

https://dspace.org/

Martin Luther King, Jr.: publicity, disobedience, and the revitalisation of American democratic culture

Goldman, Anita Haya

1994-07-13T11:46:11Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/8128

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

GOLDMAN

DEMOCRACY



POPULAR
PRECEDENTS
PRACTICE
CULTURE

13 - 15 JULY 1994

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

HISTORY WORKSHOP

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.:
PUBLICITY, DISOBEDIENCE, AND THE REVITALISATION OF
AMERICAN DEMOCRATIC CULTURE

Anita Haya Goldman
Department of English
University of Illinois

AFRICANA

Anita Haya Goldman

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.: PUBLICITY, DISOBEDIENCE, AND THE REVITALIZATION OF AMERICAN DEMOCRATIC CULTURE

On forty-seventh street in the south side of Chicago there is a large graffiti mural that depicts an undulating series of seagreen waves. Below this striking image are spray-painted letters that spell out the following words, attributed to Emerson: OUR GREATEST GLORY CONSISTS NOT IN EVER FALLING BUT IN RISING EVERYTIME WE FALL [sic].[1] The graffiti serves as a reminder of the various ways language performs the cultural work of inventing and perpetuating values--values to which we, in turn, find ourselves deeply and naturally committed. The creation of the graffiti mural--the spray-painting of Emerson's words and name on the wall--is a form of cultural practice that also points out the uses of philosophy as a response (however meaningful or thoughtless that response might be) to social crisis. Taken in its literally concrete context, the graffitied epigram establishes a cohesive group identity for individuals involved in an ongoing struggle for social justice--a collectivity or "we" whose glory consists in rising every time it falls.

The significance of Emerson's contribution to the revitalization of American political culture and the expression of political thought both during and after the civil rights movement becomes more apparent when we recall that Martin Luther King, Jr. repeatedly and explicitly referred to Emerson in his speeches, lectures, and sermons. For example, in a classic sermon delivered at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta collected in the volume entitled *Strength To Love*, King--in an attempt to exhort his

---

[1] According to Herbert Cobb, owner of Erbo's Printing and Copy Services, the mural was done on his storefront by graffiti artist Gregory R. Penrice on February 17, 1993.

listeners to harness and master their fears of what they might encounter in their fight for civil rights--quotes Emerson's observation that "He has not learned the lesson of life who does not every day surmount a fear."[2] And in "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," a 1956 address before the First Annual Institute on Non-Violence and Social Change in Montgomery, King quotes Emerson's aphorism that "If a man can write a better book, or preach a better sermon, or make a better mousetrap than his neighbor, even if he builds his house in the woods the world will make a beaten path to his door." Glossing Emerson, he reminds his congregation that "A...challenge that the new age brings to each of us is that of achieving excellency in our various fields of endeavor. In the new age many doors will be opening for us that were not opened in the past, and the great challenge which we confront is to be prepared to enter these doors as they open.... We must set out to do a good job, irrespective of race, and do it so well that nobody could do it better" (*Strength to Love*, 70).

King's creative interpretation of Emerson registers an acute awareness of the necessary contingencies of his own time and place: what he discloses in this passage is the important connection between striving for excellence in any creative endeavor and establishing rights of citizenship. This insistence that excellence in the act of invention--whether this act is one of preaching, building, or making a mousetrap--opens doors onto political life bears a striking resemblance to Hannah Arendt's account of the public, political space of the Greek *polis*. King's reading of Emerson makes explicit his own claim that excellence is assigned to what Arendt describes in *The Human Condition* as "the public realm": "Every activity performed in public," Arendt argues, "can attain an excellence never matched in privacy; for excellence, by definition, the presence of

---

[2] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Antidotes for Fear," Strength to Love (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 109.

others is always required, and this presence needs the formality of the public."[3] But whereas Arendt fails to clarify the exclusions built into this concept of publicity when she recounts the loss of the public realm for modernity, King's words and the situation of their utterance demonstrate the extent to which, for African-Americans during the sixties, striving for excellence and thus a stalwart belief in publicness were necessary because they represented a crucial means of attaining civil rights. As Seyla Benhabib has observed, "The struggle over what gets included in the public agenda is itself a struggle for justice and freedom."[4] Excellence, when performed in public, is a visible marker of civility that facilitates access to the benefits of citizenship.

King's recourse to Emerson's aphorism to designate a means of crossing the threshold onto the freedoms of public life appears an even more accurate and compelling response to Emerson's philosophy when we consider this 1855 journal entry, which forms the basis for Emerson's aphorism published sixteen years later:

> I trust a good deal to common fame, as we all must. If a man has good corn, or wood, or boards, or pigs, to sell, or can make better chairs or knives or crucibles or church-organs than anybody else, you will find a broad hard beaten road to his house, though it be in the woods. And if a man knows the law, people find it out, though he live in a pine shanty, & resort to him. And if a man can pipe or sing...; or can liberate or intoxicate all people who hear him with delicious songs & verses; 'tis certain that the secret cannot be kept: the first

---

[3] Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 49.

[4] Seyla Benhabib, "Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jurgen Habermas," Habermas and the Public Sphere, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: the MIT Press, 1992), 79.

witness tells it to a second, and men go by fives & tens & fifties to his door.

Well, it is still so with a thinker. If he proposes to show me any high secret, if he profess to have found the profoundly secret pass that leads from Fate to Freedom, all good heads & all mankind aspiringly & religiously wish to know it, and, though it sorely & unusually taxes their poor brain, they find out at last whether they have made the transit, or no. If they have, they will know it; and his fame will surely be bruited abroad. If they come away unsatisfied, though it be easy to impute it (even in their belief) to their dulness in not being able to keep step with his snow-shoes on the icy mountain paths--I suspect it is because the transit has not been made. 'Tis like that crooked hollow log through which the farmer's pig found access to the field; the farmer moved the log so that the pig in returning to the hold, & passing through, found himself to his astonishment still on the outside of the field....

Whatever transcendent abilities Fichte, Kant, Schelling, & Hegel have shown, I think they lack the confirmation of having given piggy a transit to the field.... If they had made the transit, common fame would have found it out. So I abide by my rule of not reading the book, until I hear of it through the newspapers.[5]

The passage expresses Emerson's hopes for the comprehensibility and public appeal of philosophy, and invites us to explore the complex imbrication of philosophy and culture. Despite his ambivalent affection and disdain for "common" readers who, like the farmer's pig, are trying to find the secret pass in his text that leads from Fate to Freedom, Emerson also values the accessibility and currency of philosophy; believing that philosophy, like fame, should be heard of in newspapers and otherwise bruited

---

[5] Emerson in his Journals, ed. Joel Porte (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 458-459.

abroad.

Writing in 1968, the year of King's assassination, in the wake of student uprisings and urban rioting in Newark and Detroit, the philosopher Stanley Cavell once posed the question of publicity as a question of philosophy's audience and performance, observing that "The question of philosophy's audience is born with philosophy itself.... No man is in any better position for knowing it than any other man--unless *wanting* to know is a special position. Then what makes it relevant to know, worth knowing?.... The effort is irrelevant and worthless until it becomes necessary to you to know such things. There is the audience of philosophy; but there also, while it lasts, is its performance."[6] Emerson's practices as a lecturer, even more than his stated interest in philosophy heard about in newspapers, show his preoccupation with the phenomenon of fame, and the public performance of philosophy.[7] Taken together, the graffiti, the sermon, and the journal entry provide us with an occasion to consider the relationship of Emerson's ideas to social action--what some might regard as the responsibilities of philosophy to culture--and suggest just how wide the audience for philosophy can be.

We know that in addition to reading Emerson, King also referred to Thoreau's

---

[6] Stanley Cavell, Must We Mean What We Say? (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), xxviii-xxix.

