
Forum

PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles in previous issues or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. The editor reserves the right to reject or edit contributions for publication and offers the authors discussed an opportunity to reply to the letters published. The journal omits titles before persons' names, discourages footnotes, and regrets that it cannot consider any letter of more than 1,000 words. Letters should be addressed to PMLA Forum, Modern Language Assn., 10 Astor Place, New York, NY 10003-6981.

The Words and Actions of Martin Luther King, Jr.

To the Editor:

The debate between SuzAnne C. Cole and Keith D. Miller (Forum, 105 [1990]: 1125–27) about the seriousness of “plagiarism” in the essays of Martin Luther King, Jr., seems to me slightly off the mark on both sides. While I agree with Miller that King (and other public political or social figures) ought not to be held to the same rules of plagiarism that are applicable to college undergraduates, his response to Cole reads too much like a statement that the end justifies the means. Moreover, I think that in their exchange both Cole and Miller miss the point of King’s career by focusing on King’s written essays as central to the moral issues that arise in their discussion.

There are two good reasons why teachers should stress the evils of plagiarism and punish the cases that they discover: first, the copying of others’ work defeats the purpose of education, which is to help students develop ideas and powers of expression that they will need in their later lives—for getting and holding jobs and articulating their feelings and opinions; second, since grades and recommendations of students are always, in part, comparative, it is unfair to make honest students, just learning to express themselves, compete with professional writers, or even with previously successful students whose work is being resubmitted by less talented ones. (For this reason, I find potentially more troubling King’s use in his doctoral dissertation of material from the unpublished dissertation of a fellow theology student at Boston University [Anthony De Palma, “Plagiarism Seen by Scholars in King’s Ph.D. Dissertation,” *New York Times* 10 Nov. 1990: 1+].)

Professionals, on the other hand, use the training they receive, from both schools and life, to carry out their responsibilities in the most effective manner, according to the standards of their fields. Most of us wouldn’t want to be operated on by surgeons, or have our prescriptions filled by pharmacists, who stressed their originality. Preachers of the gospel and priests of traditional churches are not trained to be originating geniuses, nor are they expected to footnote the sources that everyone who thinks about the question assumes they are using. Unless the names of the persons they quote are well known, they merely sound pedantic when they try to give credit all around.

The success of a minister of the national stature of Martin Luther King, Jr., does not depend on originality or even on clever expression but on moral

insight and relevance to the occasion. For King—who rose to national prominence, not through his words, but through his organization and leadership of the Montgomery bus boycott and other *actions*—the words were secondary. People did not read or listen to King to admire fine phrases or even his cumulative rhetoric but to join in rethinking and acting on a social problem that was rotting America. We listened to him and read his words because he seemed to embody in intelligent and ultimately healing *actions* the way out of what many of us had for years seen as a blot on our society. We desired to increase our partial understanding of segregation and other forms of racial injustice through his thoughtful yet passionate reflections on his experience and the experiences of other individuals—black, white, and brown—with whom he was familiar, either personally or through his reading. It never would have occurred to me to ask the origin of the words he used to convey that collective thinking and experience, any more than I could have thought that the biblical echoes in his—or Lincoln’s—speeches were plagiarisms.

Miller’s conception that King won over white Americans by quoting words with which they were familiar is beside the point. If other black social and political leaders conveyed, through their lives and public actions, the dignity of oppressed minorities and presented a means of healing the wounds resulting from past injustices, their words would reach white Americans as effectively as did the words that King brought into his service. The debate between Miller and Cole suggests that some in our profession seem to be losing sight of the difference between rhetoric and reality. Words do not create reality; they derive their impact from life. To restate a necessary truism, the words of a saint have a quite different meaning when spoken by a charlatan: “What you *do* and what you *are* speak so loudly that I can’t hear what you’re *saying*.”

DONALD H. REIMAN
The New York Public Library

Replies:

Donald H. Reiman wisely notes that the actions of Martin Luther King, Jr., contributed to his persuasiveness. Clearly King’s boycotts, marches, demonstrations, arrests, and terms in jail—his “street rhetoric”—proved extremely important to his cause. Unfortunately, Reiman also makes the untenable claim that King’s words were “secondary.”

Certainly King himself did not concur with Reiman’s view. If King had agreed, he would never have punished himself by delivering two or three hundred addresses

a year during every year of his public life. He would never have crisscrossed the nation on such an excruciating speech-making marathon, which can only be compared to an endless presidential campaign.

Reiman argues, “If other black social and political leaders conveyed, through their lives and public actions, the dignity of oppressed minorities and presented a means of healing the wounds resulting from past injustices, their words would reach white Americans as effectively as did [King’s] words. . . .” Through this statement, Reiman blithely ignores the actions of *thousands* of nonviolent African Americans who repeatedly demonstrated, marched, boycotted, served time in jail, and risked their lives for the cause of civil rights and who were frequently beaten and sometimes killed for doing so. King’s actions, however thoughtful and brave, were not distinctive in any way whatsoever.

Consider James Farmer. Trained by black mentors who had conversed with Gandhi about the tenets of nonviolence, Farmer was extremely knowledgeable about Gandhian tactics. In 1942—when King was thirteen years old—Farmer founded Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the first Gandhian organization in America devoted to racial justice. In the same year Farmer and his friends sat in at a lunch counter, thereby staging the first Gandhian protest against American segregation. In 1960 he led the famous Freedom Rides, which white vigilantes met with brutal violence that made headlines around the world. During the 1960s CORE, headed by Farmer, staged many more nonviolent demonstrations, marches, and protests of other kinds than did King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Farmer served time in jail, narrowly averted assassination, and proved himself a shrewd political strategist.

Yet millions of Americans, I imagine, have never heard of James Farmer. If someone were to advocate a national holiday honoring Farmer, Fannie Lou Hamer, James Bevel, Diane Nash, Medgar Evers, Ruby Doris Robinson, or almost any other civil rights leader, I suspect that white legislators would wonder, Who is this person? Yet these black leaders—and numerous others—marched as often as King, boycotted as often, went to jail as often, and suffered beatings as often. Many of them died martyrs’ deaths, just as King did.

Actions, most emphatically, did *not* distinguish King from his equally courageous colleagues, whose words, like his, were congruent with their lives. Far from being “secondary,” King’s popular essays and incandescent oratory made him unique.

During the 1950s and 1960s hundreds of thousands of demonstrators demanded racial justice, but only one person could deliver “I Have a Dream”—easily the most