

Editing Martin Luther King, Jr.: Political and Scholarly Issues

Since becoming director of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers Project in 1985, I have wavered between two conflicting rationales for this long-term project. On the one hand, I have asserted that the historical importance of King's ideas was sufficient justification for a major printed edition of his correspondence, sermons, public statements, published writings, and unpublished manuscripts. He was, after all, an influential religious and civil rights leader and an internationally known, Nobel prizewinning advocate of nonviolent strategies for social change. On the other hand, I have remained skeptical of the notion that a single individual could bring about major social changes. While conceding that King's presence may have sped the pace of social change or caused such change to occur with less violence, I discounted the Great Man theory of history, arguing instead: "If King had never lived, the black struggle would have followed a course of development similar to the one it did." A habitual iconoclast rather than a hagiographer, I often found it convenient to justify the King Project by suggesting that, if major editions had been or were being published for other American historical figures, why not for King?

The experience of preparing the first volume of a fourteen-volume edition of King's papers soon made it difficult, however, to avoid confronting fundamental questions regarding King's historical significance. Was our edition of King's papers intended to enhance our understanding of him as an individual, or was it meant to illustrate his role in a social movement? Was it to document his beliefs at particular points in time or to document his social interactions and formative experiences?

Like other documentary editors, my staff and I assumed that historical documents provided evidence about what individuals thought or did in the past. We believed, therefore, that our primary task was to gather a comprehensive body of such documentary evidence and then to communicate that evidence in a clear, accurate, and unobstructed form to readers of our volumes. Unlike literary or textual editors, we were less interested in the present-day meanings that could be derived from texts than in what a particular text could tell us about what King thought or did at some point in the past. As historians, we resisted the tendency to create perfected texts derived from multiple extant drafts and instead limited ourselves to reproducing the texts of documents as they existed in the past. Moreover, we felt confident that other documentary editors had already developed principles that would allow us to achieve our goal and that we should simply adopt their methodologies with only minor changes. In short, we assumed that our edition would contribute to historical research by providing readers with reliable transcripts of the most significant available documents relating to King's life.

As we proceeded with our work, however, naive assumptions about methodology were replaced by nagging questions that were difficult to resolve. Why was an annotated, selective edition of King's papers necessary? Why didn't we simply produce a microfilm or facsimile edition of all of the several hundred thousand King-related documents that we located, rather than selecting a small proportion of these documents for transcription and annotation? Should our annotations be extensive or sparse? Was there an inherent contradiction between the ideal of accurately replicating documents and the practice of surrounding them with extensive annotations? Was our decision to produce a printed edition with extensive annotations intended to enhance our understanding of King or to demonstrate our skills as researchers? Underlying all these questions was a more fundamental one: what worthwhile information, not already known to King scholars, could be learned from the King Project's effort to prepare a definitive documentary edition of King's papers?

Answering such questions quite unexpectedly became a matter of considerable urgency when our annotation research produced findings that, in the view of some, undermined King's historical reputation. Our discovery of extensive plagiaries in King's academic papers affected every aspect of our work by raising new questions about the biographical and historical significance of many of the documents we had selected for inclusion. Should the existence of such plagiaries be selected for inclusion in King's papers? How should we convey to readers of our edition the intellectual provenance of papers containing plagiarized passages? Should we indicate every instance

of textual appropriation and attempt to determine which instances constituted plagiarism? Answering these questions required not only judgments about proper scholarly practices but also about our research capabilities and the expectations of the edition's potential readers, both scholarly and lay.

No one advised against publishing our conclusions regarding King's plagiarism, but the discussions regarding the manner in which we would present our findings were both intense and extensive. Although we discovered the first indication of plagiarism in 1988, we kept the information within the project until staff members could determine the extent of the "problem." The search for plagiaries in King's dissertation and dozens of his academic papers required careful textual analysis, involving the examination of thousands of pages of potential source texts. When the editors concluded that the issue of plagiarism would require revisions in the project's research strategy and publication schedule, we began discussing our options with persons outside the project. One evening in September 1989, I met with Mrs. Coretta Scott King at her home to inform her of our findings, and, the following month, I met at the King Center with members of the project's advisory board. At these meetings, the editors proposed that the plagiarism issue be discussed fully in a scholarly article that would appear before the publication of the initial volume of the King papers. The editors hoped that this plan would enable us to release a statement on our plagiarism discovery while also allowing us to delay publication of the first volume until we had completed the vast amount of annotation research that the discovery made necessary. No one dissented from this approach. There was, however, considerable discussion, both during and after the board meeting, regarding the issue of whether individual annotations were needed for each instance of textual appropriation. I argued that the extent of plagiaries could be indicated in head notes and that source footnotes should be used sparingly so as not to overwhelm other types of annotations and thereby detract attention from the texts themselves. I was soon persuaded to abandon my approach when other scholars suggested that anything less than itemized source notations would leave the King Project open to a cover-up charge.