[7] As Philip Fisher has argued, "On a plane beyond Dickens or Twain, Emerson had, in the previous generation, created American philosophy in public as the performance of philosophy and thought before the lecture hall crowd" ("Appearing and Disappearing in Public: Social Space in Late-Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture," Reconstructing American Literary History, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986], 157).

philosophy throughout his writings.[8] In *Stride Toward Freedom*, a widely circulated text which eventually became a handbook for the civil rights movement, King traced the following relationship between his role as an activist in the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott and his first exposure to Thoreau's philosophy of civil disobedience:

> As I thought further I came to see that what we were really doing was withdrawing our cooperation from an evil system, rather than merely withdrawing our economic support from the bus company. The bus company, being an external expression of the system, would naturally suffer, but the basic aim was to refuse to cooperate with evil. At this point I began to think about Thoreau's *Essay on Civil Disobedience*. I remembered how, as a college student, I had been moved when I first read this work. I became convinced that what

---

[8] For example, King mentions Thoreau's work on civil disobedience in "The Time for Freedom has Come" in order to explain the actions and subsequent arrests of a new generation of black youth committed to the freedom struggle (164); and in a sermon titled "Antidotes for Fear" he refers to Thoreau's journal entry, "Nothing is so much feared as fear" (512). In "The American Dream," a 1961 commencement address delivered at Lincoln University, King quotes Thoreau's aphorism "Improved means to an unimproved end" and glosses it by saying that "If we are to survive today and realize the dream of our mission and the dream of the world, we must bridge the gulf and somehow keep the means by which we live abreast with the ends for which we live" (211). Another gloss of the same aphorism appears in Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community, published in 1967: "Every man lives in two realms, the internal and the external. The internal is that realm of spiritual ends expressed in art, literature, morals and religion. The external is that complex of devices, techniques, mechanisms and instrumentalities by means of which we live. Our problem today is that we have allowed the internal to become lost in the external. We have allowed the means by which we live to outdistance the ends for which we live. So much of modern life can be summarized in that suggestive phrase of Thoreau: "Improved means to an unimproved end." This is the serious predicament, the deep and haunting problem, confronting modern man. Enlarged material powers spell enlarged peril if there is not proportionate growth of the soul" (620).

we were preparing to do in Montgomery was related to what Thoreau had expressed. We were simply saying to the white community, "We can no longer lend our cooperation to an evil system."

Something began to say to me, "He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it." When oppressed people willingly accept their oppression they only serve to give the oppressor a convenient justification for his acts. Often the oppressor goes along unaware of the evil involved in his oppression so long as the oppressed accepts it. So in order to be true to one's conscience and true to God, a righteous man has no alternative but to refuse to cooperate with an evil system. This I felt was the nature of our action. From this moment on I conceived of our movement as an act of massive noncooperation. From then on I rarely used the word "boycott."[9]

For King, the experience of wanting to know and the necessity of knowing philosophy, as well as his performance of it, are shaped by his commitments to public life. The aspect of King's political philosophy which will be the primary focus for this analysis is his work on the nature of political obligation and his performance of civil disobedience in the public realm. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt describes the public realm of politics as the space of visibility. She writes, "Everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity. For us, appearance--something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves--constitutes reality" (50). Although, as we shall see, both Emerson and

---

[9] A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 429. Subsequent references are to Testament of Hope and appear parenthetically.

Thoreau are concerned with the problem of political obligation, and although Thoreau's critique of Emerson points up the importance of visible, symbolic action as a means of publicizing the claims of conscience, King's demand for racial equality is distinctive in that his performance of philosophy involves a commitment to a scale of publicity and visibility that involves life-threatening bodily risks. In particular, King's attempt to put the philosophical ideals of civil disobedience into practice depended for its success on his high visibility as a media star firmly ensconced in a national symbology, constructed and manipulated in innumerable newspaper and televised images, radio appearances, and cover treatment by advertiser-financed illustrated magazines.[10] The necessity of this immense media publicity and high visibility associated with King's performance of philosophy, and the significance of this visibility for his extension of critical political publics during the sixties,[11] distinguish King's response to the tradition

---

[10] For an account of how King "became a luminous media personality whose fame spread to the nation and the world" (29) and the symbology of cover treatment by news magazines such as Time, Newsweek, and U.S. News and World Report , see Richard Lentz, Symbols, the News Magazines, and Martin Luther King (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990). For a clear, useful analysis of visibility, public performance, and their implications for social forces at work in shaping personality in late-nineteenth-century literature and culture, see Fisher's "Appearing and Disappearing in Public: Social Space in Late-Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture" and Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 128-178.

[11] In The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (trans. Thomas Burger [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991]), published in 1962, the sociologist Jurgen Habermas sharply criticized the role of the mass media in creating a sentimentalized, depoliticized, impoverished, and "faked" public sphere that curtailed the capacity for rational criticism of public authority. King's contribution to the proliferation of revitalized publics during the sixties--a contribution that enlisted the same media strategies deplored by Habermas--suggests important, effective uses for this "degenerated" bourgeois public sphere which Habermas himself failed to anticipate

in American political thought represented by the writings of Emerson and Thoreau. It is part of the work of this essay to consider the nature of this response,[12] thereby making the exigencies and consequences of King's critique of the Emersonian tradition comprehensible to a wider audience of readers and critics.

Of the many recent critical commentaries written about Emerson, two philosophical responses have a direct bearing on this discussion of King's political thought, and help to elucidate the tense, necessary embrace of philosophy and politics in King's writings. The first is "Finding as Founding: Taking Steps in Emerson's 'Experience,'" the final lecture in Stanley Cavell's 1989 Carpenter Lecture series,

---

in his analysis.

[13] Exploring the connection between the hermeneutic and the ethical in modern thought, Donald Marshall has recently observed that the problem of responsiveness to the intellectual world may lead us to question the significance of the "Other": "The conflict here," he writes, "is the more intense and perhaps the more irresolvable because the contest is over what 'the Other' is and how we must stand in relation to it.... The accusation that runs from Kierkegaard to Levinas is that those who insist on understanding are complacent self-deceivers incapable of the passion of faith. On the other hand, to insist that the 'Other' would be effaced or disfigured by any effort to understand runs its own risks of self-deception" ("Response to Gerald Bruns," Meanings in Texts and Actions: Questioning Paul Ricoeur, ed. David E. Klemm and William Schweiker [Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1993], 323-324.) Viewed in connection with this attempt to characterize King's philosophical response to Emerson and Thoreau, Marshall's discussion also invites us to consider more broadly the question of whether and how the social formation of racial "Otherness" complicates the process of intellectual responsiveness--the radical reorientation of political thought in King's writings that is simultaneously a mark of continuity and inheritance.

collected in the volume *This New Yet Unapproachable America*.[13] The second is Cornel West's *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, also published in 1989.[14] Both Cavell and West show a preoccupation with the meaning of "Americaness": for Cavell, the attempt to characterize Emerson's inheritance of philosophy as being "not only for himself but for America" (*New Yet*, 83), provides a suitable occasion to ask whether the edifice of Western philosophy has an "American inflection" (*New Yet*, 109); and for West, the project of locating Emerson within the genealogy of pragmatism involves serious inquiry into "the American heritage" (*American Evasion*, 4), the possibility of there being an "indigenous mode of thought" (*American Evasion*, 5) in America. Both Cavell and West offer readings of Emerson that reflect their respective projects and stated prospects for philosophy. Cavell's observation that Emerson's inheritance is figured as "conversion" (or "transfiguration" or "reattachment") of philosophical terms supports his claim that Emerson underwrites the defense of proceeding in philosophy from ordinary language; the fact that, as Cavell has stated elsewhere, Emerson "returns" words to "the life of language, to language transfigured, as an eventual everyday."[15] And West's insistence that Emerson contributes to the pragmatic reconception of philosophy as

---

[13] Stanley Cavell, This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures After Emerson After Wittgenstein (Albuquerque: Living Batch Press, 1989). Subsequent references are to New Yet and will be cited parenthetically.

[14] Cornel West, The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989). Subsequent references are to American Evasion and will be cited parenthetically.

[15] Stanley Cavell, Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 21.

social and cultural criticism supports West's conception of an "Emersonian culture of creative democracy" (*American Evasion*, 235) that underlies his defense of prophetic pragmatism as "a practice that has some potency and effect or makes a difference in the world" (*American Evasion*, 232).

But Cavell's and West's philosophical responses to Emerson differ radically in their approach to the problem of publicity, and the relationship between philosophy and politics. For example, Cavell's insistence that the inheritance of philosophy enacted as Emerson's rebirth or conversion to America is "his way of founding a nation, writing its constitution, constituting its citizens" (*New Yet*, 93) prompts Cavell, at the very margins of his own text, to take up philosophically the question of "the public." Exploring the problem of whether philosophizing is, or ought to be, also something done to the world, Cavell maintains that the question "Can mere philosophy *do* anything?" (*New Yet*, 94) should always remain a question for philosophy. On this point, Cavell aligns himself with Emerson, whom he regards as being at odds with Dewey's pragmatism: "For Emerson," Cavell writes, "putting the philosophical intellect into practice remains a question for philosophy. For a thinker such as John Dewey it becomes, as I might put it, merely a problem" (*New Yet*, 95).[16] Indeed, Cavell practices his own stated methodological preference when, a few pages later, he poses a provocative, rhetorical question concerning the publicness of Emerson's writing, a question that invites but does not require the reader's connecting leap between Emerson's power to demand social transformation and the public realm in which such

---

[16] Compare Cavell's discussion of Dewey and Wittgenstein in Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: "If what Wittgenstein means by 'bringing words back' represents thinking, it bears a relation to words and the world different from that in, say, Dewey's application of intelligence to the world; it may seem its opposite. I have emphasized its opposite sound..." (21).

demands are ultimately effected:

> The most renowned phrase for what I was calling the power of passiveness--a power to demand the change of the world as a whole, Emerson sometimes calls it revolution, sometimes conversion--is what Thoreau will call civil disobedience. This phrase notes the register of lasting as it appears in a public crisis, call it a tyranny of the majority. Emerson may seem to confine himself on the whole to the lasting's appearance not at the public end of crisis but at the private end, call this the tyranny of thinking. Yet he says that he would write on the lintels of the door-post (in 'Self-Reliance'). Perhaps he is now writing so. Is that a public place? (New Yet, 115)

Following his own dictum that the problem of the public--philosophy's audience or capacity to make a difference in the world--should appear as an enduring, provocative question for philosophy, Cavell asks here whether philosophy is visibly performed or invisibly pondered; whether self-reliance is a "revolution" against the tyranny of public opinion or of mind. Such questions point to the significance of, but do not directly clarify, the meaning of "the public" as a conceptual resource.

