

“Tough Love”: The Political Theology of Civil Disobedience


Alexander Livingston

Love is a key concept in the theory and history of civil disobedience yet it has been purposefully neglected in recent debates in political theory. Through an examination of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s paradoxical notion of “aggressive love,” I offer a critical interpretation of love as a key concept in a vernacular black political theology, and the consequences of love’s displacement by law in liberal theories of civil disobedience. The first section locates the origins of aggressive love in an earlier generation of black theologians who looked to India’s anticolonial struggle to reimagine the dignity of the oppressed as “creative survival.” The second contextualizes King’s early sermons on moral injury and self-respect within this tradition to reinterpret *Stride toward Freedom’s* account of the dignity-enhancing effects of nonviolent resistance as the triumph of love over fear. The third considers the implications of these arguments for conceptualizing the moral psychology of the white citizen and its consequences for contemporary debates over the ideological uses of Civil Rights history. The call to respond to oppression with aggressive love illustrates the paradoxical character of civil disobedience obscured by legal accounts as well as by criticisms of the very idea of “civil” disobedience. This is the paradox of affirming civility while enacting disobedience in order to bind political confrontation with political pedagogy.

The gospel of love rang loud in American politics during the era of Civil Rights. Civil disobedience was love in action. Integration promised to redeem the nation as a beloved community. Black students were asked to love angry white parents who could not love

themselves. The classical phase of the Civil Rights struggle wielded love as a creative weapon in its crusade against Jim Crow. Yet for all of love’s dramatic presence in the rhetoric and ideology of the black freedom struggle, it has remained conspicuously absent from discussions of civil disobedience in political theory.¹ While Martin Luther King, Jr. and the iconography of the Civil Rights movement have become synonymous with civil disobedience, scholars have reoriented the discussion of nonviolence and conscientious resistance from the rule of love to the rule of law. Civil disobedience, on this legalist account, seeks to alert the public to laws and policies infringing on basic rights. Such acts of protest that break the law can in fact strengthen the rule of law by affirming its underlying normative principles. As John Rawls explains, its function of securing legal redress makes civil disobedience “one of the stabilizing devices of a constitutional system, although by definition an illegal one” (Rawls 1999, 336). Love, by contrast, seems too otherworldly a foundation for conceptualizing dissent in a pluralistic liberal democracy.

The irony of political theory’s avoidance of love is that it stems in part from an attempt to affirm the moral claims of the Civil Rights movement by placing them on firmer theoretical footing (Scheuerman 2018, 32-54; Livingston forthcoming). Defending civil disobedience as an element of the rule of law demands public rather than private reasons available to both secular and religious citizens alike (Sabl 2001). Accordingly, scholars concerned with recovering King and the Civil Rights era’s contributions to political theory often relegate love to the margins. Some argue that King’s thoughts on disobedience, nonviolence, and democracy rest

Alexander Livingston  is Associate Professor in the Department of Government at Cornell University (pal229@cornell.edu). He is the author of *Damn Great Empires! William James and the Politics of Pragmatism* (Oxford University Press, 2016), as well as numerous articles and chapters examining issues of race, religion, and dissent with a focus on American political thought. His current book project, *Inventing Civil Disobedience*, looks at the theory and practice of civil disobedience in the long Civil Rights movement, and their afterlives in contemporary political culture.

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on general moral principles independent of his theological commitments and language (Scheuerman 2015; Shelby 2018, 194-5). Others acknowledge theology's irreducible role in King's political thought but argue that the moral content of concepts like love can be translated into the secular language of public reason or shared principles of justice without distortion (Richards 2004; Allen 2018, 146-7). Others still simply disregard his religious language entirely (Feit 2017). What gets lost when political theory segregates love from politics, however, is the freedom dream at the heart of the paradoxical union of civility and disobedience.

Robin D.G. Kelley observes that love is one of "the most revolutionary ideas available to us, and yet as intellectuals we have failed miserably to grapple with [its] political and analytical importance" (2002, 11-12). I attempt to take up Kelley's challenge to grapple with the meaning of love in the theory and history of civil disobedience in the context of the long Civil Rights movement. Love, I argue, is the core concept of a vernacular black political theology.² The duty to love is no duty to like. It is not the reciprocal sentiment of friendship (*philia*) nor a romantic affection (*eros*). *Agape*, "the love of God operating in the human heart," is asymmetric love (King 2010a, 93).³ It is selfless service to a neighbor, even when that neighbor hates in return. Loving this "enemy-friend" is paradoxically a means of serving oneself and the other (King 2010b, 44). As service to oneself, it is a means of resisting fear and self-hatred by asserting one's dignity as a child of God. As service to the other, it is a means of building a world where the hatred and fears that stunt the personality of the oppressor can be overcome as well. The paradox lies in the conflicting directions in which these duties pull political action. As duty to self, love demands resistance and confrontation. As duty to other, love entails sacrifice and constraint. King captures this paradox neatly with his claim that the love exemplified by the life of Jesus Christ is no sentimental feeling or empty wish for friendship but something he calls "aggressive love" (2010b, 35). It is this same generative paradox that defines the torsion between civility and disobedience.

Stride toward Freedom, King's political autobiography of the event conventionally celebrated for introducing mass civil disobedience to the United States, the 381-day Montgomery bus boycott, portrays the campaign in terms of the triumph of love over fear.⁴ "Once plagued with a tragic sense of inferiority resulting from the crippling effects of slavery and segregation, the Negro has now been driven to reevaluate himself. He has come to feel that he is somebody," King observes. "One can never understand the bus protest without understanding that there is a new Negro in the South, with a new sense of dignity and destiny" (2010a, 183). Courageously confronting oppression throws off fear and rekindles in the oppressed a sense of dignity and self-respect. The theme of affirming dignity by resisting oppression is a common trope of black political thought (Boxill 1992, 186-195; Bromell 2013, 13-36).

King was at pains to persuade his critics that nonviolence was not an evasion of this tradition but rather a creative inversion that linked dignity and fearlessness to suffering violence rather than perpetrating it (Threadcraft and Terry 2018, 214-6). Yet reconceptualizing resistance as love involves more than a transformation in tactics alone. It demands a radical reorientation in the imagination of freedom. "There is not only the job of freeing the Negro from the bondage of segregation," King explains, "but also the responsibility of freeing his white brothers from the bondage of fears concerning integration" (2010a, 201). Fearlessly loving oneself is impossible without courageously loving the enemy.

