

The Intertextual Voice of the Montgomery Bus Boycott
as Articulated in Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Address to the
First Montgomery Improvement Association Mass Meeting"

Gather around and listen
As I share childhood memories of my brother,
The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
I am his older sister and
I've known him longer than anyone else.
I knew him long before the speeches he gave
And the marches he led
And the prizes he won.
I even knew him before he dreamed the dream
That would change the world.

Christine King Farris

Resting in my consciousness is the intertextual voice of Christine King Farris' brother, a brother who, as she suggests in the epigraph was imbued with a dream long before he became heralded as the symbol of America's moral, social, political, and spiritual conscience, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Through discourse like his speeches and sermons, King emerged as the voice of the African American people, at first, and then later as the voice of the idea of universal justice and equality. Through his sermons, moreover, King rhetorically compelled folk to conceptualize a world where equality was the norm. King constructed his voice by drawing on historical and religious texts similar to his audience's cultural/ political/social milieu. That is the purpose of this presentation: to examine King's intertextual voice as articulated in the inaugural sermon of the Montgomery Bus Boycott—"Address to the First Montgomery Improvement Association Mass Meeting."

First, though, imagine me sitting in the historic Ebenezer Baptist church in Atlanta, Georgia. The pews are empty now, for there are no Sunday worshippers at this meeting. There are only the footsteps of an old security guard who walks around the church as if he is a gate-keeper whose job is to make sure those who visit understand the importance of the Civil Rights Movement as the singular performance act that shaped race relations in the American narrative, and, more specifically, the place—the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church building, which now serves as an historical landmark

Today, I am alone, "absence in my body; presence with the Lord," and thinking of King. I imagine how he might have stood in the pulpit of the Ebenezer Baptist Church. I imagine him singing what has been deemed

the Civil Rights anthem, “We Shall Overcome.” I observe the setting of this old church that nurtured King in his youth. I imagine the boy preacher King exhorting his “. . . trail sermon” (Baldwin 280). I hear Martin Luther King’s voice, and it serves to interrogate my own memory and conscience; it urges my commitment to civil and human rights. I merge myself into the baptismal water of King’s voice as it is represented in the inaugural address of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, “Address to the First Montgomery Improvement Association Mass Meeting.”

This is how I come to these pages: baptized by a sermon that gave public voice to the Jim Crow racism in Montgomery in 1955, a sermon that compelled Rosa Parks, the protagonist of the boycott to say, “. . . it became clear to me that we had found our Moses, and he would surely lead us to the promised land of liberty and justice for all” (*A Call to Conscience* 4-5).

King was the newly elected president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, the umbrella organization for the boycott, and his burden on that Monday evening was to applaud the protestors for a successful first day of staying off of the city buses, and to minister to the church folks.

As congregational preacher, twenty-six year old King reminded his parishioners of the horrific sin committed against one of its church members, Rosa Parks, by reminding the folk that on December 1, “. . . one of the finest citizens in Montgomery (Amen)-not one of the finest Negro citizens. . . but one of the finest citizens in Montgomery-was taken from a bus. . . and carried to jail and arrested . . .” (*A Call to Conscience* 8). King also prophetically gave voice to a local grassroots movement that would serve as the example of a people who would certainly “. . . inject new meaning into the veins of history and civilization” (*A Call to Conscience* 7).

On Monday, December 5, 1955, King intended to lead the citizens of Montgomery and other Americans into what Wilma Dykeman and James Stokely call a “new frontier . . .” (361) employing “. . . [Jesus], Thoreau and Gandhi rather than Crockett and Boone . . .” (361) as the models. Further, on December 5, 1955, Martin Luther King, Jr., served as a griot. He was the teller of the African American tale of racism and segregation on city buses, and, at the same time, he delivered a didactic message of hope and the possibility of social transformation.

In the African tradition, the griot tells the tales of the tribe-- the social, political, cultural, and religious community-- all of which are inscribed by an historical underpinning. He (or she) is a representation who intimately articulates the histories, the cultural manifestos, the spiritual legacies and lessons through the use of the

story. The griot is the village's voice. "The honor [he is] paid," says Toni Morrison, "and the awe in which [he is] held reach beyond [the] neighborhood to places far away . . ." (The Noble Lecture 10). Therefore, as the Griot and leader of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, as King tells the stories of the tribe he uses a myriad of texts from the tribe and thus takes on the voices from those texts.

