, we examine King’s rhetoric during the last year of his life, (April 4, 1967-April 3, 1968)—focusing specifically on the issues of race. In examining several texts of King, we argue that King adopts a prophetic persona of a pessimistic prophet—especially when addressing issues of race and racism. In exploring King’s rhetoric and noting King’s directness and firmness when addressing the race issue, we argue that King’s rhetoric found a home in the African American prophetic tradition in his attempt to dismantle hegemonic politics and institutional racism. Specifically, we argue that Martin Luther King was radically dismantling white hegemony; and becoming one of the most hated men in America.

Keywords: Martin Luther King Jr., Prophetic Rhetoric, Race, Racism, African American Prophetic Tradition

On April 4, 1968, on a balcony at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee in front of Room 306, an assassin shot and killed the nation's prophet of non-violence. The previous night, not feeling the best and against his own wishes, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. reluctantly showed up at a rally supporting the striking sanitation workers at Mason Temple Church of God in Christ where he delivered a speech for the ages. King somehow mustered up enough strength to move the crowd that night, calling them to stand firm under the oppressive tactics of the Henry Loeb administration. He also called for them to turn up the pressure in their non-violence resistance. This meant massive economic boycotts. He asked them not to buy “Sealtest milk” and “Wonder Bread or Hart’s Bread.” It was time for the redistribution of the pain that the sanitation workers have only felt. “We are choosing these companies,” King declared, “because they haven’t been fair in their hiring policies, and we are choosing them because they can begin the process of saying they are going to support the needs and the rights of these men who are on strike. And then they can move on -- downtown and tell Mayor Loeb to do what is right.”¹

He further called his audience that night to “strengthen Black institutions.” He wanted them to deposit all of their money in Tri-State Bank and called for a “bank in” movement in Memphis. “Put your money there,” he declared, “you have six or seven

¹ Martin Luther King Jr., “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.” Delivered at Mason Temple Church of God in Christ. April 3, 1968. Para. 28. <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>.

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Black insurance companies here in the city of Memphis. Take out your insurance there. We want to have an ‘insurance-in.’” He proclaimed,

We don’t have to argue with anybody. We don’t have to curse and go around acting bad with our words. We don’t need any bricks and bottles. We don’t need any Molotov cocktails. We just need to go around to these stores, and to these massive industries in our country, and say, “God sent us by here, to say to you that you’re not treating his children right. And we’ve come by here to ask you to make the first item on your agenda fair treatment, where God’s children are concerned. Now, if you are not prepared to do that, we do have an agenda that we must follow. And our agenda calls for withdrawing economic support from you.²

But on the next day, King laid dead on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. Earlier that day, he had worked on his sermon for Sunday, April 7, which was Palm Sunday. Typically, on Palm Sunday, church audiences hear the sermon about Jesus coming into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey and shutting down all traffic. Christians call this the Triumphal Entry; where Jesus lead a processional in which folks waved palm branches and proclaimed, “Hosanna, Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” Even for non-liturgical churches like many Black Baptist congregations, Palm Sunday is usually celebrated. However, King’s sermon was not your typical Palm Sunday variety. Though he lay dead, his associates found in his pocket the sermon notes he would have preached that Sunday if he had lived. The sermon title: “Why America May Go to Hell.”³

While King today is largely considered one of the greatest Americans to ever live, during his lifetime—and especially near the end of his life—King was one of the most hated men in America. The FBI named King “the most dangerous Negro in America.”⁴ According to a 1966 Gallop Poll, almost two-thirds of Americans had an unfavorable opinion of King—a twenty-six-point increase from 1963.⁵ Scholars note that hostility toward King increased shortly after the passage of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 at the time when many white Americans believed that integration was moving too quickly.⁶ Furthermore, for much of the last year of his life, King spoke out against US political institutions for what he argued were immoralities such as the war in Vietnam, lack of acknowledgment and/or support for the economic downtrodden, and especially the institution of racism.

If this version of King comes as a surprise to many of his contemporary admirers, it may be because of the shift scholars have noticed in King’s rhetoric over time.⁷ According to Sunnemark, pre-1965 King had what he called a “common

² Martin Luther King Jr., “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.” Delivered at Mason Temple Church of God in Christ. *American Rhetoric*. April 3, 1968. Paras. 29, 26. <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>

³ Tavis Smiley, *Death of King: The Real Story of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s Final Year*. Little, Brown, and Company. New York. 2014.

⁴ Michael Eric Dyson. *I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King Jr.* Simon and Schuster. New York, 2000. p. 80.

⁵ Jeffrey M. Jones, “Americans Divided on Whether King’s Dream Has Been Realized.” Gallup. August 26, 2011. <http://news.gallup.com/poll/149201/americans-divided-whether-king-dream-realized.aspx>.

⁶ Smiley, *Death of King*. Also Dyson, *I May Not Get There with You* and Jones, “Americans Divided.”