Whereas Cavell's method of provocative questioning broaches the topic of philosophy's relationship to political culture, in *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, West unequivocally advocates philosophy's entry into public life for explicitly moral and political purposes--as "a form of cultural criticism in which the meaning of America is put forward by intellectuals in response to distinct social crises...[;] a continuous cultural commentary or set of interpretations that attempt to explain America to itself at a particular historical moment" (*American Evasion*, 5). Indeed, throughout *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, West's writing is clearly motivated by, and derives much of its justification and force from a capacious conception of what he identifies in *Race*

Matters as "the public square"[17]--a place not only for rational deliberation, but also for expressing love; a realm that includes not only philosophers, but also extends to gay, feminist, working class, Chicano, Black, Asian-American and third world collectivities, all working together in service of "the public interest."

> The political substance of the American evasion of philosophy is that what was the prerogative of philosophers, i.e., rational deliberation, is now that of the people--the populace deliberating is creative democracy in the making. Needless to say, this view is not a license for eliminating or opposing all professional elites, but it does hold them to account. Similarly, it is citizenry in action, with its civil consciousness molded by participation in public-interest-centered and individual-rights-regarding democracy (*American Evasion*, 213).

West's fundamental difference with Cavell in visualizing the relationship between philosophy and the public realm is reflected in West's interpretation of Emerson's philosophy as having important consequences for the emergence of Dewey's pragmatism. According to Dewey, the public (as distinguished from the social) consists of all persons who have been indirectly affected by various consequences that follow from the fact of associated behavior. This public extends to all those affected who

---

[17] In Race Matters (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), West argues for the necessity of present-day black scholars engaging in public life by invoking the concept of a vital "public square": "We must focus our attention on the public square--the common good that undergirds our national and global destinies. The vitality of any public square ultimately depends on how much we care about the quality of our lives together. The neglect of our public infrastructure...reflects not only our myopic economic policies, which impede productivity, but also the low priority we place on our common life" (7).

require systematic care by the state.[18] Unlike much of West's later work, which is devoted to elaborating on the idea of publicity entailed by prophetic pragmatism,[19] *The American Evasion of Philosophy* does not explore the similarities and differences

---

[18] In The Public and Its Problems, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1927) Dewey writes, "the essence of the consequences which call a public into being is the fact that they expand beyond those directly engaged in producing them. Consequently special agencies and measures must be formed if they are to be attended to.... The obvious external mark of the organization of a public or of a state is thus the existence of officials" (27).

[19] For example, in "The Postmodern Crisis of the Black Intellectual," West argues that "It behooves us to think about the degree to which the waning of public spheres in this society tends to displace politics into the few spheres where there is in fact some public discussion--spheres like the academy. Hence so much of academic politics is a displacement of the relative absence of serious politics within the larger 'public' spheres where serious resources are being produced, distributed, and consumed. And so much of academic politics--in terms of the level of what's at stake--seems to be exorbitant in a country in which our actual politics are comical. No real public sphere: we know about the theatricalization of our politics and the packaged character of our candidates and so forth" (Cultural Studies, eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, [New York: Routledge Press, 1992], 692). In "Learning to Talk of Race," he writes, "The tragic plight of our children clearly reveals our deep disregard for public well-being.... One essential step is some form of large-scale public intervention to ensure access to basic social goods--housing, food, health care, education, child care, and jobs.... After a period in which the private sphere has been sacrilized and the public square gutted, the temptation is to make a fetish of the public square. We need to resist such dogmatic swings" (Reading Rodney King, Reading Urban Uprising, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams [New York: Routledge Press, 1993], 259). And in "The New Cultural Politics of Difference" he calls for a "new cultural criticism" that will expose the exclusions that have in the recent past been built into a public sphere, a sphere constituted and regulated by "immoral patriarchal, imperial, jingoistic and xenophobic constraints" (Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures, ed. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West [Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990], 35).

between, on the one hand, West's own concept of publicity that undergirds his prophetic pragmatism and role as an organic intellectual; and, on the other, Dewey's vision of "a discursive and dialogical space wherein various 'publics' can find common ground" (*American Evasion*, 105). Nonetheless, West's commitment to his idea of "the public"--to knowing more about the connection between thought and action, and what he clearly regards as the necessary alignment of philosophical ambition with felt responses to the political world--is registered in his dissatisfaction with Emerson's doctrine of "self-reliance" as a program for social change. Unlike Cavell, West does not read Emerson's essay as prompting even the question of publicity. He writes, "Emerson's nonconformist conception of self-reliance resists mere ideological support of capitalist development. Yet his viewpoint also provides very little substantive opposition to it" (American Evasion, 21). And: "Emerson is not a social revolutionary because 'he believes he is already on the right track and moving towards an excellent destiny.' Moral transgression essentially consists for Emerson in the exercise of personal conscience against custom, law, and tradition. It rests upon a deep distrust of the masses, a profound disenchantment with the dirty affairs of politics and a fervent defense of individual liberties" (*American Evasion*, 17).

That "Self-Reliance" should emerge as a key text eliciting such philosophical deliberation over the meaning of the public is understandable when we consider that this essay stands as Emerson's best known contribution to a nineteenth-century tradition of liberal discourse that represents public opinion as a coercive force. At the same time that the proliferation of American publics during the nineteenth century created new political possibilities for individuals, particularly women, who had previously been

excluded from such institutional sites,[20] philosophical inquiry into the subject tended to demote and finally to denounce the insidious powers of what John Stuart Mill describes in *On Liberty* as the "yoke of opinion,"[21] and Alexis de Tocqueville once called the "mistress of the world."[22]

In his celebrated diatribe against public opinion, Mill is less at pains to describe, as Tocqueville does, the etiology, actual operation, and effects of public opinion[23] than he is to attack and undermine its formidable power to impose serious, undemocratic

---

[20] On this point see Mary P. Ryan, Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880 (Baltimore, 1990).

[21] John Stuart Mill, On Liberty, ed. Elizabeth Rapaport (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1978), 8. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically.

[22] Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J. P. Mayer (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1969), 435. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically.

[23] In Democracy in America, Tocqueville insists that public opinion in the United States, as in any democracy, derives much of its influence from the fact of equality between citizens. Although equality is a source of pride and independence it is also, according to De Tocqueville, a primary cause for feeling insignificant and weak: when a citizen compares himself with all his fellow citizens put together as one vast entity, he is bound to feel isolated and defenseless in the face of the majority. Thus it is that in democracies, by De Tocqueville's account, public opinion exerts its strange, powerful appeal: "It uses no persuasion to forward its beliefs, but by some mighty pressure of the mind of all upon the intelligence of each it imposes its ideas and makes them penetrate men's very souls. The majority in the United States takes over the business of supplying the individual with a quantity of ready-made opinions and so relieves him of the necessity of forming his own. So there are many theories of philosophy, morality, and politics which everyone adopts unexamined on the faith of public opinion" (Democracy in America, 435-436).

constraints upon individual liberty. "It is easy," he writes, "for anyone to imagine an ideal public which leaves the freedom and choice of individuals in all uncertain matters undisturbed and only requires them to abstain from modes of conduct which universal experience has condemned. But where has there been seen a public which set any such limit to its censorship?... In its interferences with personal conduct it is seldom thinking of anything but the enormity of acting or feeling differently from itself... (*On Liberty*, 82). For Mill, the only time when public opinion may be properly used to coerce any member of a civilized community is when such coercion prevents harm to others.

