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Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" and the Politics of Cultural Memory: An Apostil

In 1998, an Atlanta Federal District Court judge ruled that Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech was part of national history and that CBS did not need to seek permission to air it in an historical documentary that included a segment on the civil rights movement. The documentary, broadcast in 1994, incorporated a nine-minute excerpt of King's historic speech. The King Corporation lawyers in the case argued that CBS had unlawfully used King's "eloquent, creative, literary expressions." Arguing the decision before the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals, the King family succeeded in having it overturned two years later. Although the decision was the first to legally cement the King family's rights, this was not the first time the copyright had become an issue, nor would it be the last.

Presciently, King had copyrighted the speech a month after it was delivered and his heirs clung tenaciously to the idea that it was a bequest to them (Stout 16). Clarence Jones, King's lawyer and confidant, filed suit against Twentieth Century Fox Records and Mr. Maestro Records for issuing bootleg copies of the speech (Branch 886). However, King granted Motown Records permission to release two recordings of his speeches ("Great March to Freedom" and "Great March to Washington"), but told Motown founder Berry Gordy that he wanted the entire proceeds to be donated to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). When Gordy urged King to keep half of the royalties for himself and his family, King insisted it go to the SCLC so as not to give the impression that he was benefitting from the cause of civil rights (Posner 175–76). King's family, like Gordy, has seen the speech as an important source of revenue, some of which undoubtedly has been used to promote King's legacy. Since winning their appeal against CBS, the King family has continued to exploit the copyright of the speech, agreeing to sell the French telephone company Alcatel the right to use a digitally altered version of the event for a 2001 television commercial. The commercial

shows King speaking jarringly absent the 250,000 people who had on that day lined the reflecting pool on the national mall. The commercial asks what would have happened if King's words had not been able to "connect" with his audience (Szegedy-Maszak 20).

Selling a permission to use the speech for a television commercial and engaging in legal wrangling about the news media's right to rebroadcast the speech are not developments that could be predicted from the iconic status the speech has achieved in national history. Although the legal dimensions of the speech's dissemination are of interest, we are primarily interested in how King's speech has become a permanent fixture in the collective memory of American citizens despite the copyright controversy. In a recent book on the speech, Drew Hansen suggests that it is "the oratorical equivalent of the Declaration of Independence" (*The Dream* 214). What Edwin Black said of the Gettysburg Address is equally true of "I Have a Dream": "The speech is fixed now in the history of a people" (Black 21). Far more than an ordinary written or performed text, King's speech is now viewed as a text belonging to the nation, despite its current legal status. Coretta Scott King suggested that when King delivered the speech he was "connected to a higher power" (King). Whether or not divinely inspired, the speech has come to symbolize the civil rights movement and anchors collective public memory of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Equality and of King himself.

Although King's "I Have a Dream" speech is now recognized as one of the most important speeches of the twentieth century, this has not always been the case. Reactions to the speech immediately following its delivery were mixed. Some praised the speech, while inexplicably others completely ignored it. How did King's speech achieve its iconic status given the mixed reaction immediately following its presentation? Thinking of the speech as generative of its own fame supports the legendary aura that now surrounds it, but its elevated stature resulted from a gradual process of media dissemination and cultural amplification. The touchstones in this process included eventual comparisons of King's rhetoric to Lincoln's, media portrayals of King's role in the civil rights movement following his assassination, and the appropriation of the speech as a synecdoche for that movement.

The memory of Lincoln's speech was fixed by print, while King's speech was fixed by the electronic media. In 1863, no one realized that Abraham Lincoln's humble "Remarks by the President" at the Gettysburg ceremony would have become part of national iconography. Years later, Carl Sandburg referred to it reverentially as the "great American poem," but part of the apocryphal lore of the speech is that Lincoln truly believed the world would not "note nor long remember" what he and others said at Gettysburg. Senator Edward Everett, one