⁷ Anthony Cook, “Beyond Critical Legal Studies: The Reconstructive Theology of Dr. Martin Luther King,

discourse.” For him, this common discourse of King was as “inviting as possible for as many as possible.” King meant this type of discourse to be non-offensive as the rhetoric was mostly about “recognition and affirmation.” When employed today, it works in the same way. “The vague generality,” writes Sunnemark, “means that King’s rhetoric can still be filled with meaning from different sources. It can still conform to a particular identity of traditional American ideology and self-understanding and its system of signification has become tied in with this identity.” In other words, this “vague generality” helps us to understand how both progressives and conservatives can easily appropriate King’s earlier rhetoric and discourse. Further, he maintains that this is how King has become frozen in time with his “*I Have a Dream*” speech. The speech, argues Sunnemark, has become a signifier of righteousness which means people can use it in a “wide range of circumstances for a variety of means.”⁸

However, King’s later rhetoric is not available for use in this manner, and it is this rhetoric that we examine. We especially focus on one of the main reasons that many celebrate King today—his seemingly or supposed color-blind, equality-based rhetoric. Along with Cook, we suggest that King, in the last year of his life, began “to understand the hegemony of repressive ideologies, and to deconstruct the limits they appear to set on the possibilities of change” and became “deeply committed to the reconstruction of a social reality based on a radically different assessment of human potential.”⁹ When examining King’s rhetoric during the last year of his life, one would note that several of his last speeches addressed the fallacies of white hegemony; the political elitism and institutional racism of America; the Johnson administration and foreign policy (especially the war in Vietnam), and the redistribution of economic resources—poverty and the treatment of workers. However, we argue that the foundation of these arguments is King’s growing understanding of race and racism. In short, as a key component of these speeches, King focuses much more on race than modern admirers would have imagined.

We also note that for King to move rhetorically in this manner was not politically expedient. He had secured victories in getting the Johnson administration to pass the long-awaited Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965. King had an ally in the White House and, politically, it did not make sense for King to take such controversial positions. However, we submit that it only makes sense that he did begin to address America’s racism because King adopted a prophetic persona of a pessimistic prophet. More specifically, when we frame King as prophet, his rhetorical shift becomes understandable.

To highlight his prophetic pessimism, we examine King’s rhetoric during the last year of his life (April 4, 1967-April 3, 1968)—focusing specifically on the issues of race. In examining several texts of King, we attempt to highlight King’s directness and firmness when addressing the race issue; we also approach an analysis of the rhetoric used by King in his attempt to dismantle hegemonic politics and institutional racism. Specifically, we argue that while Martin Luther King was radically dismantling white hegemony; he was also becoming one of the most hated men in America.

Jr.” *Harvard Law Review*, 103(5), 985-1044. doi:10.2307/1341453. Also, Dyson, *I May Not Get There with You* and Smiley, *Death of King*.

⁸ Fredrik Sunnemark. *Ring Out Freedom! The Voice of Martin Luther King Jr. and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement*. Bloomington. Indiana University Press. 2004. p. 233.

⁹ Cook, “Beyond Critical Legal Studies,” p. 987-988.

We do this by first addressing the African American prophetic tradition and prophetic pessimism. Second, we offer a brief overview of race, especially Critical Race Theory and the use of color-blind racism. Third, we examine the rhetoric of race from King during the last year of his life. Finally, we offer a conclusion to our study.

African American Prophetic Tradition

Once primarily only the purview of religious studies scholars, since the publication of James Darsey's seminal text, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (1997), literary and rhetorical critics have found prophecy and the prophetic tradition worthy of study.¹⁰ However, much of the study of prophetic rhetoric negates the contributions of African-American scholars and those who study African-American prophetic rhetoric. This lack of attention by scholars lead many to understand prophetic rhetoric only from a white European framework that understands the people as the New Israel and grounded in the ideals of freedom, individualism, and "called people of God" type rhetoric. It is this oversight that impedes scholars from seeing that the African-American version of prophetic rhetoric is profoundly different.

Despite Majocha's contention that we do not know "how to uncover prophetic rhetoric," or "how to test for prophetic rhetoric,"¹¹ in *The Forgotten Prophet*, Johnson defined the genre as "discourse grounded in the sacred and rooted in a community experience that offers a critique of existing communities and traditions by charging and challenging society to live up to the ideals espoused while offering celebration and hope for a brighter future." It is a rhetoric "characterized by a steadfast refusal to adapt itself to the perspectives of its audience" and a rhetoric that dedicates itself to the rights of individuals. Located on the margins of society, it intends to lift the people to an ethical conception of whatever the people deem as sacred by adopting, at times, a controversial style of speaking.¹²

In a previous essay, Johnson writes about the two primary traditions that critics seek to situate prophetic rhetoric—apocalyptic and the jeremiad.¹³ While there are a plethora of studies on prophetic rhetoric drawing from the two traditions above, until recently, not many of them focus primarily on the African American tradition. Created in the crucible of slavery and formed in segregation, it has been this tradition that not only has given voice to many African Americans but also provided a level of comfort and reassurance. According to Johnson, "through struggle and sacrifice,"

[T]his tradition has expressed Black people's call for unity and cooperation, as well as the community's anger and frustrations. It has been both hopeful and pessimistic. It has celebrated the beauty and myth of American exceptionalism and its special place in the world, while at the same time damning it to Hell

¹⁰ For research on prophetic rhetoric see Shulman's *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture*, 2008; Terrill's *Malcolm X: Inventing Racial Judgment*. 2007.