Board members also agreed not to discuss the plagiarism discovery until the editors had published their article, but the circle of scholars who became aware of our findings expanded rapidly during late 1989 and 1990. I became involved in a heated series of phone calls and correspondence with one board member when I learned that he, had discussed the matter with other scholars at a Southern Historical Association meeting. I was dismayed when he attacked me for suppressing scholarly freedom; yet I continued to insist that premature disclosure would result in public misunderstandings of our findings and greatly disrupt our continuing research effort. Rumors about our work were sufficiently rife to reach members of the press. On 3 December 1989, a *London Telegraph* columnist stated that the King Project had discovered that King's dissertation was based on a thesis submitted earlier by another Boston University student, Jack Boozer. During subsequent months, I received a few phone calls from journalists who had read the column or had heard rumors from other sources. I soon mastered the politician's art of responding to such calls by calling attention to the erroneous aspects of each rumor and then promising to get back to them when the Project was prepared to tell the full story.

After contacting the editor of the *Journal of American History*, we worked strenuously to complete by June 1990 an article that would report on our research in progress and offer our initial thoughts about the significance of the plagiarism discovery. We were led to expect that the peer review of the article would be expedited so that it could appear in the December 1990 issue. We hoped that the *Journal*, perhaps for the first time in its history, would break a major news story, but we were disappointed. Despite our strong objections, the *Journal's* editor insisted that our article could only be published as part of a larger "Round Table" involving other scholars.

Our efforts to control the initial release of news regarding the plagiarism finding came to an end when a reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* began investigating a lead about the plagiarism finding. When others in the news media gave prominence to the story, some critics immediately challenged our motives.-' Were we trying to harm King's reputation? Had we delayed releasing our findings in order to protect King? We tried as best we could to defend ourselves by explaining that our objective "was not to determine whether King violated academic rules [but] to assemble evidence regarding the provenance of King's papers and to make this evidence available to readers of our edition." We knew, however, that our task involved determining the significance as well as the extent of King's plagiaries, and thus we were forced to confront some of the questions mentioned above. Indeed, while the press reports of King's plagiaries focused on the related ethical issues, our effort to determine their significance, soon led us to address basic questions about the extent to which King revealed his thoughts in manuscripts written for

specific purposes and intended to be read by others.

Although a few critics have disputed our contention that legalistic assessments of King's ethical culpability were less important than an effort to place the plagiarism issue within a larger biographical and historical context, this approach did not lay to rest the plagiarism issue. Indeed, we became aware of more and more instances of plagiarism as we extended our inquiry beyond the dissertation, which was the focus of the initial press reports about our work, to the entire body of King's writings and public statements. When our research was published in June 1991 in the *Journal of American History*, the article made clear that King's plagiarism was a general pattern evident in nearly all of his academic writings. Although the plagiaries in the dissertation were less egregious than the press reports had suggested, they were more extensive throughout King's papers than had been reported. We found that instances of textual appropriation can be seen in his earliest extant writings as well as his dissertation. The pattern is also noticeable in his speeches and sermons throughout his career.

Even as we became more and more aware of the extent to which King relied upon the words of others, we also came to the somewhat paradoxical conclusion that King's academic writings-and certainly his later writings and speeches as a public figure-were reliable expressions of his public persona. Writings that were flawed by plagiaries were nevertheless revealing in that they expressed views that were consistent internally and over time. This consistency helps to explain why King's professors and later readers of his papers did not notice the extensive textual appropriations. We also suggested that the compositional practices that raised ethical issues during King's graduate-school days were closely related to the positive qualities that later made him an influential public figure. Rather than youthful lapses in judgment, King's appropriations reflected a deeply ingrained attitude regarding the use of erudite language to achieve personal and social ends. Our findings suggest that, once he entered public life, King's theological training became an asset, distinguishing him from other black leaders and providing him with intellectual resources that enhanced his ability to influence white middleclass public opinion. We concluded:

Even his ability to appropriate texts to express his opinions was a benefit as he drafted public statements that would not require citations. His characteristic compositional method contributed to the rhetorical skills that became widely admired when King was called unexpectedly to national leadership. His appropriations of major scholarly texts satisfied his teachers and advanced his personal ambitions; his use of political, philosophical, and literary texts-particularly those expressing the nation's democratic ideas-inspired and mobilized many Americans, thereby advancing the cause of social justice. His use, as a student and as a leader, of hegemonic or canonized cultural materials enabled him to create a transracial identity that served his own needs and those of African Americans.