This adoption of the voices from other texts within the tradition is an example of an aspect of Stephen Henderson's idea of saturation; by responding to the activist tradition, King expresses in the text a "a sense of fidelity to the black experience." The aspect of the black experience that I am referencing is what Lerone Bennett calls the "activist tradition," a tradition that African Americans call upon when "[f]aced with the brute fact-powerlessness vs. power" (8).

King was bathed in this tradition. In addition to being Baptist preachers, his father and maternal grandfather were activists. His grandfather, for example, was a leading member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He successfully organized a boycott against a Georgia newspaper when it verbally insulted Negroes for successfully getting the city to build a Negro school. ^[1]

King utilizes the activist tradition in his address. Like his predecessors, in the textual address, he borrows from the historical and religious texts found in the American political documents and Christian texts. Further, King's voice, as represented in the inaugural sermon, is not his own; it is a confluent voice, which suggests its intertextuality. ^[2]

Pedagogically speaking intertextuality, a concept conceived by Julia Kristeva, concerns itself with ". . . text ^[3] as a network of sign systems situated in relation to other systems . . . (ideologically marked sign usage) in culture" (*Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory* 568). It, says Leon S. Roudiez, is as Kristeva suggests, ". . . the transportation of one or more systems of signs into another, accompanied by a new articulation. . ." (qtd in Kristeva 15). This new articulation results from what Kristeva suggests is the creation of a new text when it enters into and thus combines with other texts. As Kristeva says, "[t]he text is . . . a productivity, and this means . . . that it is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another" (36).

The result of that neutralization is the birthing of a new text, I maintain, and the Montgomery Bus Boycott is an example of this "permutation of texts." The two opposing texts--i.e., those for and those against bus

segregation in the broad sense are representations of texts that interacted, thus formulating a new text, bus integration. King as the voice is essential to this text as his voice fused texts to formulate a vision of bus integration. What is intriguing about the theory of intertextuality is that it suggests the metaphysical space found in fusing text. Although the fusing of King's sermon is grounded in material documents such as the constitution and the Bible, the act of fusing takes place in the mind, and that conceptual reality, when put into action, evidences the new text. In this sense, intertextuality is a psychological birthing act, and is, indeed, not resistant to analyzing King's address through it: King's inaugural sermon birthed in the African American folk in Montgomery a new vision of what they could become.

In this "Address to the First Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) Mass Meeting," Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s voice is affected by two influences. The principal influence on King's voice was the social/cultural historical events and circumstances of the African American's freedom struggle in America as articulated by the progenitors of the liberation movement. In addition, King's voice was shaped by the religious paradigm of the African American freedom fighter. He believed, says Lewis V. Baldwin, that ". . . the minister should be a spiritual leader as well as an advocate for social justice" (289). Therefore, King worked out of a culturally inscribed Christianity where Jesus is a symbol of revolutionary practice. King's Jesus, like the Jesus of Nat Turner, is one that will, in visions, tell the African American preacher he must be like Moses. He must be brave enough to demand that Pharaoh let the people go, even if that means protest.

Indeed, King's voice is the American mantra for social, political, and religious consciousness. Less than a decade after the Montgomery Bus Boycott, in 1963, *Time Magazine* named him as the Man of the Year. Further, although he died in 1968, he is the singular voice identified as the iconic symbol of political and cultural righteousness. I am often amazed at how American folk, young and old, pre and post Civil Rights Movement, far right and far left, are unified on King's identity as the politically unspoiled preacher of America's social consciousness. Emblems of his dual presence and voice support this proposition. Representations of Martin as man and King as icon abound in media and print. King's import as an American iconic image, for example, was established in 1979 by the United States Postal Service. A stamp included in the Black Heritage Series was designed in his honor. In 2005, the United States Postal Service designed a group of stamps celebrating the American Civil Rights Movement. At the center of this collection is Martin Luther King, Jr.

And at the mythic center of the Montgomery Bus Boycott story is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I believe

it is because of his representation as the voice of the boycott, a voice that he did not ask for, a voice that was given to him because he was seen as the griot best suited to tell the story. King officially began his leadership of the boycott on December 5, 1955 when he stepped into the pulpit to preach the inaugural sermon at the Holt Street Baptist Church.