¹¹ Kristen Lynn Majocha. "Prophetic Rhetoric: A Gap between the Field of Study and the Real World," *Journal of Religion and Communication*. Wtr. 2017 Vol 39 4 p5-18, p. 14

¹² Andre E. Johnson. *The Forgotten Prophet: Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and the African American Prophetic Tradition*. Lexington Books, 2012. p.7.

¹³ Andre E. Johnson. "'To Make the World So Damn Uncomfortable': W.E.B. Du Bois and the African American Prophetic Tradition." *Carolinas Communication Annual XXXII* (2016). p.22. See also *The Forgotten Prophet*.

for not living up to the promises and ideals America espouses. It is a tradition that celebrates both the Creator or the Divine's hand in history—offering “hallelujahs” for deliverance from slavery and Jim and Jane Crow, while at the same time asking, “Where in the hell is God?” during tough and trying times. It is a tradition that develops a theological outlook quite different at times from orthodoxy—one that finds God very close, but so far away.¹⁴

It is also a tradition that does not exclusively reside in the examples above of the discourse because “contextual restraints and rhetorical exigencies have not always allowed for an apocalyptic or jeremiadic appeal.”¹⁵ For example, traditionally in apocalyptic rhetoric, the world is a bad place, and the speaker argues that God (or some divine action) will cause a cataclysmic event and bring about a new age. In the jeremiad, the speaker appeals to some prearranged covenant to call back the audience to a right relationship with the Divine. However, what if a speaker who adopts a prophetic persona does not believe that God or some divine action will cause a cataclysmic event that will bring in a new age? What if a speaker does not appeal to a covenant—or for that matter, does not believe the covenant is available to the people? What if the covenant itself is the problem?

This is the position that many African Americans find themselves in when addressing audiences. Therefore, to adopt prophetic personas, many African-American prophets are forced to adopt other rhetorical nuances within the prophetic tradition. In Johnson's work on the rhetoric of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, he identified four other types of prophetic rhetoric found primarily, but not exclusively in the AAPT—celebratory prophecy, disputation prophecy, mission-oriented prophecy, and pessimistic prophecy.¹⁶ For the purposes of this essay, we now turn to pessimistic prophecy.¹⁷

Pessimistic Prophecy

Johnson develops his notion of prophetic pessimism by drawing on the work of Cornel West. West argues that for African Americans who adopt prophetic personas “at some point the odds seem so overwhelming, the incorporative strategies of the status quo so effective and the racism so deeply entrenched in American life that a pessimistic attitude can easily develop.” However, this does not signal defeat because, as he notes, “most prophetic practices among Black Americans have given this pessimism *an aggressiveness* such that it becomes sobering rather than disabling, a stumbling block rather than a dead end, a challenge to meet rather than a conclusion to accept.” West grounds his theory of aggressive pessimism in the belief that “Black prophetic Americans” eventually

¹⁴ Johnson, “To Make the World,” p.22.

¹⁵ Johnson, “To Make the World,” p.22.

¹⁶ See Johnson, *The Forgotten Prophet*, p.14

¹⁷ Outside of Johnson, for another study of the Black prophetic tradition, see Christopher Hobson. *The Mount of Vision. The African American Prophetic Tradition, 1800-1950*. Oxford, 2012. For a study on the Black Jeremiad see David Howard-Pitney's “The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Social Justice” (2005) and Willie J. Harrell, *Origins of the African American Jeremiad: The Rhetorical Strategies of Social Protest and Activism, 1760-1861*; 2011. For a study of the Black prophetic persona, see Christopher A. House. “Crying for Justice: The #BLACKLIVESMATTER Religious Rhetoric of Bishop T.D. Jakes.” *Southern Communication Journal* 83, 2018.

become frustrated “regarding the possibilities of fundamental transformation of American society and culture.”¹⁸

Adopting West’s theory, McLaren and Dantley write that aggressive pessimism has a way of “awakening a new zeal” and that it “restores for African Americans the courage to renew their struggle to appropriate the hegemonic traditions and to resist those societal forms that simply do not make sense to them, namely those that exclude them, that predict and label them, and that sonorously silence them.”¹⁹ In short, aggressive pessimism helps speakers deal with those insurmountable obstacles placed in front of them, thereby becoming a coping strategy, which starves off communal nihilism and self-destruction.²⁰

African-Americans orators adopting a prophetic persona—realizing racism is too entrenched and the American covenant ideals not realistic for Black Americans to ascertain—become wailing and moaning prophets within the lament tradition of prophecy. Laments are “expressions of grief and pain that are in search of an outlet” and the one “practicing lamentation understands that nothing will change about her or his situation (at least not immediately) but the chance to express oneself and to really speak one’s mind becomes therapeutic for the person and abates, at least for a while, the frustration the person feels about the situation.” Lamentation “helps a person continue with the struggle, and while not understanding the ‘why’ questions, the person is still able to function and maintain, thankful that at least the Divine hears her or his cry.”²¹