What Mill stresses above all else in his discussion of publicity is the necessity and importance of addressing the public, the making of private arguments and opinions public: "The liberty of expressing and publishing opinions [is]...almost of as much importance as the liberty of thought itself and...is practically inseparable from it" (*On Liberty*, 11-12). A few pages later he insists that "the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is that it is robbing the human race, posterity as well as the existing generation--those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it" (*On Liberty*, 16). And finally, he observes that conformity to public opinion by even the brightest of individuals ruins society's chances for self-improvement because all possibilities of intellectual development and fearless innovation have been effectively done away with:

> A state of things in which a large portion of the most active and inquiring intellects find it advisable to keep the general principles and grounds of their convictions within their own breasts, and attempt, in what they address to the public, to fit as much as they can of their own conclusions to premises which they have internally renounced, cannot send forth the open, fearless characters and logical, consistent intellects who once adorned the thinking world. The sort

> of men who can be looked for under it are either mere conformers to commonplace, or timeservers for truth, whose arguments on all great subjects are meant for their hearers, and are not those which have convinced themselves (*On Liberty*, 31-32).

Like Mill's *On Liberty*, Emerson's writings exhibit a profound ambivalence toward the public: for Emerson, as for other liberal philosophers, public opinion is both burdensome and conceptually indispensable in thinking about democracy.[34] Although, as we have seen, Emerson values the fame-making attributes of mass circulation newspapers as vehicles for philosophy, in "Self-Reliance" he contemptuously describes "the sour faces of the multitude, [which] like their sweet faces, have no deep cause, but are put on and off as the wind blows and a newspaper directs."[35] Like Mill, Emerson deplores the extent to which newspapers have become shapers of public opinion that do away with any capacity for thought that might exist among the masses.[36] And like Mill,

---

[34] As Habermas points out, the demotion of the existing public by liberal theorists resulted in the constitution of a new, elite public: "Against a public opinion that, as it seemed, had been perverted from an instrument of liberation into an agent of repression, liberalism, faithful to its own ratio, could only summon public opinion once again" (137).

[35] Ralph Waldo Emerson, Essays and Lectures, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 264. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically.

[36] "At present individuals are lost in the crowd," Mill observes. "In politics it is almost a triviality to say that public opinion now rules the world. The only power deserving the name is that of masses, and of governments while they make themselves the organ of the tendencies and instincts of masses.... [The] mass do not now take their opinions from dignitaries in Church or State, from ostensible leaders, or from books. Their thinking is done for them by men much like themselves, addressing them or speaking in their name, on the spur of the moment, through the newspapers" (63). Mill's stated concern at this point in his

Emerson believes that custom and public opinion work against the nurturing of precious individuality; that, as Emerson famously puts it, "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude" ("Self-Reliance," 263).

In contrast to Mill, however, Emerson does not emphasize the importance of public address and of making private, original views public. Rather than defending the freedom of public, published expression, in "Self-Reliance" Emerson insists that the rigidity and impediments associated with public opinion will be effectively undone once it has been rightly conceived of as mirroring private conviction. Paradoxically, at the same time that Emerson's claim that what is privately true holds true for all men encourages freedoms of expression, it also obviates what Mill regards as the urgent necessity of free, public speaking. By Emerson's account the liberties of public expression Mill would fight for eighteen years later are there for the taking but altogether unnecessary, because of this striking and inexplicable, but inevitable convergence of public and private. He writes, "Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost,--and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the Last Judgment" ("Self-Reliance," 259).

The curious enfolding of the vocabulary of the public into the private that takes place over the course of Emerson's essay is nowhere more in evidence than in this reference to the publicness once only borne by the person of the monarch or feudal lord, now available to every man:

---

argument is less what he calls "the present low state of the human mind" per se than it is the obstacles such a low state would present for a government attempting to rise above mediocrity.

> In history, our imagination plays us false. Kingdom and lordship, power and estate, are a gaudier vocabulary than private John and Edward in a small house and a common day's work; but the things of life are the same to both.... Why all this deference to Alfred, and Scanderbeg, and Gustavus? Suppose they were virtuous; did they wear out virtue? As great a stake depends on our private act to-day, as followed their public and renowned steps. When private men shall act with original views, the lustre will be transferred from the actions of kings to those of gentlemen.
>
> The world has been instructed by its kings, who have so magnetized the eyes of nations. It has been taught by this colossal symbol, the mutual reverence that is due from man to man. The joyful loyalty with which men have everywhere suffered the king, the noble, or the great proprietor to walk among them by a law of his own, make his own scale of men and things, and reverse theirs, pay for benefits not with money but with honor, and represent the law in his person, was the hieroglyphic by which they obscurely signified their consciousness of their own right and comeliness, the right of every man ("Self-Reliance," 268).

As Habermas points out, the phenomenon of "representative publicness" that was the ground of manorial authority in feudal society of the High Middle Ages was inseparable from the lord's presence and the visibility of his physical attributes--his insignia, dress, demeanor, and rhetoric--all of which contributed to the endowment of what Habermas describes as his powerful "aura" (*Structural Transformation*, 7).[27] In "Self-Reliance," the

---

[27] Although he notes that sociologically speaking distinct public and private realms did not exist in the feudal society of the High Middle Ages, Habermas argues that lordship was something publicly represented: "This <u>publicness</u> (or <u>publicity</u>) <u>of representation</u> was not constituted as a social realm, that is, as a public sphere; rather, it was something like a status attribute.... [The manorial lord] presented himself as an

primary features of this publicness inherent in the vocabulary of kingdom and lordship have been fundamentally altered. In Habermas' account, the king's representative publicity was such that it effectively barred private people from stepping into the public sphere--during the Middle Ages in Europe, he claims, there existed no legal status that could define such a capacity for translation into the public (*Structural Transformation*, 5). By contrast, Emerson's description of the publicity involved in his notion of "the representative" renders the experience of publicity--the enjoyment of personal magnetism, the reverence and loyalty of fellow men, and the prerogative to live "by a law of his own"--as a right that is democratically extended to "every man."

Setting aside for a moment the unacknowledged exclusions built into Emerson's concept of representative publicity, at first glance Emerson appears to be promoting something like universal access to publicity. But in fact he is simply *equaling* the private with the public. He tells us that *as great a stake* depends on private acts as public ones, and thus what is called for is not entry into the public realm but rather a universal assertion of the right to act *as private men* with original views.[38] The modern, legal vocabulary of public representation--the language of acts, rights, and laws--has been saturated in this passage with personal, common sense or everyday meanings. The effects of such an altered vocabulary are dual and contradictory. At the same time that

---

embodiment of some sort of 'higher' power. The concept of representation in this sense has been preserved down to the most recent constitutional doctrine.... For representation pretended to make something invisible visible through the public presence of the person of the lord" (Structural Transformation, 7).

[38] Compare Habermas' observation that the transformed and degenerated bourgeois public sphere "becomes privatized in the consciousness of the consuming public" (Structural Transformation, 171).

Emerson encourages an original first step onto the path leading to public life, he also presents a barrier to publicity and obviates the need for public action because, by his account, no distinct public realm exists beyond the intimate confines of the private.[19] Thus he is able to insist, with stunning self-assurance, that the truest form of participation in public life is a vanishing from that life; that publicity is best accomplished by sitting at home. "All concentrates," he writes.

> let us not rove; let us sit at home with the cause. Let us stun and astonish the intruding rabble of men and books and institutions, by a simple declaration of the divine fact. Bid the invaders take the shoes from off their feet, for God is here within. Let our simplicity judge them, and our docility to our own law demonstrate the poverty of nature and fortune beside our native riches ("Self-Reliance," 272).

This same inclarity as to the significance of the public recurs in Emerson's reference to the visibility of the body. Whereas previously we saw that Emerson strategically blurs the distinction between the public and the private, in "Self-Reliance" we are also left with a question as to whether the body is public or social. For example, when Emerson complains about the conformity that characterizes various "communities

---

[19] The same point applies to Cavell's use of the Emersonian term "constitution" when he describes Emerson's inheritance of philosophy as a conversion and rebirth into America: "Emerson's writing is (an image or promise of, the constitution for) this new yet unapproachable America: his aversion is a rebirth of himself into it (there will be other rebirths)...The identification this writer proposes between his individual constitution and the constitution of his nation is a subject on its own" (New Yet, 92-93). This claim, taken with Cavell's observation that Emerson's "quest was his way of founding a nation, writing its constitution, constituting its citizens" invites us to consider how Emerson's notion of constitution (which conjoins senses that are both personally physical and legal or public) relates to the actual process and consequences of forming political community.

of opinion"--describing the uniformity of faces and bodies, "the gentlest asinine expression" that is "the prison-uniform of the party to which we adhere"--he does not indicate whether these parties function as actual political entities or as social clubs ("Self-Reliance," 264). Indeed, the sociality and not the publicity of the body seems to be at issue when Emerson describes the physical experience (and not the visible appearance) of what he calls "'the foolish face of praise,' the forced smile which we put on in company where we do not feel at ease in answer to conversation which does not interest us. Thus muscles, not spontaneously moved, but moved by a low usurping wilfulness, grow tight about the outline of the face with the most disagreeable sensation" ("Self-Reliance," 264).