“Once upon a time,” says Toni Morrison in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, “there was an old woman. Blind but wise. Or was it an old man? A guru perhaps. Or a griot soothing restless children. ” (1066). Implied in Morrison’s evaluative notion of story is its historical nature as well as its value to the community. In addition to preserving cultural traditions and providing wisdom, stories have been used to comfort those in pain. Within the African-American preaching tradition, stories have been employed to deliver a message of salvation, both religious and secular. Martin Luther King, Jr. was that griot; his linguistic and visual presence delivered a message of salvation to the boycott participants who were against bus segregation. This became evident on the evening of December 5, 1955 when he mounted the pulpit to preach the inaugural sermon. In this sermon, King rises as the voice of the boycott. ^[4] The sermon also serves as a testimony of the African American religious and social/historical sign systems, both of which underscore the idea of King’s voice as the intertextual voice of the boycott.

Martin Luther King, Jr. understood, himself, the pragmatic and religious significance of his sermon and his voice as a sign system to send out the boycott’s inaugural message. He understood that his message had to be both instructional and motivational. Further, King was aware that his voice was the prophetically historical representation of the people who would be identified as those who birthed the modern-day civil rights movement because as he says:

As I thought of the limited time before me [twenty minutes] and the possible implications of this speech, I became possessed by fear. . . I was faced with the inescapable task of preparing . . . a speech that was expected to give a sense of direction to a people imbued with a new and still unplumbed passion for justice . . . I turned to God in prayer. My words were brief and simple, asking God to restore my balance and to be with me in a time when I needed His guidance more than ever. (*Stride* 45)

Implied in King’s appeal to God is the reality of the religious influence, a significant sign within the African American culture, on the boycott even before King delivered his first message to the boycotters. King identifies

the Judeo-Christian influence on the boycott more specifically in his text on the boycott, *Stride Toward Freedom*. He says:

From the beginning a basic philosophy guided the movement. This guiding principle has since been referred to variously as nonviolent resistance, non cooperation, and passive resistance. But in the first days of the protest none of these expressions was mentioned; the phrase most often heard was ‘Christian love.’ It was the Sermon on the Mount, rather than a doctrine of passive resistance, that initially inspired the Negroes of Montgomery to dignified social action. (66)

King began his socially public ministry picturing Jesus delivering his spiritually and socially centered, yet practical lessons-- the Beatitudes-- for living a valuable life on a hillside surrounded by his disciples. He modeled this image and thus constructed an image of benevolence for himself. This image has become the iconic representation of the identity most associated with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In December of 1955, King became the preacher standing as a luminous, introspective, light to lead all of humanity into the marvelous light of equality.

The Holt Street Baptist Church was King’s hillside, his mountain, and the disciples were those who came “. . . almost soldierly . . . silent . . . [as if they were] performing what appeared to be a ritual . . .” (Azbell 228). The primary purpose of King’s speech, “Address to the First Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) Mass Meeting,” was the fight against bus segregation in Montgomery, Alabama. King tells his “friends” (*A Call to Conscience* 7) that “. . . we are here in a specific sense because of the bus situation in Montgomery” (*A Call to Conscience* 7). It is, I submit, the secondary texts, the neutralized utterances (religious and historical) that King used as the underpinning for the Montgomery Bus Boycott text. These utterances gave the boycotters the intestinal fortitude to walk 381 days. It is what kept them coming to the mass meetings. What were they? What . . . , as James Weldon Johnson says, “. . . what sound[s] did . . . [they] hear?” (54) They are , as Kristeva would say, “utterances,” or as Johnson asserts in a biblical context individual “bones” “. . . clicking together . . . bone to bone . . .” (54) to desegregate city buses.

Indeed, one of those utterances is associated with Christian character. King points this out as he identifies the woman who is the catalyst of the boycott story, Rosa Parks. About the woman who was arrested on December 1, 1955, King says:

Mrs. Parks is a fine person . . . Nobody can doubt the height of her character (Yes), nobody

can doubt the depth of her Christian commitment and devotion to the teachings of Jesus . . . Mrs. Parks is a fine Christian person, unassuming, and yet there is integrity and character there. (*A Call to Conscience* 9)