Legal theories of civil disobedience read statements like King's as expressions of the "civil" character of civil disobedience. Disobedience ought to serve the public good, appeal to shared constitutional principles, and respect the dignity of one's fellow citizens. Translating the injunction to love into these secular legal terms makes for a triple distortion of King's political theology. The first is how it relieves the disobedient of the demanding ethical duty to love the enemy at great peril, and instead asks them to love political institutions of the state. The second is a moralization of civility at the expense of the confrontation or "aggressive" dimension of disobedience. Third is its displacement of the vital place of the social in black political thought. Michael Hanchard rightly observes that the state's race-making and race-sustaining functions pressure black politics in spaces deemed "apolitical" (2010, 519). These spaces "reconfigure" the racialized boundaries of the political and the social, the private and the public (2010, 513). Religious life and its institutions are precisely such politically-charged spaces beyond the boundaries of the racial state. Hanchard's analysis can be extended here to say that the archive of black political theorizing "reconfigures" the boundaries between religion and politics more broadly, and in doing so invites political theorists to approach religious arguments as potentially valuable sources of insight rather than simply a liability to contain.

Theorizing civil disobedience in terms of fidelity to love articulates a set of valuable moral intuitions at the center of the theory and history of civil disobedience that are difficult to articulate in the strictly secular terms of fidelity to law. Love names not simply the moral motive for political action but a means of orienting contention. It is a practice acknowledging of the moral bonds uniting oppressor and oppressed without artificially constraining the idea of moral suasion as the antithesis of coercion or force. This is a vision of nonviolence that demands self-limitation and self-sacrifice as a testament to a commitment to freedom foreclosed by political theory's imperative to rearticulate the claims of social movements in the narrow—and too often status quo-oriented—terms of constitutional order and the rule of law. King's capacity to take up and reimagine Gandhian nonviolence within the terms of the black social gospel tradition is a powerful illustration of civil disobedience as a "traveling theory"

(Livingston 2018). In recounting one celebrated moment in the concept's global circulation, I aim to illustrate the ways civil disobedience served as an idiom linking global struggles and proliferating meanings across time and space.⁵

What follows is a historical and philosophical interrogation of King's retelling of the moment where civil disobedience is said to have burst on to the American scene: the 1955–1956 Montgomery bus boycott.⁶ The purposes of focusing on this one particular episode in the canonical history of civil disobedience are threefold. The first is foregrounding King's contributions as an innovative theorist of political action, rather than simply as an object of political theorizing about civil disobedience. Many of the sermons and theological arguments King would return to over his career were penned in these early years in Montgomery, and as such offer a fuller picture of the relationship between theological argument and political practice than his later, more stylized writings to a national audience allow.⁷ Second is to provincialize Montgomery as the marker in a mythologized history of civil disobedience reaching back to democratic Athens in order to engage political theory in dialogue with black religious thought. For all of the interest in race and black political thought in recent years, there remains little scholarship in political theory engaging African American religious thought or liberation theology (cf. Lloyd 2016). One consequence of this omission is the perpetuation of a rigid and uncompromising vision of religion as a body of dogma to the exclusion of an engagement with African American religious thought as an imaginative "practice of freedom" (Glaude 2018, 17). Lastly, reconsidering the mythologized origin of civil disobedience in this longer perspective aims to offer a richer account of the praxis of nonviolence than liberal legal accounts permit, while at the same time narrowing the terms of civil disobedience from a universal rubric for theorizing political lawbreaking to a particular praxis of confronting the distinctive dynamics of racial oppression that characterized social relations in the Jim Crow South.

This argument proceeds in three sections. The first section situates the origins of King's philosophy of nonviolence in the works of an earlier generation of black social gospel theologians who sought to learn lessons from India's anticolonial struggle for reimagining the dignity of the oppressed as a form of transformative moral integrity or "creative survival." The second section contextualizes King's early sermons on moral injury and self-respect within this tradition to reinterpret *Stride toward Freedom's* account of the dignity-enhancing effects of nonviolent resistance as the triumph of love over fear. The third section considers love and fear from across the veil, so to speak, for conceptualizing the moral psychology of the white citizen and its implications for contemporary debates over the ideological uses of Civil Rights history. King's call to respond to violence with aggressive love illustrates a paradoxical character of civil disobedience that both legal accounts and recent criticisms of the very idea of "civil" disobedience obscure. This is the paradox of affirming civility even while

enacting disobedience in order to bind political confrontation with political pedagogy.

Jim Crow and Creative Survival

Stride toward Freedom's retelling of King's own intellectual pilgrimage to nonviolence has become synonymous with the "origin story" of civil disobedience in the United States (Mantena 2018, 80). King credits Henry David Thoreau for teaching him the duty not to cooperate with evil, Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche for their bracing criticisms of religious moralism, Walter Rauschenbusch's social gospel for the lesson that love is empty moralism without justice, and Mohandas Gandhi for introducing him to a practical means of putting the gospel of love into action. "Christ furnished the spirit and motivation," he summarizes, "while Gandhi furnished the method" (King 2010a, 72). Conspicuously absent from King's genealogy is acknowledgment of earlier African American thinkers and their decades of experimentation with Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence.

The elective affinity between the Gospels and Gandhi was hardly King's original discovery. As American pacifists and missionaries first began learning of *satyagraha* the 1920s, Gandhi's admirers in the United States portrayed him as a modern Jesus Christ representing an alternative to the power politics that led the world into the catastrophe of the First World War (Danielson 2003; Kosek 2009, 85–111; Scalmer 2011). John Haynes Holmes, a leading Unitarian pacifist and founding member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation responsible for popularizing Gandhi in America, named him "the greatest man in the world today" precisely for his resemblance to Christ (Holmes 1976). African American newspapers similarly portrayed Gandhi as a Messiah-like figure throughout the 1920s, but contextualized his spiritual genius in terms of the dark races' common struggle against colonialism and white supremacy. From Marcus Garvey to W.E.B. Du Bois, African Americans in the interwar years looked to Gandhi and the Indian nationalist movement as an inspiring exemplar of race leadership in the global struggle against white rule (Prashad 2009). Historian Nico Slate summarizes Gandhi's significance for the African American freedom movement in these years as "entail[ing] not specifically techniques of protest but the hope that comes with the sense of connection to larger struggles" (2012, 108). These experiments in translating culturally distant experiences of oppression and resistance, and divergent conceptual idioms like *ahimsa* and love, laid the foundations for the post-World War II Civil Rights movement's tactical experimentation with nonviolence, beginning with the March on Washington Movement's inaugural call for mass Gandhian civil disobedience in the United States.⁸