As we sought to explore such varied biographical implications of our discovery of King's plagiaries, we realized that our discussion in the *Journal of American History* had only begun to address some vexing issues. The thematic consistency we noted in King's papers did not necessarily indicate that the papers were authentic representations of King's private thoughts as opposed to his public positions. They may simply indicate a consistency in King's literary or public persona or in his motives. As we became more able to identify precisely the gradual development of King's theological perspective, we realized that the documents increased our uncertainty about the inner workings of his mind. King's skill in the appropriation of words gave him the ability to reveal his theological views with sophistication or simply to reveal his sophistication. His skill in the use of a European-American theological scholarly vocabulary may also have allowed him to conceal or disguise his underlying African-American religious beliefs, perhaps even from himself

We already knew that many of King's published works were heavily edited by others and sometimes ghostwritten. As we sought to make sense of the pattern of plagiarism, we became increasingly aware that our annotations of King's papers clarified his behavior while obscuring his motives. After carefully annotating dozens of King's academic papers, we were unable to determine how King felt about the ethical standards associated with academic writing. Did he feel guilty about his violations of those standards or was he simply oblivious to them? Did King plagiarize the word of major theologians only because he agreed with them or because the words also served purposes other than simply communicating theological beliefs? In a paper written at Crozer Theological Seminary attacking Karl Barth's notion of a "wholly other" God, King concedes in his conclusion, "We must grant freely, however, that final intellectual certainty about God is impossible.... We can never gain complete knowledge or

proof of the real.' Does our knowledge that the two sentences are largely appropriated from another theologian indicate that King did not actually include himself within the pronoun "We"?"

What about King and his world do the words convey? Can we ever know King through his words? Do his words represent his perception of reality or his rhetorical strategies? In recent debates among literary critics, the notion of authorial intention has been reexamined by deconstructionists who question the notion that a text can serve as a window into the past. It is probable that a deconstructionist reading of King's writings would yield many insights, but my point is not to say that the language of a King document is self-referential and thus more a house of mirrors than a window into the past. Rather, my point is that the discovery that the words in King's papers may not be his own raises questions about the assumption that any document can accurately reveal all dimensions of the thoughts of an "author."

Although scholars quote King in support of various interpretations, the fact that he appropriates the words of others leads us to question the depth of his understanding about concepts that became central to his thought as a public figure. The problematic uses some scholars have made of King's writings can be seen from an example in John J. Ansbro's *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of a Mind* (1982). To clarify King's conception of agape, Ansbro cited a passage from King's dissertation (shown first) that was derived from Paul Tillich (shown second)

All love, except *agape*, is dependent on contingent characteristics which change and are partial, such as repulsion and attraction, passion and sympathy. [Footnote:] Tillich, ST, 1, 280 *Agape* is independent of these states. It affirms the other unconditionally. It is *agape* that suffers and forgives. It seeks the personal fulfillment of the other.

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How well does the quotation from King's dissertation illustrate King's understanding of *agape* if this particular expression of that belief came from Paul Tillich? This question itself suggests that if King had paraphrased rather than plagiarized the material, he would be assumed to have a greater understanding of the distinction between *agape* and *eros*. The distinction between plagiarized and paraphrased text often falsely implies that the author understands the latter more than the former.

Verification of authorship is assumed to be a major step toward the determination of whether a document represents the thoughts of the presumed author. But the process of transforming thoughts into words on paper is complex in ways that historians often avoid confronting. It is, first of all, not simply a one-way process for most writers, because writing is related to the process of thinking. The necessity of putting words on paper can alter an author's opinions by making assumptions explicit or by transforming opinions into arguments that can influence readers. The vocabulary that the writer borrows from others, either in the form of specific intellectual influences or, more generally, in the form of cultural norms also sets limits on the options that are available to an author seeking to communicate with others.

King's deep roots in African-American culture undoubtedly affected his ability and willingness to communicate his thoughts in writing. Perhaps the most challenging questions that were raised by our discovery of King's plagiarism relate to the issue of determining King's level of comfort with academic writing as a vehicle for self-revelation. What was the relationship between his academic persona as presented in his academic papers and his evolving persona as an African-American religious leader? Although there is a consistency in the views expressed in his academic papers and those expressed in his sermons, King gradually became more willing to use the emotionally charged language of the black church rather than the emotionally and language of the academy to express his views. His writings suggest that his academic training may have given him the ability to conceal or repress his emotions and his African-American cultural roots.