What King does at the onset of this address is masterfully strategic. He compares Parks to a sign that is entrenched in the African American and Euro- American traditions, Jesus Christ. To say that Parks is a devotee of Jesus is to imply that she has taken on his way of thinking, his way of responding to situations, even if those situations involve segregation on city buses. The suggestion of Parks as a devotee of Jesus metaphorically places Parks, the boycott participants, and the boycott itself at the foot of the cross. [5]

For many Christians, the word Jesus brings to mind that image of Jesus dragging the cross or Jesus hanging on the cross dripping with blood between two thieves. Now imagine Parks dragging the cross and imagine Parks, the woman King says “. . . one of the finest citizens in Montgomery . . .” (*A Call* 8), hanging from the cross dripping with the blood of segregation. Therein lies the spark that King needed to urge the boycotters to rise and say they would continue to walk after that first day. King fused, Jesus, a religious cultural marker, and Rosa Parks, the social cultural sign to formulate a new sign in which both Jesus and Parks are placed inside of it. Parks thus becomes a representation of the Jesus that is the suffering Messiah. Metaphorically, she becomes a Jesus figure who understands the revolutionary practice of what King deems “unearned suffering.” The redemptive gift in the suffering of Parks was the desegregation of city buses.

King’s visible audience, moreover, responded to King verbally. The “well” and “yes” are testimonial examples of the African American tradition of call and response. “The key to any black preacher’s style is the responsiveness of the congregation,” says Lischer who also identifies the intertextual feature of call and response. He says:

The call-and-response pattern dates back to the West African ring shout and to the earliest forms of worship among African Americans. Call and response is a metaphor for the organic relationship of the individual to the group in the black church . . . The response often provides the preacher a barometer by which to evaluate his or her performance . . . (136)

In a church setting when the parishioners agree with the speaker, when he (or she) has touched the souls of the folks, they often respond with words of appreciation and affirmation like “well” and amen. These signs of agreement also suggest complete support of the speaker. King understood this. He knew that he had the difficult

challenge of drawing the audience, including the news media, into his vision of equality. In addition to employing themes the audience could identify with, he utilizes an idiolect employed by African American preachers to draw the church folk into acknowledging their right to equal treatment as outlined by the constitution. He says:

If we are wrong, the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong . . . If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong (*Yes sir*) [Applause] If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong . . . If we are wrong, Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer that never came down to earth . . . If we are wrong, justice is a lie. . . . (10)

Repetition is rhythmic and thus forges an emotional response from the audience. The testimonial to this emotive response is the affirming performance of the audience as represented in “well” and “yes sir” and the applause. Further, King uses the conditional word “if” to underscore the idea that the treatment the African American was receiving is contrary to the way they should be treated and to imply interrogatively a supposition. Suppose, I hear King saying, the Constitution and God are wrong. I hear King responding to his own rhetorical question. They are not. King is prodding, pushing the proponents of bus desegregation into revolt. If these are wrong, we must change them; however, because they are not, and because the proponents of bus desegregation “are not wrong in what [they] are doing” (*A Call to Conscience* 10), what needs to be changed is the bus segregation law, and as King suggests the change must be initiated by the “. . . disinherited of this land,” [the folk who] “have been oppressed so long, are tired of going through the long night of captivity” (*A Call to Conscience* 11). King’s parallel of the religious and historical reality is emblematic of the African American preaching style.

If Judeo Christian theology as inscribed within the African American cultural tradition is one sign system, one “utterance” which contributes to the formation of the boycott story, another is historical: the American idea of democracy. King indicates that it is because America is governed by a paradigm of democracy where the people are at the center that the boycotters understand their right to fight against bus segregation. King privileges the American idea of democracy by comparing the American political space to Communism. He says, “[i]f we were incarcerated behind the iron curtains of a Communistic nation we couldn’t do this” (*A Call to Conscience* 9). The “this” King references is, of course, protest. In King’s mind protest is a privilege given every American. It is every American’s duty to “. . . apply [their] citizenship to the fullness of its meaning . . . to transform from thin paper to thick action . . . the greatest form of government on earth . . .” (*A Call to Conscience* 7). King also

argues here that the theoretical idea of democracy must be made a practical reality. In saying this, King signals to the boycotters to move from conversation about equality into physical action. Included in the right of citizenship, moreover, is the right to protest when the government becomes “. . . destructive . . . it is the Right of the People to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying Foundation on such Principles, and its organizing Powers in such Form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. . .” (*The Constitution of the United States* 81). King argues that the theoretical ideas as outlined in the historical sign referenced in his call to “apply citizenship” must be moved off of the page; the performance of full citizenship for the African American must be merged with the “thin paper” or theoretical notion of citizenship. King believed, I am convinced, democracy was a theoretical idea, and if all Americans were not able to participate fully in the democracy, America would tear like “thin paper.” For King and his disciples, an America without bus integration represented a frail political system, and eventually, like “thin paper” would tear.