It is in this tradition that the “prophet’s primary function is to speak out on the behalf of others and to chronicle their pain and suffering as well as her or his own. By speaking, the prophet offers hope and encouragement to others by acknowledging their sufferings and letting them know that they are not alone.” Moreover, when one who adopts a prophetic persona does this, “she invites all who hear (or read) her words to understand the frustration and pain that the community shares.” The aim at proclaiming the message is “simply to *speak and to get the audience to hear*. By doing this, the prophet offers a record that chronicles the “pains and sufferings of the people the prophet claims to represent and [gives] voice to the voiceless.”²²

We argue that as King neared the end of his life, one of his primary foci was to chronicle the sufferings of the poor and to challenge America to reexamine its commitment to those in poverty. This led King to adopt a pessimistic prophetic persona grounded in the lament tradition of prophecy. At this time in his life—and especially during the last year of his life—King’s confidence in American institutions or the American people living up to the ideas and ideals set forth in its sacred documents began to wane. While he called for a Poor People’s Campaign to address the issues facing the poor in America and indeed the world, King limited his rhetorical options because, in addressing poverty, he had to tackle the issue of race and racism. While addressing issues that called into question the sacred identity of America, it led him to adopt a pessimistic

¹⁸ Cornel West. “The Prophetic Tradition in Afro America.” In *Let Justice Roll: Prophetic Challenges in Religion, Politics, and Society*, edited by Neal Riemer, 89-100. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishing, 1996.

¹⁹ Peter L. McLaren and Michael Dantley. “Leadership and a Critical Pedagogy of Race: Cornel West, Stuart Hall, and the Prophetic Tradition.” *Journal of Negro Education* 59.1 (1990), p.39-40

²⁰ Michael E. Dantley. “Purpose Driven Leadership: The Spiritual Imperative to Guiding Schools Beyond High-Stakes Testing and Minimum Proficiency.” *Education and Urban Society* 35.3 (2003) p. 274-275

²¹ Johnson, *The Forgotten Prophet*, p.14.

²² Johnson, *The Forgotten Prophet*, p.14.

prophetic voice. However, in doing so, King found a space for his oratory, becoming a “wailing and moaning prophet whose primary function was to speak out on the behalf of others and to chronicle their pain and suffering.”²³ Consistent with the lament tradition, King did not know if things would change—his goal was simply *to speak and to get his audience to hear*. Thus King’s prophecy on race becomes a record chronicling the pain and suffering of Blacks and it gave a voice to those not able to speak for themselves.

Rhetoric of Race

Following the supposed successes of Civil Rights Movement, many in the mainstream—or white—America have held that race no longer matters, or influences the life expectancies of people (of color).²⁴ Since at least the late 1960s, whites, who still make up over 75% of the US population²⁵ believe that since the significance of race is declining, people of color must be falling behind on the socioeconomic ladder because of their cultural deficiencies,²⁶ results of market forces, or naturally occurring phenomena.²⁷ These people also believe that racism is no longer a systematic issue, but an individual flaw. Colorblind racism theorists hold that this ideological strategy leads people to avoid talking about race, or to use “semantical maneuvers” to denounce their prejudice, such as, “I am not a racist, but...”²⁸ With this ideology in place, much of the rhetoric of King in his final year would not only be heavily criticized by politicians and political media because of a racial focus, but by citizens as well; all who posit that individualism has nothing to do with race.

However, a reexamination of King’s rhetoric of race during the last year of his life would for some, be a surprise. For instance, in many of his speeches during the last year of his life, King drew upon social statistics and social theories for logical appeals. As noted by Cook, King was a “towering organic intellectual of twentieth-century American life” and “integrated theory, experience, and transformative struggle to create a rich and effective form of critical activity.”²⁹ Although scholars point to the formation of Critical Race Theory—a school of thought founded on challenging hegemony, and answering how racism persists with its condemnation—as starting in either the 1970s or

²³ Johnson, *The Forgotten Prophet*, p.14.

²⁴ Dinesh D’Souza. *The End of Racism*. New York, NY. 1995.

²⁵ U.S. Census Bureau. Census 2010 Gateway. Washington, D.C.: U. S. Census Bureau. 2010. <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-10.pdf>.

²⁶ Lawrence D. Bobo, and Camille Z. Charles. 2009. “Race in the American Mind.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. 621. 243-59; Hunt, Matthew O. “African American, Hispanic, and white beliefs about black/white inequality, 1977-2004.” *American Sociological Review* 2007. 72:390-415; Lipsitz, George. “Learning from New Orleans: The Social Warrant of Hostile Privatism and Competitive Consumer Citizenship.” *Cultural Anthropology*, 2006. 21 (3): 451-468. (<https://search.proquest.com/docview/61771523?accountid=14582>). doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/can.2006.21.3.451>.

²⁷ Brent Berry and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva. “‘They Should Hire the One with the Best Score’: White Sensitivity to Qualification Differences in Affirmative Action Hiring Decisions.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 31(2) (2008) 215-242. (<https://search.proquest.com/docview/61676905?accountid=14582>). doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01419870701337619>. Also, Lipsitz, George. “Learning from New Orleans.”

²⁸ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, “The Linguistics of Color Blind Racism: How to Talk Nasty about Blacks without Sounding ‘Racist.’” *Critical Sociology* 28 (1-2) (2002): 41-64. (<https://search.proquest.com/docview/60465766?accountid=14582>).

