

Paradoxes of King Historiography

One of the prayers that I pray to God everyday is: 'O God, help me to see myself in my true perspective. Help me, O God, to see that I'm just a symbol of a movement. Help me to see that I'm the victim of what the Germans call a Zeitgeist and that something was getting ready to happen in history; history was ready for it. And that a boycott would have taken place in Montgomery, Alabama, if I had never come to Alabama. Help me to realize that I'm where I am because of the forces of history and because of the fifty thousand Negroes of Alabama who will never get their names in the papers and in the headline.

—Martin Luther King, Jr., August 11, 1957 (1)

The literature regarding Martin Luther King, Jr., and the modern African American freedom struggle is extensive and increasingly sophisticated. Although King became an internationally known figure during his life, his stature as a historical figure has continued to grow since his death. In part, this resulted from the successful campaign to establish a national holiday celebrating his birth, but it also derives from a growing recognition that King was one of the key symbols of a twentieth-century social justice struggle that altered the lives of the majority of the world's population. As King's life fades from the memories of those who knew him, the historical King has come to the forefront as scholars construct convincing new narratives of the half century since the start of the Montgomery bus boycott. Yet, while scholars have placed King within the panorama of modern world history, they have also focused their attention on particular aspects of his life and thought. King scholarship has paradoxically become more thematically ambitious and yet often more narrowly specialized. The best contemporary studies of King illuminate the biographical as well as historical factors that account for King's rapid rise to international prominence.

King's own autobiographical statements remain useful starting points for scholars interested in his life. Often with editorial help from his associates, he published numerous insightful and readable articles as well as three major books: *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (1958), *Why We Can't Wait* (1964), and *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (1967) (2). Like most public figures, King carefully fashioned his public persona, but his writings nonetheless offer a revealing window into his intellectual and political evolution amidst the tumult of his times. Although he

responded to the rapidly changing political climate of the 1950s and 1960s, King's basic beliefs remained remarkably consistent during his adulthood. Even as he gained fame as a civil rights leader and peace advocate, he defined himself primarily in religious terms—the twentieth century's foremost proponent of social gospel Christianity.

King's core identity is also evident in the memoirs of those closest to him: notably Martin Luther King, Sr., Coretta Scott King, and close associates such as Ralph Abernathy and Andrew Young.

Although most of the writings about King that appeared during his lifetime were ephemeral, some profiles have proven to be of enduring value. Rather than assuming that the black struggle consisted mainly of a charismatic leader and his followers, a few observers shed light on King's limitations and self-doubts as well as his complex, ever-changing relationship to the social upheavals of the 1950s and 1960s. As early as 1957, an article by journalist Ted Poston noted King's uncertainty about his future role, quoting him as reflecting, "A man who hits the peak at 27 has a tough job ahead." King admitted fearing that he would be expected "to pull rabbits out of the hat for the rest of my life" (3). In 1961 James Baldwin wrote of the tremendous pressures on King—"they come from above and below"—in a perceptive essay in *Harper's* (4). In a 1965 article, historian August Meier labeled King a "conservative militant" who served "as an organ of communication with the Establishment and majority white public opinion" and "a bridge between the activist and more traditionalist or 'conservative' civil rights groups" (5). Robert Penn Warren's *Who Speaks for*



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and other civil rights leaders at the March on Washington in the nation's capital, August 28, 1963. At the far left is John Lewis, chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, who gave a controversial speech at the event. (Image courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration NWDNS-306-SSM-4C[51]13.)

the Negro? (1965) offered revealing portraits of King as well as many other movement activists (6).

In contrast to these journalistic pieces, the initial book-length biographies of King written during his lifetime usually abjured critical judgments, although Lawrence D. Reddick's *Crusader Without Violence* (1959) and Lerone Bennett's *What Measure of Man* (1968) were notably perceptive in their understanding of King's family roots and formative experiences. Soon after King's assassination, David L. Lewis published a thoughtfully opinionated narrative, *King: A Critical Biography* (1970), that suggested avenues of inquiry that would be followed by subsequent King scholars. Writing during a period when many Black Power proponents and white leftists dismissed King's nonviolent strategy, Lewis acknowledged King's remarkable oratorical ability and leadership skills while also insisting that "his singularity of leadership initially, and almost until the end, also derived from forces external to himself" (7).

