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# King's Plagiarism: Imitation, Insecurity, and Transformation

David J. Garrow

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Martin Luther King, Jr.'s extensive plagiarism in his graduate school term papers and doctoral dissertation is a crucial issue in any biographical evaluation of King, but it will amount to only a brief footnote in the expanding historiography of the black freedom struggle of the 1950s and 1960s. While the impressive annotations and discoveries of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers Project staff will unavoidably alter our understanding of the young Martin Luther King, in broader and more important contexts their work will, in the long run, complement and further strengthen two interpretive themes that already have strong and growing support among civil rights scholars: First, King was far more deeply and extensively shaped by the black church tradition in which he grew up than by the readings and instructors he encountered in seminary and graduate school, and, second, the emergence and development of the black freedom movement was in no way the simple product of individual leaders and national organizations.

Nothing can be gained by attempting to minimize or understate either the amount of King's plagiarism or the seriousness of the academic wrongdoing that it represented. The extent of King's largely unacknowledged reliance in his own dissertation upon an earlier Boston University (BU) dissertation by Jack S. Boozer is especially egregious, and already some who are either uncomfortable with or downright hostile to King and the movement's larger political legacy are hard at work to amplify and emphasize King's pirating of Boozer's work.<sup>1</sup> Likewise little can be gained by attempting to avoid the circumstantial but nonetheless almost inescapable conclusion that King knew what he was doing was wrong at the time that he did it. Clayborne Carson has emphasized that King "knew what footnotes were and he knew how to use them."<sup>2</sup> Those less empathic to King are utilizing precise and powerful comparisons of the King and Boozer manuscripts in arguing that "the smooth and impressive manner in which King conjoined, word for word, different

David J. Garrow is a Visiting Fellow at the Virginia Center for the Humanities and is on leave as professor of political science at the City College of New York and the City University Graduate Center. This essay has benefited extensively from conversations with Sean Wilentz, Ralph Luker, James H. Cone, Keith D. Miller, Peter Holloran, and Mary Beth Norton.

<sup>1</sup> See, in particular, Theodore Pappas, "A Doctor in Spite of Himself: The Strange Career of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Dissertation," *Chronicles*, 15 (Jan. 1991), 25-29.

<sup>2</sup> *USA Today*, Nov. 13, 1990, sec. A, p. 11.

sections of Boozer's dissertation could not have been done without great circumspection and forethought."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, a careful reader of the public statements made by King Project staff members can easily conclude that those who have spent the most time comparing the two manuscripts likewise have few private doubts about the question of knowing intent. As one project editor said in commenting on Coretta Scott King's understanding of the plagiarism problem in light of the fact that she herself had typed the final copy of her husband's dissertation, "We all suspected she might have known anyway."<sup>4</sup>

Rather than grapple unsuccessfully and unproductively with such issues, anyone seeking a serious yet sympathetic understanding of "what went wrong in King's career as a student" ought to begin by gaining a clear understanding of the learning style that King brought with him to both Crozer Theological Seminary and Boston University.<sup>5</sup> As the invaluable work of Keith D. Miller best highlights, long before Martin Luther King, Jr., began work on "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman," he had begun to master a sermonic repertoire and a preaching style rooted in pulpit performances he had witnessed and studied by well-known Atlanta preachers such as his own father, Rev. Martin Luther King, and Rev. William Holmes Borders of the Wheat Street Baptist Church.<sup>6</sup> Equally important, as Miller's work shows, and as King's closest teenage friends similarly testify, King devoted extremely serious study to the published sermons of such white Protestant preachers as Harry Emerson Fosdick, Robert McCracken, George Buttrick, and J. Wallace Hamilton.<sup>7</sup> King's ability to memorize and absorb lengthy texts came to him both easily and early. At the age of fourteen he delivered a competitive high school oration on "The Negro and the Constitution"

<sup>3</sup> Pappas, "Doctor in Spite of Himself," 27. For the interaction of Jon Westling, President *ad interim* of Boston University, and the Rockford Institute, which publishes *Chronicles*, see James Warren, "Denial of King Plagiarism Ignores the Evidence," *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 18, 1990, sec. V, p. 2; and Chris Raymond, "Discovery of Early Plagiarism by Martin Luther King Raises Troubling Questions for Scholars and Admirers," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Nov. 21, 1990, sec. A, pp. 1, 8.