Emerson's imagining of the public in "Self-Reliance"--his simultaneous invitation and denial of access to a world beyond domestic life--calls our attention back to the fact, and consequences, of the central issue raised both by West's criticism of Emerson's essay as providing little substantive opposition to social injustice, and by Cavell's question regarding the lintel's publicity : namely, whether the liminal act of writing philosophy is, or ought to be, defined as public action. The debate over whether Emerson's doctrine of "self-reliance" is or is not revolutionary; over whether, and how, philosophy may be said to shape or revitalize political culture, takes on an even more pressing relevance to King's political philosophy when we consider the fact that King's sermon "Transformed Nonconformist," published in his widely circulated collection *Strength to Love*, does in many respects reflect Emerson's ideas and exhortations to nonconformity.[30] Indeed, King structures the sermon around what might be seen as the

---

[30] In The American Evasion of Philosophy, West points out a connection between King and Emerson, arguing that although King contributed to the political project of building of an "Emersonian

most famous and quotable of aphorisms in "Self-Reliance," "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist" (*Strength to Love*, 12). Unlike Emerson, who simultaneously precludes and facilitates access to the public realm, King unequivocally promotes political action by deploying Emerson's famous mandate for nonconformity to communicate King's own vision of the social crisis brought about by the deadening conformity of racism. "Many people fear nothing more terribly than to take a position which stands out sharply and clearly from the prevailing opinion," he observes.

> The tendency of most is to adopt a view that is so ambiguous that it will include everything and so popular that it will include everybody.... Not a few men, who cherish lofty and noble ideals, hide them under a bushel for fear of being called different. Many sincere white people in the South privately oppose segregation and discrimination, but they are apprehensive lest they be publicly condemned.... How *few* people have the audacity to express publicly their convictions, and how *many* have allowed themselves to be 'astronomically intimidated'! (*Strength To Love*, 10)

---

culture of creative democracy" (235), he himself was not a prophetic pragmatist. "The social movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr., represents the best of what the political dimension of prophetic pragmatism is all about. Like Sojourner Truth, Walter Rauschenbusch, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Dorothy Day, King was not a prophetic pragmatist. Yet like them he was a prophet, in which role he contributed mightily to the political project of prophetic pragmatism. His all-embracing moral vision facilitated alliances and coalitions across racial, gender, class, and religious lines. His Gandhian method of nonviolent resistance highlighted forms of love, courage, and discipline worthy of a compassionate prophet. And his appropriation and interpretation of American civil religion extended the tradition of American jeremiads, a tradition of public exhortation that joins social criticisms of America to moral renewal and admonishes the country to be true to its founding ideals of freedom, equality, and democracy" (235).

Emerson's own formulations of the doctrine notwithstanding, self-reliance, as presented in King's strategic interpretation, implies some public mode of speech or action that also resists conformity by unveiling the unique distinctness of individuals. In King's terms, self-reliance as public action promises to bring about a direct confrontation with the dominant culture that results in "true brotherhood, true integration, true person-to-person relationships" ("Love, Law and Civil Disobedience, *Testament of Hope*, 51), a public realm in which individuals appear to each other, not as physical objects, but in all their personal dignity and worth.

The critique of Emerson embedded in King's sermon--a rhetorical performance that evidently worked to perpetuate "self-reliance" as important cultural value promoting entry into the public realm during the struggle for black liberation[31]--is in many respects similar to the critique set forth in Thoreau's "Resistance to Civil Government," a work published eight years after "Self-Reliance" and which was foundational to King's developing theory of political obligation and symbolic action. In *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, Cavell acknowledges Thoreau as "Emerson's purest interpreter, no one more accurate, no one else so exclusive" (*New Yet*, 84). In Thoreau's treatise on civil disobedience, the line of this inheritance is clearly etched. Like Emerson and other nineteenth-century liberal philosophers, Thoreau attempts to

---

[31] In Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom, Richard King explores a concept of "self-respect" which, he argues, was central to the political experience of participants in the civil rights movement: "Self-respect is not just a state of mind; it implies some form of action which transforms self-respect from a subjective or private certainty into a public truth" ([New York: Oxford University Press, 1992], 72). Martin Luther King's interpretation of Emersonian "self-reliance" bears a striking resemblance to this concept of "self-respect" and, as I argue throughout this discussion, represented a rich resource for the revitalization of political culture and experience for participants in the civil rights movement.

work against the stultifying claims of public opinion. But unlike Mill, who argues that private opinion should be freely made public; and unlike Emerson, who insists that private opinion will, in the end, be universally affirmed in public; Thoreau's writing is directed against the expression of *any* opinions whatsoever, when such opinions take the place of public, political action. Again and again in his essay Thoreau refers to the urgent necessity of what he calls "doing": "There are thousands who are in opinion opposed to slavery and to the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them; who, esteeming themselves children of Washington and Franklin, sit down with their hands in their pockets, and say that they know not what to do, and do nothing."[32] "How can a man be satisfied to entertain an opinion merely, and enjoy *it*?" he asks. Even voting is not tantamount to doing, because as Thoreau puts it "Even voting *for the right is doing* nothing for it. It is only expressing to men feebly your desire that it should prevail" (*Resistance*, 139).

For Thoreau, the problem with Emerson's idea of "self-reliance" as a strategy for resistance is that, like any mere expression of opinion, self-reliance does not stake the character of the individual; instead, it contributes to the illusion that living expediently in the world is in fact doing something for it. "The American has dwindled into an Odd Fellow," he observes,

> one who may be known by his development of his organ of gregariousness, and a manifest lack of intellect and cheerful self-reliance; whose first and chief concern, on coming into the world, is to see that alms-houses are in good repair; and, before yet he has lawfully donned the virile garb, to collect a fund for the

---

[32] Henry David Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government," Great Short Works of Henry David Thoreau, ed. Wendell Glick (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 139. Subsequent citations are to Resistance and will be cited parenthetically.

> support of the widows and orphans that may be; who, in short, ventures to live only by the aid of the mutual insurance company, which promised to bury him decently (*Resistance*, 140).

Thoreau's dissatisfaction with the inadequacies of self-reliance to effect real changes in society results in his articulation of what he identifies as a "revolutionary" concept of performance as public action. He writes, "Action from principle,--the perception and the performance of right,--changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with any thing which was" (*Resistance*, 142).

Thoreau's emphasis on public performativity represents a critique of Emerson in two major respects. First, unlike Emerson's "Self-Reliance," in which the term "conscience" is conspicuously absent, Thoreau's account of performance as disobedient, symbolic action--namely, his refusal to pay his poll tax and subsequent night in jail--underscores the claims of conscience by stressing the importance of making these claims visible to the public eye.[33] Thoreau argues that only when these powerful claims of conscience, as opposed to mere opinion, have been made public, can there be any possibility of forming a collective identity, a corporation or "nation" of disobedients. In such a revolutionary situation of visibility and publicity, he contends, the claims of conscience are *both* privately experienced *and* shared in public: "It is truly enough said,

---

[33] Compare Cavell's reference to the significance of visibility for Thoreau's project in Walden: "the writer's claims to privacy, secrecy, and isolation are as problematic, in the achievement and in the depiction of them, as any other of his claims.... This is one way I understand [his] placing himself 'one mile from any neighbor.' . It was just far enough to be seen clearly.... The withdrawal he depicts in Walden creates a version of what the Puritan Congregationalists called a member of the church congregation: a visible saint" (The Senses of Walden [San Francisco: North Point Press, 1972], 10-11).

that a corporation has no conscience; but a corporation of conscientious men is a corporation *with* a conscience" (*Resistance*, 136). Second, whereas Emerson's descriptions of the body in "Self-Reliance" blur the distinction between the public and the social, Thoreau presents the performance of symbolic action as an innovative, visible vocabulary of the body that publicizes the claims of conscience.