Such comments indicate that the foremost barrier that separates us from an understanding of King's thoughts may

be King's culturally ambiguous position on the borders between black and white America. Seen from this perspective, King was one of many African-American leaders who have appropriated European-American language, cultural values, and institutional forms to serve their own purposes. Because all European-American elements of African-American culture are borrowed, it is hardly surprising that African-American thought takes the form of implicit or explicit references to European-American intellectual traditions. King's writings exemplified the tendency of black reformers to refer often to the basic documents of American democratic ideals, particularly the Declaration of Independence. Black leaders who appropriated the democratic arguments of revered white leaders not only garnered white support for black claims to political equality but also transformed the popularly understood meanings of the texts themselves. Keith Miller has argued persuasively that in the autobiographical passages in *Stride Toward Freedom*, King sought to enhance his standing among whites by emphasizing the extent to which his beliefs derived from his study of major theological and philosophical texts rather than from nonscholarly or African-American sources. Miller demonstrates that King often borrowed from intermediate sources that had already transformed abstract principles of democracy, Christian love, and nonviolence into usable political ideas: "Through skillfully choreographed political confrontations, King repeatedly tested the clichés of Jefferson ('All men are created equal'), the Bible ('You shall reap what you sow'), and progressive pulpits ('Truth crushed to earth will rise again) against the billy clubs of Southern police and the hatred of recalcitrant governors."

Recent literary criticism has made much of the indeterminate relationship between linguistic symbols and the reality they claim to symbolize. Likewise, King and other black leaders have long recognized that the democratic rhetoric they appropriate from white political leaders originally signified a racial reality African-Americans found unacceptable. The black leaders' achievement was in using the political vocabulary of the dominant culture creatively and ironically in order to change that reality. For King and other African-Americans, the appropriation of hegemonic texts was a political act because they asserted their ability to use texts for their own purposes, as a critique of present reality, or as a prescription for a future one. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has noted that the African-American literary expression often involves the creation by blacks of "their own unique vernacular structures" that comment on their European-American sources. Gates proceeds to analyze the challenge confronting African-American writers as they seek to express the meaning of their own experiences and those of other blacks while using a language and forms of literary expression that were created to describe the experiences of whites. Despite their best efforts, Gates notes, black novelists and poets have rarely found it possible "to step outside the white hermeneutical circle and into the black."

Although we cannot know for certain the psychological costs of King's attempts to use a borrowed vocabulary to express his thoughts, his writings and oral statements sometimes provide hints that he struggled to develop a rhetorical style that would express his beliefs more directly and fully than those he learned in the academy. As we suggested in the *Journal of American History*, his writings display the influence of African American religious traditions less than does his oratory, particularly his sermons.

Although King's literary persona remained largely that of a culturally assimilated religious leader, he occasionally noted the contrast between theological discourse and the emotionally evocative language of the black church. In a 1965 sermon, King advised his congregation that "we do not need to get philosophical about Him, because we get lost in the atmosphere of philosophy and theology sometimes" He compared Tillich's notion of God as "the new being" to the "poetic language" of black religion. "Sometimes when we've tried to see the meaning of Jesus we've said he's the lily of the valley ... a bright and morning star ... a rock in a weary land ... a shelter in the time of storm ... a mother to the motherless, and a father to the fatherless. At times we've just ended up saying he's my everything"

Ironically, King's seemingly routine use of plagiarized passages may have allowed him to avoid internalizing the European-American modes of thought that underlay the passages.

What can we conclude, therefore, about the biographical and historical significance of King's papers? Although I concede that the King Papers Project would not exist if not for the widespread belief among American elites in the notion that Great Men and their ideas alter the course of history, I suggest that the papers reveal less about King's

impact on the world than about the religions and intellectual influences that shaped his public persona. Documentary editions undoubtedly reinforce the notion that great leaders and their ideas alter the course of history, but they can also become valuable sources of knowledge about the social forces that make possible the emergence of new leaders. Although readers of the King papers will undoubtedly learn more about King, they should not expect his inner mind to be fully revealed through his papers. We must face the possibility that King's public persona may have obscured aspects of his personality and opinions or that King's diction served purposes other than to communicate his inner thoughts. Plagiarized academic writings may have been more effective than more original writings in allowing King to play his chosen role as an African-American leader seeking the influence white Americans. King used his writings and his speeches and sermons not only to express ideas, but more important, to influence his multiracial audience. King has already been the focus of numerous serious biographical works, but our study of his papers convinces us that he will remain both a compelling and an elusive subject for research for many years to come.

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