<sup>4</sup> "King Plagiarism Agonized Scholars," *San Jose Mercury-News*, Nov. 19, 1990, sec. A, p. 1. It also bears noting, in light of press suggestions that Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1964 decision to deposit his earlier personal papers in Boston University's library might imply an absence of concern as to what careful scholarly review of his student writings might reveal, that the shipment and subsequent formal deposit of King's manuscripts was initiated and overseen by his former graduate school mentor, Professor L. Harold DeWolf, at a time when King was intensely preoccupied with—and sometimes jailed as part of—the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's protest campaign in St. Augustine, Florida. See *Coretta Scott King, Administratrix v. Trustees of Boston University*, C. A. #87-6805, Suffolk Co. (Mass.) Superior Ct., Dec. 8, 1987; and "Trial Ordered on University's Claim to King Papers," *New York Times*, Sept. 11, 1988, p. 33. Also see David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York, 1986), 334-42.

<sup>5</sup> David J. Garrow, "How King Borrowed," *Washington Post*, Nov. 18, 1990, sec. C, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Keith D. Miller, "Martin Luther King, Jr., Borrows a Revolution: Argument, Audience, and Implications of a Secondhand Universe," *College English*, 48 (March 1986), 249-65; Keith D. Miller, "Composing Martin Luther King, Jr.," *PMLA*, 105 (Jan. 1990), 70-82.

<sup>7</sup> Rev. Larry H. Williams interview by David J. Garrow, Jan. 24, 1986 (in David J. Garrow's possession). Also see the extremely valuable discussion, similarly based on an interview with Larry H. Williams, in Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York, 1988), 64-67. It bears emphasis, as Keith D. Miller notes, that "tracing the exact relationship between King's texts and black pulpit traditions is made difficult by the relative scarcity of either published or recorded sermons by black pastors. . . . This difficulty should lead no one to conclude that white sermons exerted more influence on King than black sermons." Miller, "Martin Luther King, Jr., Borrows a Revolution," 254n8.

without either a text or notes.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, according to the recollection of his closest teenage friend, Rev. Larry H. Williams, King relied upon intensive study of a Fosdick sermon, "Life Is What You Make It," in preparation for his own first trial sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church in 1947.<sup>9</sup>

Direct imitation of the best and most highly regarded pulpit texts and preaching styles was not only the method of learning that King adopted as a young teenager; it was a widely and fully accepted style of learning for any beginning preacher, white or black.<sup>10</sup> The fact that King long practiced this method of study and of oral composition is essential to understanding his own development and helps to explain why it was the teachings of the Bible and of the black Baptist preaching tradition—and not the writings of Mohandas K. Gandhi, Henry David Thoreau, or others—that became most visible and fundamental in all of his subsequent black church preaching.<sup>11</sup> As Miller's work makes clear, a pivotal part of the oral preaching tradition in which King grew up was the almost universal presumption that "words are shared assets, not personal belongings." King, like thousands of other preachers who similarly borrowed from the tradition's fluid corpus of collected great sermons, quite easily and naturally "failed to treat the word as a commodity."<sup>12</sup>

This tradition of verbal imitation was a basic part of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s early life. It certainly helps to illuminate and explain King's academic mistakes, but it in no way begins to excuse the extensive wrongdoing that is so widespread in King's Crozer and BU term papers and in his 1955 dissertation. Any argument that King simply carried over from one context into a second the learning style he had acquired in the first, without appreciating or understanding that what he was doing was both academically inappropriate and ethically improper, is so unrespectful of both King's impressive intelligence and the top-notch undergraduate training to which he was exposed at Atlanta's Morehouse College as to be highly implausible. As Professor Carson phrased it, "He had to have known that he was in an academic environment and there were different rules."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, as can be easily seen in precisely the writings where King plagiarizes extensively, his knowledge of how to quote and footnote appropriately when he so desired appears to have been quite complete. In light of King's explicit textual acknowledgment of Boozer's "very fine dissertation" and his consistent practice of always including a reference in his bibliographical listings to each of the works from which he borrowed unattributed prose, it appears all but inescapable, upon thoughtful reflection, that King was quite aware of exactly what he was doing.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 35.

<sup>9</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 66. Also see Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 38.

<sup>10</sup> Miller, "Martin Luther King, Jr., Borrows a Revolution"; and Miller, "Composing Martin Luther King, Jr.,"

<sup>11</sup> David J. Garrow, "The Intellectual Development of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Influences and Commentaries," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 40 (Jan. 1986), 5–20; James H. Cone, "The Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *ibid.*, 21–39; and James H. Cone, "Martin Luther King, Jr., Black Theology—Black Church," *Theology Today*, 40 (Jan. 1984), 409–20.

<sup>12</sup> Miller, "Composing Martin Luther King, Jr.," 79.

<sup>13</sup> *USA Today*, Nov. 13, 1990, sec. A, p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers Project, "The Student Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Summary Statement on Research," *Journal of American History*, 78 (June 1991).