²⁹ Cook, “Beyond Critical Legal Studies,” p. 987

1980s,³⁰ King was most definitely an early incarnation of a CRT activist and scholar.

Since King spoke of an issue with socioeconomic progress at an institutional level, his rhetoric would not fit well within current neoliberal ideology. Neoliberals believe that individuals should have more freedom and responsibility and that the state should be less involved in policies such as welfare.³¹ Thus, neoliberalism is premised on profitmaking, and improving social life without government intervention. Additionally, because people can make their own choices,³² race cannot explain why Blacks, or other people of color, have not succeeded in education or employment. Whites, under the ideology of neoliberalism, believe that individuals can “lift themselves up by their bootstraps,” not only because class trumps race but because neoliberals also prescribe to the colorblind ideology. Price holds that neoliberals have “co-opted” the progress of Civil Rights in their favor.³³ Price charges that because Civil Rights allowed Blacks to move up the sociopolitical ladder, while not making any progressive changes for their Black constituents, colorblind racists and neoliberals can point to the Black leaders’ appointment as progress, ignoring the constituents. This is very similar to the ways many have haloed King in contemporary society as an early post-race egalitarian who supported the regime through his patriotism.

However, as we argue, this is a profound misunderstanding of King. While many, as Dyson argues, want King portrayed as a “color-blind loyalist at all costs,” and as one who can “whitewash our blood-stained racial history,”³⁴ the real King from 1967-1968 challenges that framing. Grounded in his prophetic pessimism, we argue that during the last years of his life, King began to transform from the King many know so well as the great orator of the “I Have a Dream” speech, to a much more anti-hegemonic radical when it came to matters of race.

Race, Racism and the White Backlash

Although one can note a shift in King’s rhetoric as early as 1965, his prophetic pessimism becomes more pronounced during the last year of his life. From his *A Time to Break Silence* speech on April 4, 1967, to the *Mountain Top* speech April 3, 1968, King’s rhetoric transformed (conversion) on several positions. One of those positions was on the issue of race and racism. For instance, in his *A Time to Break Silence* speech, King adopted a prophetic persona as he prepared to critique the government’s participation in the war in Vietnam. While present with clergy members of several denominations, King admitted that it was indeed difficult to oppose one’s government. King, gathering the courage to speak, proclaimed, “Some of us who have already begun to break the silence of the night have found that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak.”³⁵

³⁰ Angela Harris. *Critical Race Theory*. Davis: University of California Press. 2012; Delgado, Richard and Jean Stefancic. *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 1997.

³¹ Alejandro Portes, “Neoliberalism and the Sociology of Development: Emerging Trends and Unanticipated Facts.” *Population and Development Review*, 23(2), 229-259. 1997. doi:10.2307/2137545

³² Johanna Bockman, “Neoliberalism.” *Contexts*, 12(3), 14-15. 2013. Retrieved from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24710786>.

³³ Charles R. Price, “Comment: Neoliberal Stories of Racial Redemption a Continuing Saga Ready For a New Plot.” *Dialectical Anthropology*, 32 (3), 243-247. 2008. Retrieved from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29790834>.

³⁴ Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You*, p. 3.

³⁵ Martin Luther King Jr., “A Time to Break Silence,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, James M. Washington (Ed). New York: Harper Collins. 1986. p. 231.

After admitting that he himself had been silent for too long because of the criticism that he would face, King moves forward:

Over the past two years, as I have moved to break the betrayal of my own silences and to speak from the burning of my own heart, as I have called for radical departures from the destruction of Vietnam, many persons have questioned me about the wisdom of my path. At the heart of their concerns this query has often loomed large and loud: Why are *you* speaking about war, Dr. King?... Peace and Civil Rights don't mix, they say. Aren't you hurting the cause of your people, they ask?³⁶

King sees this shift as his responsibility not only as a leader, or clergy but also as a citizen. He invites his fellow Americans to hear him as they “bear the greatest responsibility in ending a conflict that has exacted a heavy price on both continents.”³⁷

King, in adopting a prophetic persona, both breaks away from the Johnson Administration and the idea of absolute American exceptionalism. King no longer sees America as the God-ordained, good country proclaimed by Manifest Destiny, or its earlier documents of righteousness, because America has some major problems—some flaws that it must face to be the America it claimed. In *A Time to Break Silence*, not only does King challenge the validity of the war in Vietnam, but he also connects how the investment in the war is hurting the poor and highlighting the hypocrisy of racism. By continuing the war in Vietnam, America was ignoring the problems of its citizens at home by allowing them to succumb to violence and poverty, and perpetuating violence abroad. In other words, not only was America standing by while its citizens fell victim to violence such as police brutality, or condemning citizens for their own violence, America was exhibiting its own violence in Southeast Asia while ignoring the needs of the poor in America. Therefore, for King, America was the greatest purveyor of violence in the world. King holds that the war distracts America from domestic problems like poverty by not only taking “necessary funds or energies,” but also drawing men and skills up like “some demonic destructive suction tube.”³⁸

Using this hyperbolic language, King not only accuses the government of wrongdoing but also accuses the government of evil intentions as well. King states that the government destroys the impoverished at home by not supporting them properly, and even does so abroad, by promoting violence against the poor Vietnamese. Moreover, America has taken poor Black men, and sent them to fight for the rights of others, while still being denied rights at home in the US. “We were taking the Black young men,” King notes, “who had been crippled by our society and sending them 8 thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in Southwest Georgia and East Harlem.”³⁹ As King continues, he clearly not only advocates for the poor, but he also makes a clear, strong stance on systematic racism. He notes that it is cruel for Blacks and Whites to be able to be in combat, killing and dying side-by-side, but do not even live on the same block in Detroit. King’s prophetic

³⁶ King Jr., “A Time to Break Silence,” p. 232.