One instance where this longer transnational history of nonviolence emerges in *Stride* is a passing reference to Mordecai Johnson, the first black president of Howard University. King dates his awakening to the power of

nonviolence to a lecture by Johnson he attended in the spring of 1950 (2010a, 84). Johnson, then fresh from a journey to India where he met with Gandhians mourning the Mahatma's death, was touring the United States giving talks on the meaning of Gandhi's life and his contribution to Indian independence. The message that so struck King that day was one Johnson had been preaching for decades, however. "Gandhi is conducting the most significant religious movement in the world, in his endeavor to inject religion into questions of economics and politics," Johnson observed in 1930, enjoining African Americans to give these experiments their "most careful consideration" (quoted in Kapur 1992, 86). Under Johnson's leadership, Howard University became an important laboratory for translating Gandhian experiments of spiritualizing politics into a novel approach for confronting Jim Crow. Two theological luminaries of Howard's School of Divinity, Howard Thurman and Benjamin Mays, traveled to India in 1935 and 1937 respectively to learn from Gandhi and report back his lessons for injecting religion into politics for the struggle against racial segregation.

What Thurman and Mays sought from their encounters with Gandhi was less tactical advice than spiritual guidance in confronting the existential crisis posed by racial oppression. Jim Crow offered African Americans a brutal education in subordination. Everyday experiences of disrespect and vulnerability to arbitrary violence taught them to conform to the rules of white supremacy because their very survival depended on it. Performances of racial submission protect some from bodily violence but only at the cost of the psychic violence of a double consciousness that measures one's own worth through an internalized white gaze. Thurman describes this psychic violence in terms of the distinction between mere survival and "not being killed" (Thurman 1996, 59). Survival concerns protecting one's bodily integrity from pain and suffering. Not being killed, by contrast, is an existential issue of preserving one's moral integrity and self-respect: that is, how to sustain a sense of one's own personhood in the face of white supremacy's diminishment of black humanity. Thurman names the existential challenge of preserving self-respect in the face of oppression the problem of "creative survival" (1996, 34). Psychologically, it is a problem of how to resist the loss of self-respect that racism breeds. Morally, it is a problem of how to affirm the human worth of the dispossessed as a spur to action. Looking abroad to India was a catalyst for imagining a new language for empowering black self-respect and uprooting the stigma of racial inferiority through collective struggle.

In a series of articles published in the *Norfolk Journal & Guide* following his return from India, Mays, a man King would name "one of the greatest influences in my life," presents the Indian national struggle to African American readers as a case study in the liberating power of self-respect (King 2010a, 137). Before Gandhi's return from

South Africa, Indians were said to run and hide when confronted by a British officer. Now "they do not run away; they face him and talk to him man to man" (Mays 1937a, 19). Colonial rule breeds sentiments of inferiority amongst the colonized and a desire to imitate the language and customs of the colonizers. Gandhi's advocacy of the spinning wheel and khadi, by contrast, taught Indians self-discipline and pride in their culture as equal to that of the British. Indians "have learned how to sacrifice position, prestige, economic security and even life itself for what they have consider [*sic*] a righteous and respectable cause" (Mays 1937b, 8). Until African Americans learn these same lessons in self-respect and disciplined self-sacrifice, Mays concludes his series, they "can not [*sic*] walk and talk with God" and are therefore "doomed to oppression and poverty and servitude" (1937b, 8).

Thurman's sermons and essays throughout the 1930s and 1940s similarly explored the consequences of Gandhi's spiritual politics for the black social gospel tradition. These years of meditation culminated in his 1949 *Jesus and the Disinherited*, a book King is said to have carried in his pocket throughout the Montgomery boycott. Thurman opens the book by recounting a profound challenge to his Christian faith he experienced on his journey through the subcontinent. After delivering a lecture at a law school in Ceylon, Thurman was approached by the school's chairman who asked him how, as the descendent of enslaved people bought and sold by Christians, he could profess their faith. Slavery was abolished by economic necessity, not Christian idealism, and white Americans have no trouble touting Christian values while they continue to lynch, burn, and brutalize. "I think that an intelligent young Negro such as yourself, here in our country on behalf of a Christian enterprise, is a traitor to all the dark peoples of the earth," the lawyer charged. "How can you account for yourself being in this unfortunate and humiliating position?" (Thurman 1979, 114).

Jesus and the Disinherited is Thurman's answer. Its central claim is that Christianity is a technique for "people who stand with their backs against the wall" (Thurman 1996, xix). Thurman analogizes the situation of the historical Jesus of Nazareth to that of the American Negro. Jesus was a Jew excluded from Roman citizenship, he was a poor man denied access to a luxurious society, and he was a member of a minority in the midst of a controlling majority. The urgent problem he faced was therefore the same challenge of creative survival facing oppressed people everywhere: namely, by what means to confront one's oppressors in a way "that would be morally tolerable and at the same time preserve a basic self-esteem—without which life could not possibly have any meaning?" (1996, 12). The book's three central chapters—titled "Fear," "Deception," and "Hatred"—outline common survival strategies of the oppressed and argue that each is ultimately self-defeating.

The book's first substantive chapter, "Fear," sets the stage for this argument through a phenomenology of racial oppression. Fear is a pervasive mood of the disinherited. Looming threats of harm keep the oppressed in a state of submission. "When the basis of such fear is analyzed, it is clear that it arises out of the sense of isolation and helplessness in the face of the varied dimensions of violence to which the underprivileged are exposed" (1996, 27). The strong cultivate fear as a means of social control. The weak compound their terror by clinging to fear as a means of survival. Committing to memory "ways of being that will tend to reduce their exposure to violence" becomes a form of "life assurance" for the disinherited (1996, 40-41). Yet survival through submission is not the same thing as not being killed. Living a life of fear is to live with one's self-respect continually under assault. It is a life of mental crisis and self-hatred that wounds the soul in a manner no less devastating than assault on the body.

Fear, then, may appear as "safety device" for the oppressed but "finally becomes death for the self" (1996, 46). Seeking survival by conforming to white expectations of black subservience or reacting out of hatred with violence are no less self-defeating. The gospel of Jesus Christ offers a different approach. It affirms the absolute value of each person as a child of God. Divine assurance of one's equal human worth "tends to stabilize the ego and results in a new courage, fearlessness, and power" (1996, 39). Genuine living only begins when, confident of one's dignity as somebody, not being killed falls away as one's greatest concern. Faith "absorbs the fear reaction" and leaves the disinherited "immunized" against violence's threat (1996, 40). Only once the oppressed truly feel themselves worthy of self-respect do they become empowered to demand respect from their oppressors. Or as Mays reports this same transformation as he witnessed it in India, "when an oppressed race ceases to be afraid, it is free" (1937c, 141).