Although Thoreau's emphasis on symbolic action marks a significant departure from Emerson's "cheerful" self-reliance, his model of disobedience still relies for much of its effectiveness on Emerson's conception of "the representative man." For Thoreau, as for Emerson, the concept of representativeness dismantles individual boundaries and paves the way for universal identification or "diffusion of spirit" between persons: as Emerson put it in his 1850 essay on the "Uses of Great Men," "all touch by their summits.... Thought and feeling, that break out there, cannot be impounded by any fence of personality. This is the key to the power of the greatest men,--their spirit diffuses itself" (*Representative Men, Essays and Lectures*, 631). Thoreau's promotion of himself as a civil disobedient entails this "representative" status, a status that by definition involves free access to the public realm. Thoreau's capacity to speak on behalf of slaves; his moral universalism; and thus his claim to identify and merge his own conscience with the conscience of an imagined disobedient collectivity, derive much of their justification and force from the "representative" whiteness and maleness of his body. Paradoxically, the fact of this physical inconspicuousness--in combination with Thoreau's genius--grants him formidable powers of visibility, audibility, and thus publicity in his expression of dissatisfaction with the state.

In her critique of Thoreau's essay set forth in *Crises of the Republic*, Arendt denies Thoreau the public status of a civil disobedient because, she argues, his claims of conscience are inherently unpolitical, and as such can never be made public.

According to Arendt, "[conscience] is not primarily interested in the world where the wrong is committed or the consequences that the wrong will have for the future course in the world...because it trembles for the individual self and its integrity."[34] Indeed, she continues, once conscientious objection has been made public, it represents one, indistinguishable opinion in a marketplace of public opinion where only large numbers of coinciding consciences will have any political significance. What Arendt insists is that conscience, like philosophy, must first be heard of in newspapers as public opinion in order to have any realizable effect:

> No doubt...conscientious objection can become politically significant when a number of consciences happen to coincide, and the conscientious objectors decide to enter the market place and make their voices heard in public. But then we are no longer dealing with individuals, or with a phenomenon whose criteria can be derived from...Thoreau. What had been decided in *foro conscientiae* has now become part of public opinion, and although this particular group of civil disobedients may still claim the initial validation--their consciences--they actually rely no longer on themselves alone. In the market place, the fate of conscience is not much different from the fate of the philosopher's truth: it becomes an opinion, indistinguishable from other opinions. And the strength of opinion does not depend on conscience, but on the number of those with whom it is associated (*Crises*, 67-68).

Arendt's dismissal of Thoreau's premise that the private claims of conscience can be exhibited in public also dismantles his contention that civil disobedients should band

---

[34] Hannah Arendt, Crises of the Republic (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969), 60-61. Subsequent citations are to Crises and will be cited parenthetically.

together and form a visible, public collectivity or corporation that simultaneously recognizes its individual, conscientious members and represents, as Thoreau puts it, a corporation *with* a conscience. Moreover, Arendt's insistence that civil disobedients are organized in accordance with the principle of voluntary association denies the force of Thoreau's attempt to present the appeal to conscience, and the intimate ties of shared conscience, as a means of resisting the purely volitional, rational, contractual assumption of obligations that are fundamental to Arendt's specific engagement with liberal political philosophy.

Arendt's myopia regarding matters of race, and the significance of civil disobedience--the pressing need to believe in the public visibility and efficacy of conscience--for African Americans in the struggle for racial justice during the sixties, has been duly noted by her critics. In a salient critique of Arendt's striking inability to distinguish between publicity and sociality in the question of racial justice, Seyla Benhabib has drawn on the example of Arendt's confusion over the problem of school desegregation in Little Rock, Arkansas:

> Arendt likened the demands of the black parents, upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court, to have their children admitted into previously all-white schools to the desire of the social parvenue to gain recognition in a society that did not care to admit her. This time around Arendt failed to make the final distinction and confused an issue of public justice, equality of educational access, with an issue of social preference, who my friends are or whom I invite to dinner ("Models of Public Space," 79).

But in spite of this serious conceptual limitation, Arendt's commentary on Thoreau does illuminate two significant difficulties faced by King and other civil disobedients which Thoreau himself does not address. First, that civil disobedience

depends for its success upon the responsive performances of others--people who witness, listen, and believe; who confer visibility and publicity on the inner, whispered voice of conscience, thereby making it real. What Thoreau does not emphasize, and King's work on disobedience makes clear, is the fact that the body of the civil disobedient is offered in the hope that witnesses will regard it as authenticating the claims of conscience.[35] As various commentators have pointed out, King's public discourse relies for much of its effectiveness on an embodied, sermonic, rhetorical dimension that authorizes and enacts the claims of his conscience and philosophy of beloved community.[36] In "The Time for Freedom Has Come," King praised the commitment of black youth to the cause for freedom and their persistent exercise of rights by remarking that "They have offered their energies, their bodies to effect this result" (*Testament of Hope*, 165). In "A Gift of Love," King recalls how in the summer of 1966, during the Freedom March through Mississippi, young gang members who engaged in nonviolent direct action "were to be called upon to protect women and children on the march, with no other weapons

---

[35] Compare Elaine Scarry's claims regarding the objectification, denial, and falsification of pain in the torturer's use of the sufferer's body to confer reality onto the illusory but (to the torturers and represented regime) convincing spectacle of power: "As a perceptual fact, [a weapon] lifts the pain out of the body and makes it visible or, more precisely, it acts as a bridge or mechanism across which some of pain's attributes--its incontestable reality, its totality, its ability to eclipse all else, its power of dramatic alteration and world dissolution--can be lifted away from their source, can be separated from the sufferer and referred to power, broken off from the body and attached instead to the regime" (The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World [New York: Oxford University Press, 1985], 56).

[36] On the performative aspects of King's rhetoric and his interaction with the audience, see Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Sermonic Power of Public Discourse, 5-6.

than their own bodies" (*Testament of Hope*, 63). And in his famous 1963 "Letter From Birmingham City Jail" King defended his use of direct non-violent action as a strategy "whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and national community" (*Testament of Hope*, 291). Taken as a whole, King's writings and life work disclose his belief that only such a visible, bodily performance should authorize and make real his claims in creating access to public life. As one of King's recent commentators has observed, "King was a master of political theater."[37]

A second difficulty follows from this reliance on the body; namely, that for King and other African-Americans, disobedient entry into the public realm is complicated by racial visibility and the phenomenology of the gaze.[38] We have seen that the whiteness and maleness of Thoreau's "representative" body grants him access to formidable powers of publicity in his expression of dissatisfaction with the state; and that for Thoreau, the appeal to conscience derives much of its effectiveness from the fact that it has been enacted in his political capacity as a taxpaying citizen. In *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom*, Richard King has observed that "as a representative man, King's public words and actions revealed something essential about himself and

---

[37] E. Culpepper Clark, "The American Dilemma in King's 'Letter from Birmingham Jail,'" Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Sermonic Power of Public Discourse, eds. Carolyn Calloway-Thomas and John Louis Lucaites (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 45.

[38] For a discussion of Frantz Fanon's analysis of the look and his indebtedness to the phenomenological tradition of European philosophical thought, see Robert Gooding Williams, "Look, A Negro!," Reading Rodney King, Reading Urban Uprising, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge Press, 1993), 164-165, 173-174.

about the movement generally."[39] like Thoreau, King's success as a civil disobedient requires that he assume a "representative" status, speaking and acting on behalf of the oppressed, exhibiting his own exemplary conduct to organize and inspire commitment and disobedient, political action on the part of thousands of men, women and children involved in the black freedom struggle.[40] But in contrast to Thoreau's deft, easy assumption of a representative status, King's performance as a civil disobedient and thus his aspiration to Emersonian representativeness involves a dangerous and even life-threatening situation of racial visibility that has, historically speaking, denied black Americans access to citizenship and resulted in a pernicious condition of political invisibility in the public realm.

King's own account of his philosophy of direct nonviolent action shows the extent to which he was influenced by Thoreau's vocabulary and theoretical framework for thinking about civil disobedience and political obligation. Like Thoreau, King's model of civil disobedience represents a critique of liberal ideals that is itself an expression of his faith in those ideals: "And I submit," he writes in "Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience," "that the individual who disobeys the law, whose conscience tells him it is unjust and who is willing to accept the penalty by staying in jail until that law

---

[39] Richard King, Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 106-107.

[40] Manning Marable's study of the historical relationship between religion and black protest thought, and his observation that King's philosophy of disobedience "provided a theoretical framework for thousands of committed black men, women and children to lay down in the streets in protest, to be arrested and physically beaten by white policemen" supports my claim that King's success as an activist and political leader entailed his aspiration to a representative status. (Blackwater: Historical Studies in Race, Class Consciousness, and Revolution [Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1993], 45).

is altered, is expressing at the moment the very highest respect for law" (*Testament of Hope*,49). And like Thoreau, King's critique of liberal democracy and the limits of contractarianism centers on his broadening of our conception of political obligation to include both those which are "enforceable" or legislated and those which are "unenforceable," such as the moral obligation to refuse to cooperate with evil. In a 1962 speech titled "The Ethical Demands of Integration," King argues that such moral, unenforceable political obligations are met "by one's commitment to an inner law, written on the heart" (*Testament of Hope*, 123). Just as in "Resistance to Civil Government" Thoreau calls attention to the efficacy and force of conscience as a source of political obligations that may not be assumed by acts of consent that are wholly volitional and rational; so King's writings emphasize obligations that resist the Lockean, liberal notion that political community is constituted by contract and consent. But whereas Thoreau's essay makes visible the obligations associated with his individual act of conscience, King's writings explore the political ties that arise out of the disobedient's capacity to love.