³⁷ King Jr., “A Time to Break Silence,” p. 232.

³⁸ King Jr., “A Time to Break Silence,” p. 233.

³⁹ King Jr., “A Time to Break Silence,” p. 233.

fire is not only limited at accusing the government of manipulation, but he also charges that America is poisoning its own soul for its atrocities toward the poor in Vietnam, and even more for its neglect for the poor at home.

In his speech *The Other America*, delivered at Stanford University on April 14, 1967, King condemns America for being racist at its core. He proclaims that there are two Americas. In one America, white people prosper: “overflowing with the milk of prosperity and the honey of opportunity.” In the other, people of color—and especially Black Americans—live “in rat-infested, vermin-filled slums,” and Black children “grow up with clouds of inferiority forming every day in their little mental skies.”⁴⁰ King points out that Black Americans live in a triple ghetto of race, poverty, and misery. King calls on his audience to see that that the movement was heading towards another stage. After celebrating the victories of integration, King declared,

But we must see that the struggle today is much more difficult. It's more difficult today because we are struggling now for genuine equality. And it's much easier to integrate a lunch counter than it is to guarantee a livable income and a good solid job. It's much easier to guarantee the right to vote than it is to guarantee the right to live in sanitary, decent housing conditions. It is much easier to integrate a public park than it is to make genuine, quality, integrated education a reality. And so today we are struggling for something which says we demand genuine equality.⁴¹

King grounded his new-found insight on an understanding of racism that had eluded him in the past. He proclaimed,

Now the other thing that we've gotta come to see now that many of us didn't see too well during the last ten years—that is that racism is still alive in American society and much more wide-spread than we realized. And we must see racism for what it is. It is a myth of the superior and the inferior race. It is the false and tragic notion that one particular group, one particular race is responsible for all of the progress, all of the insights in the total flow of history. And the theory that another group or another race is totally depraved, innately impure, and innately inferior.....I submit that however unpleasant it is we must honestly see and admit that racism is still deeply rooted all over America. It is still deeply rooted in the North, and it's still deeply rooted in the South.⁴²

For King, racism and white supremacist thinking produced what many called the “white backlash.” King argued that this “white backlash” was just a “new name for an old phenomenon.” King continued,

It's not something that just came into being because shouts of Black Power, or because Negroes engaged in riots in Watts, for

⁴⁰ King, Martin Luther, Jr “The Other America.” *Aurora Forum*. Stanford University. para.3, 5, and 6 <http://www.crmvet.org/docs/otheram.htm>

⁴¹ King Jr. “The Other America,” para.12.

⁴² King Jr. “The Other America,” para.16.

instance. The fact is that the state of California voted a Fair Housing bill out of existence before anybody shouted Black Power, or before anybody rioted in Watts. It may well be that shouts of Black Power and riots in Watts and the Harlems and the other areas, are the consequences of the white backlash rather than the cause of them. What it is necessary to see is that there has never been a single solid monistic determined commitment on the part of the vast majority of white Americans on the whole question of Civil Rights and on the whole question of racial equality. This is something that truth impels all men of good will to admit.⁴³

Here, King covertly attacks the racist hegemonic structure of American society. He does this after he argues that the movement moves to a call for “genuine equality.” In this call, the reality of race and racism becomes open and, as prophet, he must speak to the issue. In speaking to the issue, King then can reflect on the past—as victories and celebrations of the movement blinded him and others to the reality that racism was “still alive in America.” For King, it is racism that produces the “white backlash” and not anything that African Americans did. Again, for King, the “white backlash” is only a symptom of white America’s failure to commit to the whole question of racial equality.

King’s position on race and racism would become even more pronounced in his speech *America’s Chief Moral Dilemma*, delivered May 10, 1967, to the Hungry Club. In speaking on racism, King squarely places blame on white America. He starts by stating that “racism is still alive all over America. Racial injustice is still the Negro’s burden and America’s shame. And we must face the hard fact that many Americans would like to have a nation which is a democracy for white Americans, but simultaneously a dictatorship for Black Americans. We must face the fact that we have much to do in the area of race relations.”⁴⁴ While noting the progress that America has made in this area, King warns against having a “superficial, dangerous optimism.”