of the great ceremonial orators of his day, had satisfied every expectation of his audience with an address that took him two hours to deliver. It had taken Lincoln only three minutes to utter his 272 words (Wills 68). Lincoln's speech gradually reached a secondary audience through the accounts of newspapers; King's speech was instantaneously heard and seen by radio listeners and television viewers numbering in the millions. For all its compelling metaphor and soaring imagery, "I Have a Dream" is more drama than poetry; as drama, it must be heard and seen. King's rhetorical genius was oral, Lincoln's written. Lincoln spoke transcendentally, while King spoke in the moment. Journalist Richard Carter, an eyewitness of the speech, reminds us that never before had a civil rights demonstration been aired live on national television (38). It was also the last such mass meeting to be broadcast (Branch 876). Of the ten civil rights leaders who spoke at the rally, King did most to ignite the crowd, but the impact on television audiences derived from the interplay of King, his speech, the response of the crowd, and even the frequent cutaways to Lincoln's statue. Carter finds it "inexplicable" that television critic Kay Gardella of the New York *Daily News*, who acknowledged that the speech was the most moving of the rally, subordinated the impress of King's words to the visual images that the television camera associated with them: "Most effective and meaningful," she said, "were the cutaways to Lincoln's statue" (38). To those in the television medium who recorded the speech, and probably to those who watched it, the stone statue of the Great Emancipator amplified the combined effect of King's lyrical words, mellifluous voice, and determined countenance. The symbolic interplay between King and Lincoln was also not lost on E. W. Kenworthy, who filed the front page story for the *Times*: "It was Dr. King—who had suffered perhaps most of all—who ignited the crowd with words that might have been written by the sad brooding man enshrined within" (1).

James Reston, on the same *New York Times* front page, declared that King "touched the vast audience. Until then the pilgrimage was merely a great spectacle" (1). The *Time Magazine* article about the rally clearly understood the importance of King's speech: "King's particular magic had enslaved his audience," *Time* said of the prepared portion of King's text, while particularly praising the extemporized section with which the speech ended as "catching, dramatic, inspirational" ("Beginning"). Not every major news outlet recognized the importance of King's speech. The *Washington Post*, for example, focused on the speech delivered by A. Philip Randolph, without even mentioning King's (Branch 886). The historic and literary brilliance of Lincoln's address at Gettysburg had also not been universally recognized by journalists. The fact that Lincoln's speech became so famous is doubly remarkable when one considers how few people actually heard it or saw so much as a photograph of Lincoln delivering it. Illustrators would fill in the visual gaps that photographers like Matthew Brady had left out. There is

only one photograph of Lincoln on the speaker's platform and it was taken from some distance away (Kunhardt, Kunhardt, and Kunhardt 315). King's speech, by contrast, was forever wedded to a set of visual images—of Lincoln's statue, of the responsive throng, and of King himself, visibly moved by his own words.

It is difficult to explain precisely how King's speech went from privately copyrighted words to cherished public property, but surely the number of people who saw and heard and felt his speech live was an important ingredient. In the case of Lincoln's speech, it helped that it was apparently spare and simple, something school children could easily read, memorize, and declaim. At eighteen minutes, King's speech is roughly six times as long as Lincoln's, but the dramatic climax of the speech is short enough to replay in honoring King or in the retelling of civil rights movement history, and the imagery of the speech is often striking. Both King's and Lincoln's speeches were tied to a momentous event, and the messages of both can be appreciated, if not fully understood, by successive generations without providing detailed historical context. The same cannot be said of Lincoln's lawyerly and highly nuanced First Inaugural Address, or for that matter King's Vietnam era antiwar speech, "A Time to Break Silence." The addresses at Gettysburg and the Lincoln Memorial abridge tumultuous chapters in American history.

Martyrdom, Memorialization, and Mass Circulation

The martyrdom of Lincoln and King did much to propel rehearsals of their deeds and words. Pulitzer Prize winning historian David Garrow agrees with King biographer Drew Hansen that the speech received little further mention until after King was assassinated. Although King was honored by *Time* as its Man of the Year in 1964, the same year he won the Nobel Peace Prize, prior to King's assassination there was not a reason for the press to commemorate King's biography or place in history. The identification between King and his enunciated "dream" heard by millions was unavoidable and seemingly inevitable. Soon after his death, Motown Records reissued a single recording of the "Dream" speech (Waller 48). Eulogizing King in 1968, *Time* spoke of the "dream" peroration of his speech as the peak of his oratorical career ("Transcendent"). While Corretta King asked supporters to "join us in fulfilling his dream" (Rugaber 1), the *New York Times* structured its eulogy of "the fallen martyr" by discussing aspects of his "dream" ("He had a dream" E12), and in another article judged that his speech at the Lincoln Memorial was "the high point of Dr. King's war for civil rights" (Mitgang E1). King himself perpetuated his identification with "the dream" by introducing it into his later speeches.

Immediately after the assassination, Democratic Congressmen proposed the establishment of a Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, but it did not come to fruition until 1983 (Hansen, *The Dream* 216). The holiday itself has given impetus for annual memorializing of King and synoptic renderings of his life. Thus, the speech, particularly the prophetic "dream" section and dramatic conclusion, continued to be heard by virtually every generation of Americans. The speech was widely anthologized and was so widely taught in college public speaking classes that in 1982 Haig Bosmajian published an article in *Communication Education* to correct inaccurate versions of the speech. In 1998, *Time* listed it as one of only four of the "century's greatest speeches," putting the speech in a firmament with speeches by Churchill, Roosevelt, and Kennedy and offering an abbreviated quotation of the "dream" section and peroration ("Four"). Within recent years, two books have been written about the speech, as books were also written about the Gettysburg address (Sunnemark; Hansen, *The Dream*). There are few American speeches so important as to inspire book-length treatments.