Once scholars were able to utilize the extensive King manuscript collections assembled at Boston University and the King Center, major new studies began to appear with regularity during the 1980s. By this time, however, students of King had also begun to incorporate insights drawn from new studies of the grassroots black activism in the South. Thus, David J. Garrow's meticulously researched, Pulitzer Prize winning *Bearing the Cross* (1986) offered a detailed narrative of King's public life while still concluding with Ella Baker's judgment: "The movement made Martin rather than Martin making the movement" (8). Taylor Branch was more successful than Garrow in actually incorporating this sentiment into *Parting the Waters* (1988), the first volume of his projected epic trilogy of *America in the King Years*. Branch's sprawling narrative places King's leadership in the context of a succession of local struggles from the Montgomery bus boycott to the Birmingham campaign of 1963. Like Garrow, Branch explored how the interaction of civil rights activism and national politics produced historic civil rights legislation. In his second volume, *Pillar of Fire* (1998), Branch ambitiously attempted to extend his narrative scope still further to include Malcolm X and black communities in the urban North. In addition to these comprehensive narratives by Garrow and Branch, there have also been numerous shorter assessments of King's life written for general audiences by, among others, Adam Fairclough, Peter J. Ling, and Marshall Frady (9).

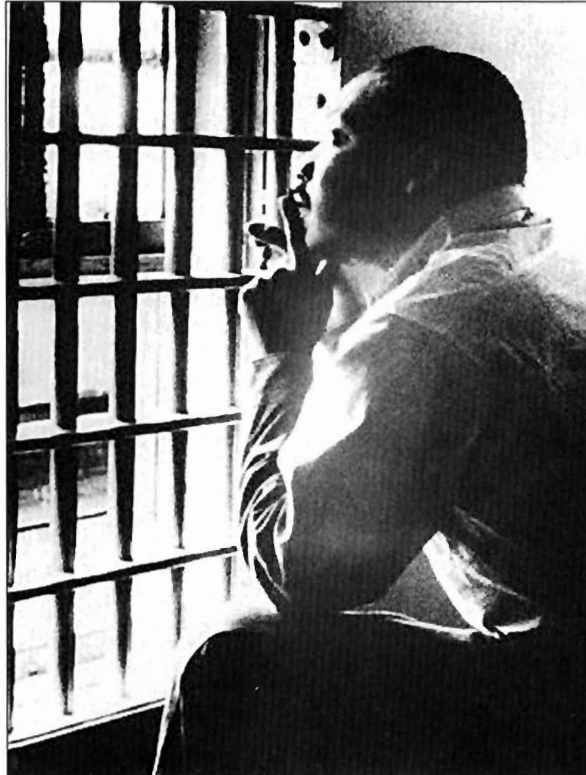
Given the growing number of biographies of King, it is not surprising that there are also numerous studies that illuminate particular aspects of his life. Thus, Richard Lischer's *The Preacher King* (1995) and Lewis V. Baldwin's *There is a Balm in Gilead* (1991)

and *To Make the Wounded Whole* (1992) enhance understanding of King's religious ideas and leadership. Although scholars have debated whether African American religious influences were more important than European American ones in shaping King's religious development, contemporary scholarship on the topic acknowledges the significance of both sources. The King Papers Project's revelation of extensive plagiarisms in King's dissertation and student writings has encouraged the tendency of scholars to see King's religious ideas as derivative rather than original, but Keith Miller's *Voice of Deliverance* (1992) suggests that King's tendency toward "voice merging" helps to account for his rhetorical effectiveness (10).