The centrality of love to King's conception of disobedience registers a crucial difference between, on the one hand, the ties of loving obligation that bind together King's idea of a beloved community, and on the other, the coincidence of consciences that is the governing principle for group cohesion in Thoreau's model of disobedience--as one commentator has noted, "King's conception of the nature and power of love is probably his greatest singular contribution to...American social philosophy."[41] By King's own account, the love ethic reflected in his vision of a "beloved community" as the aftermath of resistance was fundamental to the acts of

---

[41] Ervin Smith, The Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr. (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1981), 61.

disobedience promulgated by the student movement.[42] "Now when the students talk about love," he observes, "certainly they are not talking about emotional bosh, they are not talking about merely a sentimental outpouring; they're talking about something much deeper..." ("Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience," *Testament of Hope*, 46). And: "To retaliate with hate and bitterness would do nothing but intensify the hate in the world. Along the way of life, someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate. This can be done only by projecting the ethics of love to the center of our lives" ("Nonviolence and Racial Justice," *Testament of Hope*, 8).

The critique of liberal ideals undertaken in King's writings was central to his ongoing attempt to bring together a biracial coalition demanding civil rights and basic structural changes within American society. His death was a devastating loss to the cause for racial freedom in this country, one which threatened the cohesiveness and thus the political efficacy of further reform movements. But in the United States, at least, the consequences of King's philosophy remain, and have shaped some of our most cherished theoretical premises in the current debate over the uses and justification of defensive violence on the one hand, and on the other a desire to believe in the political *efficacy of civil disobedience and love. As Cornel West put it in* 1990,

> King believed in the fundamental trustworthiness of human existence, that creation was essentially good and only existentially evil.... This trust presupposes that the unearned suffering of *agapic* nonviolent resisters can educate,

---

[42] For a discussion of King's devotion to the ideal of a beloved community, and aspects of its theological and philosophical foundations (including Personalism, Evangelical Liberalism, and the influence of Niebuhr, Royce, and Rauschenbusch), see Kenneth L. Smith, Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Lanham: University Press of America, 1986); and Ira G. Zepp, The Social Vision of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing Inc., 1989), 207-234.

> transform, and even convert one's opponents.... And if one concludes that no such development is possible--that the adversary not only has no moral sense or conscience but, in addition, no longer even has the *capacity* to develop one--then we are forced to admit that we are doomed to an unending cycle of violence and oppression, that human history is the slaughterhouse that Hegel said it was, with the old victims of violence soon to become the new perpetrators of violence. That's the nightmare that hangs in King's closet.[43]

King's performance and critique of American philosophy not only broadens our theoretical vocabulary for describing publicity and political obligation; it also forms the basis for an innovative, ongoing critique undertaken in literatures of protest written in the wake of sixties activism. Many of the doubts and hopes raised by King's philosophy--his abiding faith in the political efficacy of civil disobedience and love--have, in turn, led to a reassessment and response on the part of African-American poets and novelists interested in developing what might be called, for lack of a better term, a poetics of disobedience. This poetics--which clearly exhibits the impact of King's involvement in the civil rights movement and critique of the American political

---

[43] West, "The Religious Foundations of the Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr.," We Shall Overcome: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Black Freedom Struggle, ed. Peter J. Albert and Ronald Hoffman (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 127. The terms of this debate are much the same as they were in 1971 when Hanes Walton, Jr. wrote the following criticisms of King's views on love: "King stressed that one is able to love a person while hating the deeds of that person. But how much of a person can actually be separated from his actions? And who, if not that person, is to be held responsible for those actions?....On these recurrent questions King's philosophy is silent.... To impose a pure love ethic in a realm where, at best, only relative justice can be attained is a utopian attempt" (The Political Philosophy Of Martin Luther King, Jr. [Westport: Greenwood Publishing Co., 1971], 80).

tradition--is one that explores the limits and expressive possibilities of King's philosophical framework, and allows each writer to grapple with the conceptual premises of disobedience and arrive at a unique formulation of prospects for entry into the public realm. Examples range from Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*, which examines tensions within black activist groups during the Carter administration and elaborates on the trauma, and need for healing, experienced by black women as a result of their entry into public life;[44] to the novel *Beloved*, in which Toni Morrison's portrait of Baby Suggs may be read as a celebration and critique of King's vision of beloved community--his emphasis on the importance of love in working against nihilism and contributing to a sense of agency and hope among oppressed people.[45] Even nationalist

---

[44] In this novel, Bambara alludes to Ralph Ellison's analysis of invisibility and the complications it presents for entry into public life: the fact that, in the words of one character, "Your true nature invisible because you're in some incongruous getup or in some incongruous place or the looker's got incongruous eyes." Even more central to Bambara's project is her vivid detailing of the public appeal and inadequacies of what she describes as a derivative, contemporary black leadership: "Some leader. He looked a bit like King, had a delivery similar to Malcom's, dressed like Stokely, had glasses like Rap, but she'd never heard him say anything useful or offensive. But what a voice. And what a good press agent. And the people had bought him. What a disaster. But what a voice" (The Salt Eaters [New York: Random House, 1980], 158, 35).

[45] In Race Matters, West refers to Toni Morrison's Beloved in order to elaborate on the significance of love for the development of what he calls "a politics of conversion" that will work against the threat of nihilism in black America. "A love ethic has nothing to do with sentimental feelings or tribal connections," he writes. "Rather it is a last attempt at generating a sense of agency among a downtrodden people... For my purposes here, Beloved can be construed as bringing together the loving yet critical affirmation of black humanity found in the best of black nationalist movements, the perennial hope against hope for trans-racial coalition in progressive movements, and the painful struggle for self-affirming sanity in a history in which the nihilistic threat seems insurmountable" (19).

poems by Amiri Baraka and Nikki Giovanni assert a distinctive black identity and cultural formation only insofar as they confront the rhetorical problem of constructing a "representative," public position from which to articulate a disobedient call to revolution--a poetic project that reflects the legacy of King's work on disobedience and critique of American philosophy.[46] And Alice Walker's novel *Meridian* examines both the uses and the inadequacies of King's philosophy by detailing moral contradictions and conflicting allegiances involved in either the commitment to love as a force for social change, or the decision to kill for the Revolution.[47] I want to conclude by briefly

---

[46] Consider, for example, Baraka's "SOS" in which the he modulates from a revolutionary, public, "representative" call for cohesion and political action voiced over radio waves to the personal invitation to come on in extended in the poem's concluding lines:

> Calling black people
> Call all black people, man woman, child
> Wherever you are, calling you, urgent, come in
> Black People, come in, wherever you are, urgent, calling you, calling all black people
> calling all black people, come in, black people, come on in (The Black Poets, ed. Dudley Randall, [New York: Bantam Books], 181).

And in Nikki Giovanni's "The Funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr.," the tragedy of King's death and the writing of his words on a tombstone are transformed into a collective, articulate, motivated rage that works towards the imagining and construction of a better world:

> His headstone said
> FREE AT LAST, FREE AT LAST
> But death is a slave's freedom
> We seek the freedom of free men
> And the construction of a world
> Where Martin Luther King could have lived and preached non-violence (The Black Poets, ed. Dudley Randall, [New York: Bantam Books], 323).

[47] Alice Walker, Meridian (New York: Simon and Schuster Inc., 1976). Subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically.

elaborating on Walker's example, because it offers a direct clarification of what I am identifying as one major consequence of King's response to the American philosophical tradition; namely, the critique of King's framework registered as a persistent engagement with the vocabulary of rights and an innovative poetics of disobedience developed in works by contemporary African-American authors and poets.

In a series of essays and addresses collected in the volume *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Walker assesses King's impact as a leader in the black community as well as his significance for Walker's own development as a writer. What is particularly striking about Walker's analysis is the extent to which she dwells on the fact of King's visibility and publicity. For example, in a 1967 essay titled "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?" she recalls that the first time she ever saw King was when his arrest was shown on a television news broadcast: "Six years ago," she recalls "after half-heartedly watching my mother's soap operas and wondering whether there wasn't something more to be asked of life, the Civil Rights Movement came into my life. Like a good omen for the future, the face of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was the first black face I saw on our new television screen. And, as in a fairy tale, my soul was stirred by the meaning for me of his mission...and I fell in love with the sober and determined face of the Movement."[48] And in "Choice: A Tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr.," an address delivered five years later, she deliberately underscores this fact of King's overwhelming publicity and life-threatening visibility--attributes which, as we have seen, were essential to the success of his ongoing attempt to practice the ideals of his revolutionary philosophy.