Thurman's encounter with Gandhianism offered more than a method alone. If Christ furnished the spirit of creative survival, Gandhi's campaigns proffered a way of reimagining the life of Jesus Christ. Gandhi is only discussed briefly in *Jesus and the Disinherited* yet "the book has Gandhian bones" (Azaransky 2017, 45). The portrayal of Jesus as the model of creative survival bears a striking resemblance to a *satyagrahi* who uses religious belief to motivate discipline and self-sacrifice for social change. Moreover, as Sarah Azaransky observes, the three vices of the disinherited that structure the book—fear, deception, and hatred—are the antitheses of the Gandhian virtues of fearlessness, truth, and *ahimsa*. The book's final major chapter, "Love," draws out the argument's implications for confronting the enemy. Jesus's "most revolutionary appeal" to the dispossessed is to resist evil by absorbing hate with love (Thurman 1996, 60). Forgiving the neighbor is no inward sentiment alone. It must be an act

of "laying bare the heart" that, like *satyagraha*, forgoes all violence "to be simply, directly truthful, whatever may be the cost in life, limb, or security" (1996, 85, 60). Only love in this direct and selfless sense proffers proper evidence that one is a child of God. Reverence for the personality of the enemy holds the promise to convert him into a friend and so create the conditions for the privileged and underprivileged to work together to build a new world.

Thurman and Mays's experiments with injecting spirituality into politics would prove influential in the coming decades, yet the question of how to translate this newfound spiritual power into a political strategy remained unexplored. *Jesus and the Disinherited* advocates the power of nonviolence but makes only passing acknowledgment to its strategic advantages. The identification of Gandhi with Christ that occupied pacifists in the 1930s foreclosed practical experimentation with strategies of nonviolent direct action itself, a project taken up by a subsequent generation of black activists less beholden to Gandhi's saintly appeal (Fox 1997, 72). Thurman's essays and sermons in the years leading up to the book, however, point towards the beginning of a more action-oriented phase of Gandhi's American reception in the 1940s and 1950s. Where oppression has atrophied the moral sense of the majority "some form of pressure more drastic and more immediately devastating than moral pressure" may be required. Thurman advises the use of boycotts, non-cooperation campaigns, and nonviolent strikes as means of shocking the white majority out of their complacency. "The function of these techniques is to tear men free from their alignments to the evil way, to free them so that they may be given an immediate sense of acute insecurity, and out of the depths of their own insecurity they may be forced to see their kinship with the weak and the insecure" (Thurman 2012, 97). Loving the neighbor, it would seem, is not inconsistent with forcing them to be free.

The Triumph of Love over Fear

Stride toward Freedom narrates the Montgomery boycott as the story of a "new Negro" rising in the South with a "new" sense of dignity and self-respect. The book sets the stage for this transformation with a catalogue of challenges King found waiting for him when he arrived in Montgomery to take up his pastorate at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. The congregation, as introduced in *Stride*, was poor and politically powerless, they lacked effective leadership, their children attended substandard schools.⁹ Jim Crow's brutal education in second-class citizenship left them with a "corroding sense of inferiority, which often expressed itself in a lack of self-respect" (2010a, 24). Fear and oppression bred an acquiescence that often left them wondering "whether they actually deserved any better conditions" (2010a, 24). The boycott transformed all this. Where previously there was only festering self-doubt and acquiescence, there now stood a new Negro confident of

his worth and unwilling to settle for anything less than first-class citizenship. The fear of arbitrary violence restraining the ambitions of the oppressed, moreover, lost its grip. In one dramatic illustration, the book recounts how the boycotters responded to the arrival of the Ku Klux Klan in full regalia in a black neighborhood. Where only weeks before the fear of death would have driven the community behind locked doors and drawn blinds, now “the Negroes behaved as though they were watching a circus parade,” casually waving at Klansmen as they drove through the streets (2010a, 155). The terror that kept the old Negro in his place had “lost its spell” (2010a, 166).

King credits this new fearlessness to the discovery of nonviolence. Gandhi’s innovation was to show how love could be wielded by protest movements as “a potent instrument for social and collective transformation” (2010a, 84). As King’s dramatic portrait of the new Negro demonstrates, this transformation was first and foremost experienced as a spiritual liberation among the oppressed themselves. “The nonviolent approach does not immediately change the heart of the aggressor,” King explains. “It first does something to the heart and souls of those committed to it. It gives them new self-respect, it calls up resources of strength and courage they did not know they had” (2010a, 215). King’s alleged discovery of nonviolence during the Montgomery boycott is often credited to the influence of Gandhian advisors like Richard Gregg and Bayard Rustin. King’s grasp of the strategic logic of nonviolence was heavily indebted to this tactical education, but he came to give these theories new depth by incorporating them within the theological framework of the black social gospel tradition and its vision of the triumph of love.

In the summer of 1957, as he was revising the manuscript that would become *Stride*, King delivered a series of sermons to the Dexter Avenue congregation on the meaning of “integrated personality.” Each sermon focuses on the practical obstacles to developing self-respect and affirming self-worth. The first sermon addresses the issue of inferiority. Oppression breeds a sense of powerlessness and inferiority amongst the oppressed. King observes that “it’s so easy for us to feel like we don’t count, that we are not significant, that we are less than. We stand every day before a system which says that to us” (2007, 315). More crushing still are the coping mechanisms that only intensify feelings of worthlessness. King traces the etiology of this affliction to the experience of an ego divided against itself. As he remarks in an earlier sermon, “each of us is something of a schizophrenic personality, tragically divided against ourselves. A persistent civil war rages within all of our lives” (2010b, 45). Escape into alcohol, attempts at deception, and lashing out in hatred are “unhealthy” methods of disavowing this experience of division that only heighten civil war within

the soul. In their place, he proposes “healthy” methods of overcoming an inferiority complex: taking pride in one’s labor, committing to a cause greater than oneself, and finding assurance of one’s worth in the love of God. Each method releases the self from attachment to ego and affirms connection with something greater than the self. The remaining sermons in the series examine the same healthy and unhealthy ways of dealing with fear and self-centeredness. In each case, King advises his congregation to affirm their self-worth through selfless commitment to something larger than their private selves, whether it be service, work, or faith. “He who seeks to find his ego will lose it,” he explains in a reflection on a passage from the Book of Matthew. It is only through losing the ego “in some cause and some purpose, some loyalty outside of yourself and giv[ing] yourself to that something” that the individual finds himself (2000, 253). Finding parallels between scripture and psychoanalysis, King preaches that the best way to master experiences of fear and self-doubt born of a divided ego is not to suppress but to “extend the ego into objectively meaningful channels” (2000, 253).