Why then did King knowingly violate academic rules of which he was fully and clearly cognizant? No simple explanation can answer this question adequately, but at least three elements of a more complex, if inherently speculative, explanation can be identified and characterized. First, as the King Project staff's summary statement cogently and frankly emphasizes, King's academic compositions, especially at BU, were almost without exception little more than summary descriptions, exegeses, and comparisons of others' writings. Nonetheless the papers almost always received desirable letter grades, strongly suggesting that King's "professors did not expect more originality in his compositions" and that King himself absorbed the lesson that comprehensive regurgitation, rather than individual originality or creativity, was the accepted academic style at Boston University's School of Theology. King's own prior experience with the learning style of the sermonic tradition no doubt made this academic lesson all the easier to adopt.<sup>15</sup>

Second, as other commentators can address more fully and more personally, when twenty-two-year-old Martin Luther King, Jr., arrived in Boston in the fall of 1951, after four years at Morehouse and three years at Crozer, he was by no means fully at home with the dense and often abstruse theological texts that he was assigned to master. King wanted a Ph.D. in order to credential himself as someone far more learned than the average Baptist preacher. But, as has been emphasized and detailed elsewhere, King was most attracted to those doctrines and themes in his graduate readings, and especially in the personalist tradition that suffused BU's theology school, that spoke, albeit in different, more abstract language, to beliefs and values that he already held as a result of his church-centered Atlanta upbringing.<sup>16</sup> It is no exaggeration to say that in his course work at Boston University, Martin Luther King, Jr., was to a considerable extent going through the motions—preparing and submitting written work that was what he understood his instructors

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 27, 29. In light of harsh criticism (much of it wholly undeserved) directed at the King Project staff in the public press, sympathetic scholars are extremely reluctant at this intermediate stage of the project's work to cavil with their exceptionally skillful annotation work, but it must be said that the more the project staff can and will say about King's compositional methods, the richer the scholarly community's understanding will be. In particular, the project should say all it can about how King employed his hundreds of note cards (acquired by the project staff from Coretta Scott King only in 1989) in drafting and footnoting his dissertation. Staff editors have explained that King often transcribed quotations he encountered in secondary sources in a manner that would wrongly suggest he acquired them from the original, but King's note cards ought to be a rich source for additional analysis of his compositional methods. Columnists Abiola Sinclair and Garry Wills provide two polar opposite attacks on the King Project. Sinclair complains that "Carson's gotten his 30 pieces of silver, namely his picture in *Newsweek*" and contends that "the purpose for all of this, including Clayborne Carson's findings, is to further discourage Black people, especially Black children, and take from them anyone whom they could possibly look up to." Abiola Sinclair, "Our Own Worst Enemy!" *New York Amsterdam News*, Dec. 1, 1990, p. 24. Wills argues that "for the editors of the King papers to have hesitated for three years over the revelation of what their research was turning up looks suspicious and contrary to the spirit of scholarly inquiry." Garry Wills, "Dr. King and Plagiarism," *Universal Press Syndicate* column, Nov. 9, 1990 (in David J. Garrow's possession). Former King aide Bernard Lee contends that the whole debate "fuels the racist attitude in the nation, this Jesse Helms mentality." "Plagiarism Revelation Splits King's Followers," *Atlanta Journal & Constitution*, Nov. 11, 1990, sec. A, p. 8. For an important retrospective analysis of press behavior concerning the project's findings, see Charles Babington, "Embargoed," *New Republic*, Jan. 28, 1991, pp. 9–11.

<sup>16</sup> Garrow, "Intellectual Development of Martin Luther King, Jr." It bears repeating as well that King throughout his Boston years was aiming towards a career as a pastor, not an academic. "He told me, fairly early, that he was not a scholar, and that he wasn't interested, really, in the academic world," Cornish Rogers, a classmate of King, recalled in a 1984 interview. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 48.

expected but that held little personal meaning or significance for King himself. If at times, or perhaps quite often, King was not fully sure of his ability to cope successfully with the dense and heavy theological jargon, his falling back on what he wrongly thought a safe strategy within the parameters of BU's academic style is again understandable, although not excusable.