The anointing of the speech by the media has been a mixed blessing. Historians and civil rights proponents caution against the condensation of a rich life into a single event. King's later speeches, which include continued references to his dream, proved less successful in the North than they had been in the South. "I have felt my dreams falter," he said in Chicago in 1965, and on Christmas Eve 1967, reflecting on his own life, he added a dream reference made famous by poet Langston Hughes: "I am personally the victim of deferred dreams, of blasted hopes." In his final years, the sweeping imagery of his famous 1963 speech gave way to a more focused advocacy on behalf of African Americans in their struggles for jobs, higher salaries, better working conditions, and integration (Hansen, "King's Dreams" E11). King also adamantly opposed the Vietnam War and called for a guaranteed family income. Worried about the dissolution of the civil rights movement, he argued for a more aggressive and disruptive brand of nonviolence, threatened boycotts, and even suggested obstructing the national Democratic and Republican conventions ("Transcendent"). Because King's rhetoric is defined by the celebrated dream speech, his later speeches, which do not fit this model, are relatively unremembered.

How much "I Have a Dream" has come to represent Martin Luther King is revealed by the planned national memorial in Washington, DC, for which ground was recently broken. Situated between the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials, the Martin Luther King Memorial will include structures and elements that materially evoke King's speeches, particularly "I Have a Dream." Clayborne Carson, the director of the King Paper's Project at Stanford University, offered suggestions for the design selected from among more than 900 submissions. He proposed that King's public words be used as inspiration for the structures in the open-air

memorial. Thus the features of the memorial include a "mountain of despair" and a "stone of hope," reflecting a phrase from the speech. There is a fountain meant to symbolize the biblical quotation King used in the speech, the passage that "Justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream." There are naves, representing the leaders of the civil rights movement, "hewn from rock, with rough edges on the outside, and smooth stone on the inside," again an homage to a biblical passage in King's dream speech ("The rough places shall be made plane and the crooked places shall be made straight") (Konigsmark 1B). The importance of King's speech in American history is also illustrated by its incorporation at the Lincoln Memorial. Visitors can watch footage of King's speech and note the spot where King delivered the speech, which is conspicuously marked with an X.

Conclusion

Historical interest in how King came to include the "I have a dream" section is comparable to the interest in how Lincoln composed his Gettysburg Address, which has produced tales of fanciful composition on an envelope while *en route* to Gettysburg. King had been given seven minutes to deliver his speech and his prepared text fit roughly into that time limit until King departed from his text to declare that "We will not be satisfied until justice runs down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." The voluble affirmation from the audience made King reluctant to continue reading from his manuscript. At this crucial turn, King recast the subdued request that the attendees should "go back to our communities" with a dynamic series of imperatives: "Go back to Mississippi. Go back to South Carolina. Go back to Louisiana. Go back to the slums and ghettos of our Northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair." Mahalia Jackson, who had earlier sung a black spiritual, shouted from behind King: "Tell 'em about the dream, Martin." Whether through the singer's prompting or by his own initiative, King launched nearly seamlessly into the now famous sentences that embodied his dream (Branch 881–82).

There are competing accounts of why King chose to depart from his text and prepared conclusion to improvise the "I have a dream" refrain. While Corretta said that he had considered including this section beforehand if the moment was right, in a 1963 interview King remembered that he included it on an impulse: "I just felt I wanted to use it here. I don't know why. I hadn't thought about it before the speech" (Hansen, *The Dream*). King's version lends credence to Coretta's idea that it was inspired by a higher power (King). Inspired prophecy should not require a prepared text, and extemporaneous speech, like the "winged words" of Homer's heroes, is regarded as more authentic than written ones.

No one, not even King, could anticipate the place his scintillating speech would take in public memory. In 1963 King delivered 350 speeches and sermons. His message and rhetoric were often the same although the size of his audience and the amplitude of his public exposure were never so great. Of course, the speech itself is powerful and memorable, but contextual forces, including the live airing of the speech, King's assassination, and the enactment of a national holiday celebrating King all contributed to making "I Have a Dream" a symbol of King's life, which in turn is a symbol of the civil rights movement. It was and continues to be a media event. It expresses in shorthand the sentiments that the public is supposed to recall. What was a performed text delivered with a political purpose has been translated by the media into a symbolic narrative that casts King as the heroic voice of those for whom the dream had not yet become a reality.

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