King's political ideas were similarly synthetic but nonetheless cogent and influential. Richard H. King's *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom* (1992) places these ideas within the American political tradition. King's relationship with the South African freedom struggle have been documented in Baldwin's *Toward the Beloved Community* (1995). Numerous scholars including John Ansbro, Kenneth L. Smith, Ira G. Zepp, and Hanes Walton have attempted systematic assessments of King's nonviolence strategy. The global impact of this strategy is discussed in Mary E. King's *Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1999). Also useful and accessible is James H. Cone's comparative assessment of King and Malcolm X: *Martin & Malcolm & America* (1991).

The major civil rights protest campaigns in which King was involved have each been subjected to detailed analyses. In *Dividing Lines* (2002), J. Mills Thornton III has succeeded in explaining the local political factors that shaped the outcomes of extended racial struggles in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma. Diane McWhorter's Pulitzer Prize winning *Carry Me Home* (2001) is an incisive and detailed narrative of the 1963 Birmingham campaign in the broader context of that city's troubled history of race relations, although

Thornton's work and Glenn T. Eskew's *But for Birmingham* (1997) supplement her understanding of this critical turning point in King's life. Jonathan S. Bass's *Blessed are the Peacemakers* (2001) provides the best description of the circumstances that produced King's influential letter from his Birmingham jail cell. David J. Garrow's *Protest at Selma* (1978) remains useful as an astute analysis of the protest campaign leading to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. James R. Ralph's *Northern Protest* (1993) documents King's attempt to implement his nonviolent protest strategy in Chicago, a setting that proved as challenging as any in the South. King's involvement in the Memphis sanitation workers' strike has been documented in Joan Turner Beifuss's *At the River I Stand* (1989) and Gerald D. McKnight's *The Last Crusade* (1998).



Martin Luther King, Jr., strikes a contemplative pose after being arrested for civil disobedience in Birmingham, Alabama, on April 3, 1963. While in jail King wrote his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in response to a published statement by eight local clergymen criticizing the demonstrations. (Image donated by Corbis-Bettman.)

The FBI's vendetta against King and the assassination in Memphis have also produced a considerable literature, while not resolving every question. David Garrow's *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1983) was an early contribution that remains instructive in documenting the FBI's campaign against King (11). There is no convincing evidence that the FBI was responsible for King's death, but this well documented pattern of federal surveillance made various assassination conspiracy theories more credible. Dramatically contrasting views of James Earl Ray's culpability in King's assassination are presented in William Pepper's *An Act of State* (2003) and Gerald L. Posner's *Killing the Dream* (1999).

In addition to these books, more than a thousand scholarly articles concerning King have been published in journals and anthologies representing various disciplines. Presentations at several of the major King conferences have been assembled and published, and the *Journal of American History* has published two thematic Round Tables featuring King scholarship (12). Despite this outpouring of research—or perhaps because of it—graduate students continue to pursue new lines of biographical and historical inquiry regarding King.

The publications of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project at Stanford University have encouraged this scholarly interest by assembling the King-related documentary resources from hundreds of archives and private collections and making these resources readily available to researchers. The first five published volumes of the project's projected fourteen volume edition of *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* have already produced important new findings regarding King's family roots, academic studies, and religious development. This definitive edition of King's correspondence, speeches, sermons, and writings has been a foundation for other scholarly writings and publications designed for general audiences. These include edited volumes and audio books featuring King's autobiographical statements—*The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1998)—as well as his most famous sermons—*Knock at Midnight* (1998)—and speeches—*A Call to Conscience* (2001) (13). The King Papers Project has also published facsimile editions of *The Student Voice* and *The Movement*, and it offers online access to the King papers at its web site, <<http://www.kingpapers.org>> (14).

Although the King Project's edition of *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* necessarily focuses on King's leadership role, King's correspondence and even his own public statements document his inextricable link to the mass movements of his times. Similarly, the broader scholarship concerning these movements has informed the annotation of King's papers. It is instructive of the current state of scholarship on the African American freedom struggle that Steven F. Lawson's recent comprehensive survey begins by noting the shift away from King-centered studies during the past two

decades; yet Lawson ends with a plea that contemporary scholars “not lose sight of the reality that King's presence had an enormous impact on how the movement progressed and was received” (15).