Third, and most speculatively, we ought to consider a significant reinterpretation of King before the Montgomery bus boycott. Traditionally we have viewed the twenty-three- and twenty-four-year-old King of 1952 and 1953 as a young intellectual seriously hungering for more and more theological analyses and philosophical tomes. In light of the new evidence, and viewing anew other material we already know about the young King, might we be better advised to consider instead the possibility that he was in those Boston years first and foremost a young dandy whose efforts to play the role of a worldly, sophisticated young philosopher were in good part a way of coping with an intellectual setting that was radically different from his own heritage and in which he might well have felt an outsider? We would do well to remember that the young Coretta Scott, on first exposure to her future husband, was most struck by his penchant for "intellectual jive" and that the experienced black New York City pastor who oversaw King's student pastorship assignment in the fall of 1950 criticized several aspects of King's demeanor: "an attitude of aloofness, disdain and possibly snobbishness which prevent his coming to close grips with the rank and file of ordinary people. Also, a smugness that refuses to adapt itself to the demands of ministering effectively to the average Negro congregation."<sup>17</sup>

Up until now this characterization of the young King, much like the two Cs King received in public speaking courses at Crozer, has been more a source for bemused irony than for serious insight into the King of those years.<sup>18</sup> But the important work of the King Project staff forces us to address a central question: Was the King of Crozer and BU actually a rather immature and insecure young man? Was he a talented young preacher with no particular aptitude for scholarly creativity, a man who was somewhat out of his element as a student yet who quickly began to mature and grow into himself once he put graduate school and his dissertation firmly behind him after returning south to pastor Montgomery's Dexter Avenue Baptist Church? The project findings should cause us to think again about how *fundamentally transforming* an experience the early leadership of the Montgomery bus boycott was for King, and whether the Martin Luther King who was molded and reshaped by those early months of the Montgomery struggle was, in some very significant ways, a distinctively different young man from the one who had pieced together "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman" in the winter of 1954–1955.

We can read again — although this time through somewhat different lenses — the

<sup>17</sup> Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 45. Rev. William E. Gardner of the First Baptist Church of East Elmhurst in Queens, N.Y., oversaw King's student pastorship. *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

richly emotional account of the early 1956 spiritual crisis in Montgomery that King in later years repeatedly identified as the truly transforming event in his life. "The first twenty-five years of my life were very comfortable years, very happy years," King recalled.

I didn't have to worry about anything. . . . I was about to conclude that life had been wrapped up for me in a Christmas package. . . . Everything was done [for me], and if I had a problem I could always call Daddy. . . . Things were solved. But one day after finishing school, I was called to a little church, down in Montgomery, Alabama. And I started preaching there. Things were going well. . . . But one day a year later, a lady by the name of Rosa Parks decided that she wasn't going to take it any longer. . . . It was the beginning of a movement . . . and the people of Montgomery asked me to serve them as a spokesman. . . . I couldn't say no.

But the dozens of death threats and harassing phone calls soon began to take a heavy emotional toll on King. Late one night yet another telephone death threat drove King to the edge.

I got to the point that I couldn't take it any longer. I was weak. Something said to me, you can't call on Daddy now. . . . You've got to call on that something in that person that your Daddy used to tell you about, that power that can make a way out of no way.

And I discovered then that religion had to become real to me, and I had to know God for myself. . . . I prayed a prayer, and I prayed out loud that night. I said, "Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I think the cause that we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now. I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage." . . . And it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world."

"Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared," King later recalled.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps even more than has previously been appreciated, King's acquisition of that fundamental sense of mission, calling, and obligation that came to him in Montgomery transformed him into someone whose newly enriched self-understanding gave to his future life an integrity, a dedication, and a sense of purpose reaching well beyond himself that simply had not been present in his life, and in his academic studies, up until that time. We need to ponder whether acquiring such a sense of mission can fundamentally transform a person's life and whether the tough-minded integrity, and the courage, that Martin Luther King, Jr., demonstrated so repeatedly and so often in the years after 1956 was not something he

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 56–58. For previous discussions of this spiritual crisis, see James H. Cone, "Martin Luther King: The Source for His Courage to Face Death," *Concilium*, 183 (March 1983), 74–79; David J. Garrow, "Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Cross of Leadership," *Peace and Change*, 12 (Spring 1987), 1–12; and David J. Garrow, "Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Spirit of Leadership," in *We Shall Overcome: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Black Freedom Struggle*, ed. Peter J. Albert and Ronald Hoffman (New York, 1990), 11–34.

brought to the black freedom struggle, but rather something he gained from his involvement in it. As Ella Baker put it, in a statement that resonates even more richly now than before, "The movement made Martin, rather than Martin making the movement."<sup>20</sup> From this perspective the ethical missteps of a precocious yet immature young student represent only a modest prologue to what became a phenomenally dedicated and courageous career and a remarkable contribution to America and the world's betterment. If we as a scholarly community are able to view both the findings of the King Project and the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., through such an interpretive prism, both our understanding of King's development and our appreciation of his role in the black freedom struggle will be enriched and enlarged.

<sup>20</sup> Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 625.