While these sermons touch on segregation and the boycott only in passing, their analysis of disintegrated personality sheds light on the conception of moral injury informing King’s vision of the transformative power of nonviolence. Oppression *depersonalizes* the oppressed. Consider the well-known passage from “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” where King distinguishes just and unjust laws: “Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality” (2010c, 93). King’s account of dignity, oppression, and disobedience are informed by the theology he claimed as “my basic philosophical position;” namely, Christian personalism (2010a, 88).¹⁰ Personalist theology emerged in Europe and the United States in the early- to mid-twentieth century as a *via media* between the secular materialism of liberal individualism and the corporatist reactions of authoritarianism and totalitarianism (Moyn 2015). It affirms the absolute and inherent worth of individual persons while insisting that human personality cannot flourish without the support of moral community. *Stride* credits King’s education in personalism to his doctoral study at Boston University yet here too *Stride* obscures his debts to black intellectual traditions. King’s personalism was, like Thurman’s, a “homespun” theology that, as Mays claimed of black religious thought more generally, was “chiseled out of the very fabric of social struggle” as a means of affirming black self-respect and articulating constructive demands for justice (Burrow 2006, 6; Mays 1968, 255).¹¹

What is personalism? Personalism postulates God and man as two aspects of a single person: one plural and finite, the other monistic and infinite (King 2013, 2-8; cf.

Smith and Zepp 1974, 101-119; Burrow 2006, 69-88). Finite human persons are the children of God and recipients of His love. Their worth is absolute and unconditional because they are an expression of God as a Supreme Person. Infinite personality names the invisible but creative force that acts in history to unite all finite persons. Edgar Brightman, King's teacher and mentor at Boston University, explains the relationship between finite and infinite personality in terms of fragment and whole: "No human being is fully personal; if he were, he would always be conscious, always intellectually, emotionally, and purposively at his best, always alert and growing. Now and then a human person catches a glimpse of what he would be if he were fully personal. Most of the time he is a mere shadow of a person, a fragmentary self, yet a fragment that contains a clue to what a person would be" (Brightman 1932, 53-54). It is through loving fellowship with others that one becomes more than a shadow of oneself, for in coming closer to other finite persons one comes closer to God. Following the example of Jesus Christ's sacrificial devotion to the neighbor is what it means to reconcile these two faces of personality by allowing one's own finite life to participate in the infinite.

Human dignity on this view is something inherent and yet fractured. A finite person is inherently valuable but not quite fully himself without the fellowship of others. This is why the experience of the self is always a divided one, incomplete and disintegrated. Love heals this division by acknowledging the deeper interdependence of all persons in God. To love, King argues by way of a line borrowed from Martin Buber, is to "project the 'I' onto the 'thou'" and see that it is only through the 'thou' that the 'I' is saved from becoming a depersonalized 'it' (2013, 26). King's preferred example of this kind of disinterested love is the Good Samaritan who forsakes himself in service to the Jew. The parable "will always remind us to remove the cataracts of provincialism from our spiritual eyes" to see "those inner qualities that make all men human, and therefore, brothers" (2010b, 24, 25). The Good Samaritan acknowledges a natural duty to love the other asymmetrically without expecting reciprocity as a way of loving God. Here love means looking beyond differences and self-interest to create a community that uplifts personality. This is what King calls *agape*, "love seeking to preserve and create community" (2010a, 94). The duty to love is therefore a duty to build a beloved community where the inherent dignity of each is respected and augmented through social relationships that affirm the inherent dignity of all.

What follows politically from this duty to create a beloved community is an obligation to resist oppression (Rose 2019, 13-34). Segregation is the antithesis of community. It is a way of refusing to acknowledge the interdependence of persons and, therefore, a refusal to

return God's love. Racism denies the equal dignity of the oppressed. It stunts personality by withholding the bonds of fellowship. "It not only harms one physically but injures one spirituality. It scars the soul and degrades the personality" (2010a, 24). The duty to preserve community is therefore a duty to resist and transform structures denying the equal dignity of all. "Love, *agape*, is the only cement that can hold this broken community together. When I am commanded to love, I am commanded to restore community, to resist injustice, and to meet the needs of my brothers" (2010a, 95). Love is not empty sentimentalism but an active duty to struggle demanded of Christians by the injustice of an un-Christian society. The division between the finite and infinite personality can only be reconciled by following the example set by Christ of struggling against a society that keeps persons divided, both without and within.

What these sermons on personal integration illustrate is that responding to oppression with hatred ironically mirrors the depersonalizing damage of oppression itself. Like alcoholism, fear and hatred are "unhealthy" reactions that only intensify self-division by disavowing it. They are repetition compulsions of racism's diminishment of human dignity by clinging to a double consciousness torn between a distorted view of the self's worthlessness and an aspirational self that unwittingly mirrors the values of white society. Love's affirmation of infinite value, by contrast, is the antithesis of this wounded attachment. Accepting God's love offers the believer "a new sense of dignity and a new sense of belonging" (2007, 315). These words, repeated almost verbatim in *Stride*, reveal the unity of King's thinking on moral ends and political means. His political theology of civil disobedience posits no distinction between the healing power of faith and the transformative power of nonviolent resistance. Resisting oppression is service to God; service to God means resisting oppression. King captures the imbrication of faith and politics in a manner that blurs cause and effect when he reports how "thousands of black people stood revealed with a new sense of dignity and destiny" he discovered at the first mass meeting of the Montgomery Improvement Association. This collective liberation is proof that "victory is already won" regardless of the boycott's practical outcome (2010a, 53).

But this is only one half of the picture. Over the course of his sermons on integrated personality, King cites an editorial titled "Two Fears" by Benjamin Mays that prefigures much of his own analysis. Fear, Mays writes, is "the greatest enemy of mankind" and man is "free in proportion as he is able to get rid of fears" (Mays 1946, 7). The editorial recounts how white violence sustains an asphyxiating atmosphere of fear in the South fettering black freedom. This is one fear in the South. The other is white fear of desegregation and the prospect of black freedom. Where black fear of white violence is a rational

reaction to oppression, white fear of black retribution is irrational but deadly. Mays characterizes it as “without any ground whatsoever” yet “too serious to be laughed out of existence” (1946, 7). Discussion and education will not overcome the fear that keeps both white and black citizens trapped together in a dying system of segregation. It therefore falls on African Americans to find the courage to overcome their fears and, in so doing, expose whites to the experience of equal dignity alone that would free them too from their crippling fears. But in what sense does racism harm the dignity of whites, and what could it mean for nonviolent resistance to free them from the rule of fear as well?