King's papers suggest that his most important historical contribution was that he not only understood his place in a larger African American freedom struggle but also the place of this effort in a global freedom struggle. King realized that the struggle was beyond his control, but he nonetheless offered singularly visionary guidance as it transcended limited civil rights goals. In his last speech, delivered in Memphis on the eve of his assassination, King indicated that among all periods of human history he would chose “to live just a few years in the second half of the twentieth century.” He explained:

Something is happening in our world. The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today, whether they are in Johannesburg, South Africa; Nairobi, Kenya; Accra, Ghana; New York City; Atlanta, Georgia; Jackson, Mississippi; or Memphis, Tennessee, the cry is always the same: ‘We want to be free.’ And another reason I'm happy to live in this period is that we have been forced to grapple with the problems that men have been trying to grapple with through history. . . . Men for years have talked about war and peace. But now, no longer can they just talk about it. It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence in this world; it's nonviolence or nonexistence. That is where we are today (16).□

Endnotes

1. Martin Luther King, Jr. “Conquering Self-Centeredness,” Sermon delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, August 11, 1957, in Clayborne Carson et al, eds., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Volume IV: Symbol of the Movement, January 1957-December 1958* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 255.
2. These works provide the narrative thread for Clayborne Carson, ed., *The*



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, Norway, on December 11, 1964, with Coretta Scott King looking on. The thirty-five year old King was the youngest recipient of the award at the time. (Image donated by Corbis-Bettman.)

- Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 2001)
3. Ted Poston, "Martin Luther King: Where Does He Go from Here?" *New York Post*, April 14, 1967, reprinted in Clayborne Carson, David Garrow, Bill Kovach, and Carol Polsgrove, eds., *Reporting Civil Rights* (New York: Library of America, 2003), 362-7.
 4. James Baldwin, "The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King," *Harper's*, February 1961, 33-42.
 5. August Meier, "On the Role of Martin Luther King," *New Politics*, Winter 1965, reprinted in Clayborne Carson et al, eds., *Reporting Civil Rights*, 459.
 6. Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (New York: Random House, 1965).
 7. David L. Lewis, *King: A Critical Biography* (New York: Praeger, 1970 [also published in Urbana by the University of Illinois Press as *King: A Biography* (1978)]).
 8. David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 625.
 9. Adam Fairclough, *Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995); Peter J. Ling, *Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Marshall Frady, *Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Penguin Group, 2002).
 10. See "Becoming Martin Luther King, Jr.—Plagiarism and Originality: A Round Table," *Journal of American History* 78 (June 1991): 11-123.
 11. David J. Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.: From "Solo" to Memphis* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983).
 12. Peter J. Albert and Ronald Hoffman, *We Shall Overcome: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Black Freedom Struggle* (New York: De Capo Press, 1993); Brian Ward and Tony Badger, eds., *The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement* (London: Macmillan Press, 1996); Lewis V. Baldwin et al, eds., *The Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Boundaries of Law, Politics, and Religion* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002); "A Round Table: Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Journal of American History* 74 (September 1987), 436-81; and "Becoming Martin Luther King, Jr.—Plagiarism and Originality: A Round Table."
 13. These books, edited by Clayborne Carson and other King Project staff members, are available in audiobook editions that include recordings of King's major public statements. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* is available in Finnish, French, Italian, Japanese, Korean, and Portuguese translations. *A Knock at Midnight* is available in a French translation, and *A Call to Conscience* has been published in Japanese.
 14. King Papers Project, *The Student Voice, 1960-1965: Periodical of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1990) and *The Movement, 1964-1970* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993). See also Clayborne Carson, primary consultant, *Civil Rights Chronicle: The African-American Struggle for Freedom* (Lincolnwood, IL: Publications International, 2003).
 15. "Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement," in Steven F. Lawson, *Civil Rights Crossroads: Nation, Community, and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), part 1.
 16. Quoted from "I've Been to the Mountaintop," April 3, 1968, in Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard, eds., *A Call to Conscience: the Landmark Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 2001), 197-8.
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