The warning comes because, for King, the movement is heading in a new direction—the call for genuine equality. Again, while acknowledging that the movement has made some gains, the gains of integrating lunch counters and hotels did not cost the power structure; they were earned at a “bargain rate”; and it did not “cost the nation a penny.” He moves that it will cost billions of dollars to solve America’s poverty issue. As King speaks out against the establishment, he tells his audience, “Now we’re going to lose some friends in this period. The allies that were with us in Selma will not all stay with us during this period.”⁴⁵ Here King is directly referring to the white supporters, and specifically the Johnson Administration. King knows by speaking out against racism and showing how poverty is directly tied to racism and racist policies, he foresees losing political and white allies.

For King, when it came to white America standing and showing up for Black equality, there has always been “ambivalence and vacillation.” Drawing from the inscription on the Statue of Liberty and noting that the nation has always been the “Mother of exiles,” King also noted that in meaning and action, this inscription has

⁴³ King Jr. “The Other America,” para.21.

⁴⁴ Martin Luther King Jr. “America’s Chief Moral Dilemma.” Speech to The Hungry Club. May 10, 1967, Atlanta, Georgia. p.2 <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/americas-chief-moral-dilemma>

⁴⁵ King Jr., “America’s Chief Moral Dilemma,” p.4.

always meant “white allies from Europe” and it “never evinced the same kind of motherly concern for its Black exiles who were brought here in chains from Africa.”⁴⁶

After offering a history of the white backlash, King then shifts to a response. He tells his audience that to handle the backlash; the people have to “keep the pressure alive.” He reminds his audience that there has never been any gains in civil rights “without constant, persistent, legal and non-violent pressure” and further told them “don’t let anybody make you feel that the problem will work itself out.” After rejecting what he calls the “pressureless persuasion” of Booker T. Washington, King reminds his audience that “along with our patient pleas, there must be “powerful pressure.” For King, it is “nonviolent pressure” that the people need deal with the evil of racial injustice.⁴⁷

King continued to address race and racism in his August 31, 1967 speech, the *Three Evils of Society*. In a speech, King revisited his arguments of racism and the prevailing white backlash. He argued that the “white backlash of today is rooted in the same problem that has characterized America ever since the Black man landed in chains on the shores of this nation.” While not implying that “all white Americans are racist,” he did critique the dominant idea that “racism is just an occasional departure from the norm on the part of a few bigoted extremists.” For King, racism may well be the “corrosive evil that will bring down the curtain on Western civilization” and warned that if “America does not respond creatively to the challenge to banish racism, some future historian will have to say, that a great civilization died because it lacked the soul and commitment to make justice a reality for all men.”⁴⁸

King’s pessimism—especially as it related to the race question—was evident in his December 1967 sermon titled “*The Meaning of Hope*.” Worrying about the condition of America, King started the sermon:

I’m going to be honest enough to tell you that I’m worried about America. I’m worried about our nation because it’s sick with racism still. Just think about the fact that we live in a nation which was founded on the principle that all men are created equal and yet men are still arguing over whether the color of a man’s skin determines the content of his character.⁴⁹

Despite his pessimistic mood, King still declared in the sermon that he had hope. King had what he called a “realistic hope”—a hope “based on a willingness to face the risk of failure and embrace an in-spite-of quality.” He also distinguished hope from desire. For King, desire had an “I” quality, and hope had a “we” quality. Therefore, “genuine hope” could never be selfish because “you can never hope for something that you don’t hope for somebody else and for many other selves. This is why hope is always contagious.” Hope for King was a “refusal to give up.” He believed that there was a “power in hope if you recognize that it is a final refusal to be stopped.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ King Jr., “America’s Chef Moral Dilemma,” p.4.

⁴⁷ King Jr., “America’s Chef Moral Dilemma,” p.5-6.

⁴⁸ Martin Luther King Jr., “The Three Evils of Society.” <https://www.scribd.com/doc/134362247/Martin-Luther-King-Jr-The-Three-Evils-of-Society-1967>.

⁴⁹ Martin Luther King Jr., “The Meaning of Hope,” p. 1. <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/meaning-hope>.

⁵⁰ King Jr., “The Meaning of Hope,” p. 2.

Conclusion: King as Pessimistic Prophet

While he never wavered in his belief in non-violence, he knew that the times demanded something more. No longer could he be silent about the war in Vietnam. Critics charged him with being out of his lane; out of his depth, they said that he was doing harm to the civil rights movement and that he should just stick to what he knew. But the prophet King began to see that the war in Vietnam was taking precious resources away from the war on poverty and that those same Black and brown soldiers, who fought so valiantly in the “rice fields of Saigon,” could not find decent housing or employment when they got back home.

He argued that what held America from becoming great was its racism. Earlier he admitted that he did not see how racism functioned in America—he believed that the better angels of people would rise up and demand that justice be afforded to all. He felt that moral suasion and a massive campaign to prove the worth of Black people and even Blackness itself would be enough. He, however, realized that one of the main reasons why he could not get traction on his guaranteed income idea, or jobs with fair and equitable wages, was because at its core America was a racist country.

He further maintained that the movement had to face a resistance grounded in the nation’s racist heritage. Led by conservatives all across the country, the white backlash led King to realize that even with the earlier victories, a majority of white people still were not on board. He began to understand at a deeper level that the principles of the country he lauded and lifted in the past were mythic constructions. Therefore, he called for a moral revolution—challenging the nation’s long-held beliefs of freedom, democracy, justice, capitalism, and fairness. King determined that the nation was sick and wondered aloud if things could get better.