---

[48] Alice Walker, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 124.

The public acts of Dr. King you know. They are visible all around you. His voice you would recognize sooner than any other voice you have heard this century--this in spite of the fact that certain municipal libraries, like the one in downtown Jackson, do not carry recordings of his speeches, and the librarians chuckle cruelly when asked why they do not.

You know, if you have read his books, that his is a complex and revolutionary philosophy that few people are capable of understanding fully or have the patience to embody in themselves. Which is our weakness, which is our loss.[49]

---

[49] Walker, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, 144. Another, much more recent analysis of the overall impact of King's media publicity may be found in Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s recent memoir, Colored People (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994). Gates recalls the tortuous experience of watching TV and then arguing about King and the Movement with his father: 'Daddy was jaundiced about the civil rights movement, and especially about the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.... Sometimes he'd just mention King to get a rise from me, to make a sagging evening more interesting, to see if I had learned anything real yet, to see how long I could think up counter arguments before getting so mad that my face would turn purple. I think he just liked the color purple on my face, liked producing it there' (26). In contrast to Walker (to whose writings he obviously alludes), Gates argues that TV was not an enabling vehicle of identification with King; but, rather, a terrifying reminder of Gates' own utter helplessness in the face of danger. The very presence of a TV in his parents' house simultaneously forced Gates, even as a very young boy, to watch acts of genocide against blacks (here represented as one might represent a sports event or a war fought overseas) and disclosed what the white world held in store for him as a black man. 'The TV was the ritual arena for the drama of race,' he recalls. 'We watched people getting hosed and cracked over their heads, people being spat upon and arrested, rednecks siccing fierce dogs on women and children, our people responding by singing and marching.... Whatever tumult our small screen revealed, though, the dawn of the civil rights era could be no more than a spectator sport in Piedmont. It was almost like a war being fought overseas. And all things considered, white and colored Piedmont got along pretty well in those years, the fifties and early sixties. At least as long as colored people didn't try to sit down in the Cut-Rate or at the Rendezvous Bar, or eat pizza at Eddies, or buy property, or move into the white neighborhoods, or dance with, date, or dilate upon white people.

As in many of her essays, in the novel *Meridian* published almost a decade after King's assassination, Walker reveals that the pressing question of identity devolves upon her coming to terms with King's death, and her assessment of the Civil Rights Movement's political ideals and goals. From the novel's opening scene, which takes place in the southern town of Chicokema, we are presented with the vestiges of sixties activism: Truman Held, a former activist, arrives at the public square in his green Volvo, and notices that although the streets are lined with people, no one is saying anything. He tries to find out what is going on from an old black man with a broom and learns that a non-violent protest is being staged because black children in the community have not been allowed to see a circus exhibit except on a designated day:

> "Well," said the sweeper, giving Truman a guarded look as he clutched his broom, supporting himself on it, "some of the children wanted to get in to see the dead lady, you know, the mummy woman, in the trailer over there, and our day for seeing her ain't till Thursday."
>
> "*Your* day?"
>
> "That's what I said."
>
> "But the Civil Rights Movement changed all that!"
>
> "I seen rights come and I seen 'em go," said the sweeper sullenly, as if daring Truman to disagree (*Meridian*, 19).

The combined effect of our inundation with these details is to raise the question of whether, in fact, anything has changed as a result of King's eloquent call for direct non-violent action: in *Meridian*, Walker reflects upon the Movement's impact on

---

Not to mention try to get a job in the craft unions at the paper mill. Or have a drink at the white VFW, or join the white American Legion, or get loans at the bank, or just generally get out of line' (27).

subsequent attempts to enact the assertion of political identity--both individual and collective--through acts of civil disobedience. The pivotal moment in this opening scene occurs as Truman watches Meridian, standing in the public square, staring down a tank painted red, white, and blue and decorated with ribbons, a tank which we are told was bought by white townspeople "during the sixties when [they] felt under attack from 'outside agitators'--those members of the black community who thought equal rights for all should extend to blacks" (*Meridian*, 18).

> Meridian did not look to the right or to the left.... As she drew nearer the tank, it seemed to grow larger and whiter than ever and she seemed smaller and blacker than ever. And then, when she reached the tank she stepped lightly, deliberately, right in front of it, rapped smartly on its carapace--as if knocking on a door--then raised her arm again. The children pressed onward, through the ranks of the arrayed riflemen up to the circus car door. The silence, as Meridian kicked open the door, exploded in a mass exhalation of breaths, and the men who were in the tank crawled sheepishly out again to stare.
>
> "God!" said Truman without thinking. "How can you not love some body like that!"
>
> "Because she thinks *she's* God," said the sweeper, "or else she just ain't all there. I think she ain't all there, myself" (*Meridian*, 21-22).

As an imaginative exploration of the radical potentiality and applicability of King's theoretical framework, and as a report of the possibilities which now exist for oppositional politics in the United States, *Meridian* presents us with what at first appears to be a bleak and startling ambiguity: as a symbol of dissent, Meridian is either someone whom we thoughtlessly worship, as does Truman; or she is someone whom we dismiss, as the old sweeper does, as harboring grandiose and insane delusions about

herself and utopian prospects for political community in America.

Walker's acute awareness of the inadequacy of the symbol-making process to enact real changes in society and in the way people see the world is evident in her description of the circus exhibit in the public square which is the focus for Meridian's act of disobedience. The circus wagon, we are told, contains the mummified body of a woman who was killed by her husband, Henry, for the crime of adultery. The uncontrollable darkening of the mummy's skin--the irrepressible question of whether the body on display is in fact the body of a black woman--calls our attention to the significance of the "representative" body in the performance of disobedience. Although, like King, Walker is acutely aware that Meridian's entry into the public realm is necessarily complicated by the fact of her racial visibility, Walker's critique of King's model of civil disobedience inheres in her vivid detailing of the complications that *both* race *and* gender present for the construction of Meridian as a "representative" American Self, a Self whose representative qualities would--as we have seen in the case of Emerson, Thoreau, and King--have otherwise contributed to the formation of political community and established a mandate for a call to collective action.

There is clearly a world of difference between Walker's recorded response to King as a representative civil disobedient--a man whose life, by her own description, "seeming bigger and more miraculous than the man himself, because of all he had done and suffered, offered a pattern of strength and sincerity I felt I could trust" ("The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?" 124)--and Truman's response to Meridian's act of disobedience as Walker depicts it in her novel. This crucial difference demonstrates Walker's recognition of the political necessity, but also the insufficiency, of Emersonian "representativeness" as a rhetorical position from which to articulate Meridian's demand for social change. Meridian's invisibility and lack of access to the public realm; her

incapacity to deploy a symbolic vocabulary of the body that publicizes the claims of conscience and promotes real changes in society, all reflect Walker's concern over the fact that, in the wake of the sixties, symbolic action has increasingly resulted in a disobedient's loss of control over the production of meaning. On a public level, this has meant that the symbology of disobedience has been dismissed, or emptied of its radical significance and appropriated for the promotion of dominant cultural norms. On a private or individual level, Meridian's attempt to inherit King's philosophy--to find a proper *mode of public action and a standard of revolutionary conduct she can live* by--is made even more difficult by Truman's jaded, willful ignorance:

> "Then you think revolution, like everything else in America was reduced to a fad?" [asked Meridian.]
>
> "Of course," said Truman. "The leaders were killed, the restless young were bought off with anti-poverty jobs, and the clothing styles of the poor were copied by Seventh Avenue....
>
> "But don't you think the basic questions raised by King and Malcolm and the rest still exist? Don't you think people, somewhere deep inside, are still attempting to deal with them?"
>
> "No," said Truman.
>
> "*Is there no place in a revolution for a person who cannot kill?*" asked Meridian, obviously not believing him.
>
> "Why do you drive yourself crazy over these questions?" asked Truman, leaning over her. "When the time comes, trust yourself to do the right thing."
>
> "The 'right thing?' Or merely the thing that will save my life?"
>
> "Don't nitpick" (*Meridian*, 189).

At the end of *Meridian*, Walker presents us with an image of Truman's own symbolic act

that expresses his sympathetic comprehension of Meridian's, and thus King's, life work: Truman climbs into Meridian's sleeping bag and puts her cap on his head. But this is a questionably disobedient gesture at best--and the urgent, but as yet uncertain matter of precisely what effective civil resistance should look like; and how we can know when we are, in fact, *doing the right thing* is left open for future examination.