Aggressive Love and the Paradox of Civil Disobedience

In his classic *Black Theology and Black Power*, James H. Cone asks what it could mean to love the white neighbor when, by the time of King’s death, the dream of racial integration had come to look like a fantasy. “To love the white man,” he answers, “means that the black man *confronts* him as a Thou without any intention of giving ground by becoming an It” (1989, 53 emphasis original). Black dignity is enacted through fearless resistance to white oppression. Confident of God’s love in him and his blackness, the black man loves the white neighbor by forcing the white man to acknowledge him as an equal. This struggle for recognition is not bound by nonviolence, however. Nonviolence is white ideology. “What whites really want is for the black man to respond with that method which best preserves white racism” (Cone 1989, 56). It was King’s willingness to turn the other cheek that made him so beloved by whites, Cone argues, and so misleading as a model for struggle in the era of Black Power.

Cone’s conclusion resonates with contemporary criticisms of the very idea of “civil” disobedience. Demands for civility, critics charge, have become a way of deflecting activist challenges to the status quo by faulting them for failing to abide by moralized standards of propriety that King’s legacy has ironically come to symbolize (Zerilli 2014; Spence 2015, 97-111; Theoharis 2018, 3-30). This is civility as an ideal of etiquette or good manners which mystifies the very relations of asymmetrical power that activists seek to challenge. Candice Delmas, for example, argues that the theory and history of civil disobedience associated with a sanitized retelling of the Civil Rights era has come to function as a “counter-resistance ideology” (2018, 24). Juliet Hooker similarly argues that calls for civility and nonviolence presume a conscientiousness of white citizens at odds with the fact of racial ignorance and the history of white backlash (Hooker 2016, 458-60). Drawing a distinction between “moral suasion” and “political disruption,” Clarissa Rile Hayward likewise argues that “when structural change is

enacted, it is not only, and it is not principally, because privileged people are made to understand their responsibilities in ways that align with the ethical principles they endorse. Instead, in significant part, it is because those whom injustice harms engage in political disruption, one important product of which is the interruption of motivated ignorance” (2017, 407). Rejecting the straight jacket of “civil” disobedience, these critics conclude with Cone, would better serve activists “because of [*incivility’s*] ability to radically disrupt the status quo” (Delmas 2018, 64).

This final section reconsiders the strategic logic of civil disobedience obscured by the co-option of Civil Rights history in light of King’s theological commitments. Ideological invocations of King seek to uphold him as an icon of moral suasion who would look down on the kinds of disruptive political tactics of contemporary activists. It is for this reason that critics of civility seek to invert these very terms and defend disruption as a more powerful response to structural oppression or white ignorance than moral suasion. King’s vision of civil disobedience, by contrast, rejects the very dichotomy between suasion and coercion framing both sides of this debate. Disobedience and civility pull in opposite directions but do so to open possibilities for suasion in the face of oppression rather than turning a blind eye to it. Brandon Terry (2015) helpfully articulates this generative paradox in terms of the challenge of mobilizing dramatic political disruption in the service of a political pedagogy that provokes both activists and audience to reimagine themselves and the ties that bind them. Invoking again the example offered by the life of Jesus Christ, King names this paradoxical task “aggressive love” (2010b, 35).

Framing political action in this way foregrounds the often-misunderstood role of conscience in King’s defense of civil disobedience. Conscience is commonly characterized as a natural moral faculty, and debates about civil disobedience and nonviolence often devolve into questions about whether or not such a faculty universally exists. Returning to the theological sources of King’s political thought reveals how his defense of civil disobedience is premised on a profound skepticism concerning this way of thinking about conscience. King credits Reinhold Niebuhr’s *Moral Man and Immoral Society* for shattering his naïve trust in the power of love in human affairs. Niebuhr argues that moral suasion is a weak reed in politics where conflict between groups only intensifies a natural disposition to egoism, self-righteousness, and resentment. Only coercive force can resolve conflicts between groups deaf to the claims of conscience. King took from Niebuhr the provocation for a more “realistic pacifism” that acknowledges the limits of moral suasion without embracing the necessity of violence as an inevitable consequence (2010a, 87). This is nonviolent resistance as an exercise of force seeking to create the conditions for persuasion in the face of psychological barriers to mutual understanding. Or as

Thurman expresses the same idea, for suasion to break through a moral sensibility atrophied by injustice and willful blindness, “there must be some hooks on which to hang it” (2012, 109). King refers to this realist political psychology in *Stride* when he characterizes nonviolent resistance as an “ultimate form of persuasion” that seeks justice “by appealing to the conscience of the great decent majority who through blindness, fear, pride, or irrationality have allowed their conscience to sleep” (2010a, 211). Implicit in this argument is a conception of conscience not as a natural moral faculty one simply possesses or not, but rather as a degree of ethical insight and self-knowledge. Loving is in part coming to develop this capacity to an ever-greater degree. Aggressive love is the name for confrontational political action that forces another into a position where a greater degree of insight becomes possible.¹²

It is worth noticing some overlap between this way of framing the problem of conscience and the problem of racial ignorance emphasized by civility’s critics. Racial ignorance is a motivated form of ignorance on the part of dominant groups to discount information and testimony that challenges their unjust authority (Mills 2016). It encompasses ignorance about objective facts and social relations, as well as its own motivations. The obstinacy of racial ignorance is rooted in “the psychological investment that privileged people have in maintaining a sense of self as ethical, even as they enjoy systemic unearned advantage” (Hayward 2017, 404). One consequence of this ignorance is that these same groups who bear the greatest moral responsibility for redressing injustice are the least reliable politically for doing so. King’s corpus lacks the analytical clarity of contemporary studies of this phenomenon but its analysis of the moral psychology of the white citizen outlines a similar dynamic of motivated ignorance.