In his last sermon delivered on March 31, 1968, at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC. King told the congregation that it is an “unhappy truth that racism is a way of life for the vast majority of white Americans, spoken and unspoken, acknowledged and denied, subtle and sometimes not so subtle—the disease of racism permeates and poisons a whole body politic.”⁵¹ In short, for King, he realized that it was racism grounded in racist ideas and policies that hindered America from achieving its greatness. He argued that the movement needed to address this element if they were to be successful with the Poor People Campaign and future initiatives.

King’s strategy was to confront racism directly. However, as a pessimistic prophet, King’s rhetoric had trouble finding a receptive audience. Part of his declining poll numbers and significance in the movement was directly related to his use of invectives and agitative rhetoric, which is part of the pessimistic prophetic tradition. According to Kofi Agyekum, an invective “is an abusive or insulting word or expression with a violent censure or reproach on the addressee. Invectives are more emotionally oriented and considered inappropriate and embarrassing, and intended to offend the addressee(s) or targeted group.” He writes that “invectives are of various types

⁵¹ Martin Luther King Jr., “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution.” Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute. Para 16. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/publications/knock-midnight-inspiration-great-sermons-reverend-martin-luther-king-jr-10>.

depending on the degree to which the targeted person may be aggrieved by the expression.”⁵²

However, Agyekum also notes that incentives “tarnish and curb co-operation between people. It is the antagonistic nature of the verbal expressions and their effects that are considered as verbal taboos.” Further, he writes,

Such words are considered more offensive when used in public. The type of people present at the time and the overall social context may influence the gravity of the offence and the emotional pain it carries. An invective expression indicates that some characteristic features of the target deviate from the social norm either physically, mentally, politically, religiously, or socially. The abuser tries to draw the attention of the target to the deviation from the norm and in so doing exaggerates it.⁵³

This type of rhetoric is in line with Mary McEdwards’s notion of agitative rhetoric.⁵⁴ For McEdwards, agitative rhetoric “evokes extreme movement away from the status quo—usually a complete reversal of existing conditions or situations.” Further, she adds that for these speakers to achieve their goals of “extreme action,” they “succeed only when using language that is also extreme. It is the speaker's choice of the abrasive word instead of the bland one, his deliberate selection of the derogatory metaphor rather than the complimentary, his use of jabbing, pounding simple sentences in place of complex syntax that marks his rhetoric as agitative rather than informative or gently persuasive.”⁵⁵ While McEdwards sees a distinction between invective and agitative rhetoric,⁵⁶ her agitator closely resembles invective.

The agitator must use the jagged word, the snarling word, the insulting word; he cannot clothe his ideas in euphemistic cotton wool to spare our sensibilities. These sensibilities are precisely what the agitator must rake raw, for to agitate, one must irritate and infuriate. When we try to suppress the man using the caustic metaphor, the savage adjective, that agitative rhetoric, we end by suppressing our own abilities to come nearer our ideal society.⁵⁷

⁵² Kofi Agyekum, “Invective Language in Contemporary Ghanaian Politics.” *Journal of Language and Politics*. (2004) 347.

⁵³ Kofi Agyekum, “Invective Language 347-348.

⁵⁴ Mary McEdwards, “Agitative Rhetoric: It’s Nature and Effects.” *Western Speech*, 1968.

⁵⁵ Mary McEdwards, “Agitative Rhetoric,” 36-37.

⁵⁶ McEdwards “Agitative Rhetoric,” 37 writes that, “Invective is the result of a direct one-to-one relationship of the speaker to his single enemy rather than a multiple relationship of a speaker to the enemies of a particular group in a society. The agitator has not been hurt personally by an individual or situation as is the case with the user of invective. Invective has personal bitterness for its primary quality and is addresses to an individual who has directly harmed the speaker—or so the speaker assumes. Agitative rhetoric generally lacks this bitter and spiteful tone. Its final purpose is extreme change in the status quo to benefit others besides the speaker rather than a narrow personal attack to benefit only the revengeful attacker. The agitator in society deliberately tries to select the diction, the imagery, the syntax that will move his audience emotionally and intellectually to call for change; the bitter speaker uses invective for catharsis of self alone. The language of invective is churlish, malicious, and surly; agitative language is jolting, combative, and passionate—in the fullest sense of the term.”

⁵⁷ McEdwards, “Agitative Rhetoric,” 37.

For King, his prophetic sensibilities and use of prophetic pessimism simply made him a pariah in many circles. He lost the support of the Johnson Administration and many in the Civil Rights Movement abandoned him. Close allies began to move away from King's positions. King was considered too radical for even some leftist organizations. This treatment, coupled with the frustrations in and around the movement, led King to become even more depressed than before.

Today many celebrate King while forgetting how he challenged white supremacy. Too many today believe that King fit under the ideologies of colorblindness and neoliberalism. As we note, King focuses much more on race than modern admirers would have imagined. Right before his death in Memphis, Martin Luther King Jr. attempted to dismantle white hegemony; believing that America may just go to hell on his way to becoming one of the most hated men in America.

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