There is an additional signal in this reference to communism, and that metaphorical signal is not for the boycott participants; it is for the opponents of bus desegregation. Infused in the American political and social ideology of the 1950s was the idea that African American protest was steered by communist influences. Ted Poston cites an example of an interview he conducted with a Montgomery domestic worker during the boycott:

So he comes back home from one of them meetings . . . a [White Citizens Council Meeting] . . .
 And he walks into my kitchen just as I’m getting ready to put dinner on the table.
 ‘Sarah . . . (that is not her name) . . . ‘you ain’t one of them fools that have stopped riding the buses, is you?’ And I said, ‘Yessuh, I is.’ And he say: ‘I ain’t gonna have none of this Communist foolishness in my house, Sarah’ (Poston 66).

King assures the Montgomery political machine and white citizens of the African Americans’ allegiance to the American idea of democracy and democratic practices, suggesting the failure of Communism by portraying it as a place of imprisonment of ideas and the mind. He wants the white body politic of Montgomery to know that the African American is like the white America: both yearn to experience the American brand of democracy. The African Americans of Montgomery do not have as their ultimate goal the dismantling of democracy; they do not desire to be a member of the Communist system where they would not be able to enjoy the freedoms and rights found in a democracy; they simply want the equality promised by the tenets of a democratic system.^[6] And King was intent on insuring the news media present at the mass meeting and the boycott participants of this

devotion to American democracy.

King also meant to publicly shape the historical gift the African American would give America. That gift would be “. . . to inject a new meaning into the veins of history and civilization” (*A Call to Conscience* 12). This “new meaning” King calls for is a good example of the intertextual moment. King does not say the former slave would revise or redefine the meaning of history (although implied in the fusing of texts is the formulation of a new idea); he says the people with “. . . fleecy locks and black complexion . . .” (*A Call to Conscience* 12) would introduce a new way of defining equality. This is the foundational idea of intertextuality. Surely, King understood the sons and daughters of former slaves and, in my mind, the sons and daughter of former slave masters, would join together to create a new definition of democracy, one that would influence the world.

In the closing remarks of King’s presentation of a new universe, he, if I can paint a picture, places the black and white folks of Montgomery on a conceptual page. Then he places the opposing views of how they envisioned American democracy, and more specifically, the bus situation. In the center of this visual text, he places a Christ-like Parks as a representation of the kind of character needed to fight for democracy and what democracy looks like; around the picture, moreover, he places the tenets of democracy as outlined in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. In this fusing of texts, one idea emerges, and that is the need for universal democracy. That is the yearning of everyman. King proposes the former slave as a representation of the revolutionary leader of this march into democracy. In this inaugural speech, “Address to the First Montgomery Improvement Association Mass Meeting,”

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. linguistically authors history and thus emerges as a griot and a seer of America’s and the world’s political future, one engineered by the foot soldiers of the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

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[1] Lerone Bennett details the story of why A. D. Williams organized the boycott in his text *What Manner of Man*.

[2] The idea of confluences of multiple ideas, concepts, and ideologies merged to create a new idea is examined in John Cullen Guesser's text *Confluences*.

[3] I am identifying text here as all types of type, print as well as non print texts.

[4] I am using the present tense to support a reading of the sermon as a text.

[5] In *The Preacher King*, Lischer examines how King uses metaphor in his sermons. What I want to suggest here is that Parks became a metaphor for Jesus and thus becomes an image of biblical pathos. What this does is lifts the condition of segregation from a racial concern to a universal one.

[6] Communist or people affiliated with Communism or socialism were not welcomed by the participants of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Bayard Rustin, who was sent to Montgomery to help with boycott strategy, an advocate of nonviolence, was ushered out of Montgomery because of his Communist affiliation. Some participants of the boycott have even tried to exclude Rustin from the boycott history. This underscores the African Americans yearning to be included in the America social and cultural framework.