Consider the analysis of white reaction to the boycott in *Stride*. The boycotters were met with moral outcry, court injunctions, arrests, gunfire, and bombs. *Stride* interprets this white resistance in terms of the interlocking effects of material and ideational roots of anti-blackness. In the most general sense, violent resistance is a testament to white Southerners’ investments in the material advantages of racial domination. The purpose of segregation “was to oppress and exploit the segregated, not simply keep them segregated” (2010a, 101). Black subordination structured the terms of white economic advantage and the symbolic wages of racial self-respect. White supremacy offered white workers “a hollow social distinction” that secured their sense of equal worth even in the face of hardship and oppression (2010a, 198). Desegregation posed a deep challenge to these economic and social advantages of whiteness. In reaction, Southern politicians and the press adeptly stoked fears of racial equality to mobilize opposition. Fear fueled a panicked defense of white privilege and shut down moral consideration of the claims of black

Southerners. Even white moderates sympathetic to the boycott were silenced by fear – “fear of social, political and economic reprisals” (2010a, 196).

Material investment in white privilege is compounded by an irrational register of fear which King, borrowing from Mays, identifies as the “ideational roots of race hate” (2010a, 200). Desegregation is a screen whites project their fear onto in order to disavow a more fundamental anxiety. This anxiety is the white Southerner’s guilt complex: “I think much of the violence that we notice in the South at this time is really the attempt to compensate, drown the sense of guilt, by indulging in more of the very same thing that causes the sense of guilt” (2000, 298). The guilt afflicting whites is an unconscious acknowledgment of the injustice of segregation. They are the complicit beneficiaries of a system that diminishes human dignity and contradicts their own moral commitments. White America has “manifested a schizophrenic personality on the question of race” since its founding, torn between their egalitarian creed and the reality of domination (2010a, 184).¹³ Massive resistance and violence are compensations for this split in the white ego. Imagined horrors of retribution and racial intermarriage sparked by this guilt overwhelm inward self-examination and project the danger outside the self to discount an unsettling reality. Rather than acknowledge their own guilt, whites seek to silence it by turning to violence to repress—in both the political and psychological senses of the term—moral provocations that might force them to honestly confront themselves.

The souls of white folk, to return to the terms of King’s personalism, are afflicted by *disintegrated personality*. Through oppression they depersonalize themselves and create an experience of a divided ego wracked with fear, guilt, and anxiety, and their attempts to disavow this reality by clinging to self-defeating compensations only shackle them ever tighter to this fear. “But how futile are all these remedies!” King declares of white Southerners’ attempts to numb their guilty conscience through violence and brutality. “Instead of eliminating fear, they instill deeper and more pathological fears that leave the victims inflicted with strange psychoses and peculiar cases of paranoia” (2010b, 125). White ignorance and white reaction are therefore two sides of the same motivated denial of the unpleasant reality of white rule that contradicts their idealized moral self-conception.

Hayward concludes from her analysis of racial ignorance that where social movements have broken through motivated ignorance and secured structural change they have done so by mobilizing political disruption rather than moral suasion. “Disruptive politics are not a matter of moral suasion,” she explains. “Their aim is less to convince those who are systematically advantaged by structural injustice that they ought to ‘do the right thing’ than to make it all but impossible for the privileged to not

hear the voice of, to not know the political claims of, the oppressed” (2017, 406). King, by contrast, often appears to draw exactly the opposite conclusion from similar premises. Consider the following claim from *Stride* where he addresses the challenge that the boycott is a show of force no different from those of the White Citizens Councils: “Our method will be that of persuasion, not coercion,” King explains. “We will only say to the people, ‘Let your conscience be your guide’” (2010a, 51). And his name for this method of persuasion is love. Appealing to his personalist account of the self and its need for community, he argues: “Since the white man’s personality is greatly distorted by segregation, and his soul is greatly scarred, he needs the love of the Negro. The Negro must love the white man because the white man needs his love to remove his tensions, insecurities, and fear” (2010a, 93–4). Civil disobedience is a way of giving the white man the love he needs by imitating Christ’s example of suffering violence without hatred. King maintains that such acts of suffering promise “tremendous educational and transforming possibilities” (2010a, 91). The shocking spectacle of the self-discipline and fearlessness of the oppressed who refuses to strike back triggers moral self-reflection in the oppressor and leaves him “glutted by his own barbarity” (2010a, 212).

This talk about the duty of the oppressed to love the white man, to meet his need, and educate him through suffering represents King’s most difficult and unpalatable commitments in our contemporary moment. They make too little of the validity of black anger and frustration, and concede too much to white fragility. Moreover, they seem blind to the obstinacy of white racial ignorance and the cruelty of asking African Americans to suffer on their behalf. Here more than anywhere else in King’s corpus religious faith seems to mystify his analysis of political reality. Yet as we have seen earlier, a “realistic pacifism” presumes a more complex moral psychology than these passages from *Stride* suggest. More revealing than the stylized account King prepared for a national audience are his sermons and speeches delivered to black audiences during the boycott itself.¹⁴ At the inaugural mass meeting of the Montgomery Improvement Association, he explains that “standing beside love is always justice, as we are only using the tools of justice. Not only are we using the tools of persuasion, but we’ve come to see that we’ve got to use the tools of coercion” (1997, 74). Indeed, the boycott represents precisely the kind of political disruption Hayward defends. The campaign of mass withdrawal from riding municipal busses leveraged economic costs on bus companies, provoked violent disruption, and ultimately mobilized the coercive power of the federal government with the Supreme Court striking down segregation on city busses. The paradoxical task of aggressive love is learning to use the tools of coercion as tools of persuasion.

Taking King’s wider view of conscience and coercion into account invites a more compelling interpretation of the significance he gives to suffering as a tactical response to racial ignorance. Karuna Mantena (2018, 94–99) identifies three interlocking explanations King puts forward for how disciplined suffering can serve to break through psychological barriers and create the space for conscientious persuasion: disciplined suffering exposes evil to the public eye; it foils anticipations of violent response and throws the aggressor off balance; it redirects the aggressor’s dazed attention back upon himself to provoke shame and self-evaluation. What Mantena’s analysis underscores is that appeals to shame are empty gestures when not bound to disruptive acts that expose and disorient. Disruption creates uncertainty. It is the dignified and disciplined form disruption takes that seizes on this uncertainty to interrupt the habituated responses of racial disavowal that foreclose white acknowledgement and self-evaluation. The tactical purpose of suffering, Mantena explains, “is to cool the emotional temperature of protest. Nonviolence chooses to whisper rather than to scream, to draw people closer and cultivate the willingness to listen” (2018, 97). King calls on protesters to suffer not to evoke empathy but to short-circuit the defensive habits of racial ignorance. Direct action disrupts in order to force the oppressor to act and, at the same time, contain the spiral of resentment and retrenchment that the experience of being confronted sets into motion. Loving the white citizen aggressively is an act of dramatically exposing the reality disavowed by racial ignorance. This is the love King claims the white citizen needs to rise to the call of his moral obligations to love the black neighbor.

Thurman and King articulate this moral psychology of nonviolent direct action in the language of personalism. Non-cooperation, boycotts, and strikes aim to produce “an immediate sense of insecurity” that force the oppressor to confront the claims of the oppressed (Thurman 2012, 97). This is their force of disruption. Disruption, however, risks only entrenching the reactive responses of the depersonalized white ego, as we have seen. The guilty conscience disavows responsibility by projecting its anxieties out onto the oppressed as sources of danger. The suffering body intervenes in this reaction by serving as a mirror, rather than a screen, that deflects the ego’s projections and exposes the guilty conscience to itself. It is a strategy of foiling the aggressor’s expectations rather than appealing directly to moral sentiments. Where fear animates white perceptions of black bodies as screens on which they can project their own anxieties and repressed guilt, conscientious suffering is a refusal to meet white anticipations and rationalizations for violent response. Disrupting psychological defenses creates the conditions for disclosing a different image of the self, as embodied in the polity’s unacknowledged brutality being publicly displayed on the suffering body. Persuasion, then, is not

simply the end of such provocation but something facilitated through its very means. *Agape*, King writes in a passage of *Stride* that is often passed over, is “insistence on community even when one seeks to *break it*” (2010a, 94, emphasis added).

Civility’s critics have good grounds for looking skeptically on the claim that scenes of black suffering will sway white audiences, particularly in an era marked by the ubiquitous circulation of images of spectacular black death (Threadcraft 2017). As Hooker charges, the assumption “that black sacrifice will induce shame among white citizens, which will in turn produce a re-orientation to racial justice is thus a particular account of white moral psychology that fails to take the effects of racialized solidarity into account” (2016, 460). What power shame had to affect moral transformation in the Civil Rights era hinged in no small part on the ideological struggle between Cold War powers on the world stage that rendered white elites particularly sensitive to charges of moral hypocrisy (Pineda 2018). Contemporary protest movements lack the same grounds for assuming appeals to shame can be effective in the same way. Indeed, clinging to the possibility of suasion seems to amount to nothing short of a leap of faith. This will seem to some as reason to discount King’s contemporary relevance but it is just here that a religious sensibility should be seen as augmenting his political arguments rather than invalidating them. Faith is not a naïve hope in the absence of good evidence. It is rather the courage to act in advance of evidence in order to create it. King’s personalism frames reality as open and in the making, where the realization of infinite personality depends on the actions of finite persons. God’s saving grace does not descend onto humanity from outside history but emerges only within it through the unifying acts of persons who find the courage to love. King’s prophetic rhetoric interpolates his audience as they ought to act rather than as they do, Mantena rightly observes, because faith in the open possibility of a different future is the precondition of bringing such a transformed audience about (2018, 99).¹⁵ This kind of asymmetric love does not mean turning a blind eye to the fact that the present enemy is in fact an enemy but to engage struggle against oppression without losing sight of a possible world where she could be a friend. Hence the ambivalence of King’s conjunction “friend-enemy” to name both faith’s necessity and its risk. The uncertainty that makes it necessary also makes it so risky because whites may ultimately prove unable to pierce through the veil of racial ignorance and prove unwilling to rise to their obligations, as King increasingly worried in his final years. But he was not willing to wait on the evidence before daring to act. The only evidence that could effectively decide the question of suasion’s force in politics could only ever be decided retroactively, requiring protestors to continually experiment with new strategies of confrontation and exposure in

ever-changing contexts rather than decide in advance that past struggles ever settle the issue once and for all.

This sort of experimentation in forward-looking faith and backwards-looking tactical learning characterizes the evolution of King’s approach to civil disobedience in the decade following Montgomery. The boycotts, mass meetings, and marches that gave birth to a “new Negro” upended expectations of black powerlessness and acquiescence yet the freedom movement struggled to maintain this same disruptive force over time. Even as the freedom movement won its historical legal gains, the following decade of white retrenchment and conservative backlash put intense pressure on King’s early view of the educative power of suffering. Maintaining the careful balance of provocation and pedagogy would prove a difficult challenge over the following years. For King, it would lead to more focused reflection on the imbrication of power and love characterizing his late vision for “mass” civil disobedience: “Nonviolent protest must now mature to a new level corresponding to heightened black impatience and stiffened white resistance,” King announced in 1968. “This higher level is mass civil disobedience” (2010d, 15; see Livingston forthcoming). Animating the trajectory of King’s experiments with ever-greater capacities for political disruption was the insight about the interdependence of disruption and persuasion developed in these early sermons and writings. Transformative social change depends on more than creating uncertainty; it is no less a struggle to contain reaction and to educate public perceptions of the vulnerability disruption incites. Pedagogy without provocation is empty; provocation without pedagogy is blind.

Conclusion

Religious citizens are often asked to translate their moral visions into secular reasons to garner a hearing in the public sphere. A pluralistic society is one where political justifications cannot rest on religious reasons alone without becoming a “conversation stopper” (Rorty 1994). Fifty years after his death, political theorists continue to make this demand of King as the condition of admission into the pantheon of political thinkers. Yet if religious citizens have a duty to translate their moral visions into terms others can understand, the responsibility goes both ways. Secular citizens and scholars have a responsibility to put aside the spurious impartiality of their own perspectives to engage religious citizens on their terms as well (Habermas 2005, 114-148). Taking religious arguments seriously is not only a way of showing respect for religious citizens but a potential source of moral resources that can enrich and expand secular political imaginaries.

King’s political theology of civil disobedience offers just such insights, and these go untapped when the religious content of his thought is reduced to a problem to be either

resolved or evaded. Fidelity to love, I have argued, constitutes the moral core of King's political vision and spiritual strategy. This is a vision of human interdependence informing demands for radical social change, a moral vocabulary centered on a natural duty to resist oppression, a critical analysis of the psychic and material barriers that stand in its way, and a set of practical techniques for realizing this vision of mutual human freedom and respect here and now. And its moral core is not a higher law that commands but a revisionary retelling of the life of Jesus Christ that exhorts. Where civil disobedience oriented around the fidelity to law is a defensive strategy of stabilizing the status quo, civil disobedience in pursuit of the fidelity to love is a transformative practice of reconstructing social order from the inside out.

In a recent study, William Scheuerman argues that religious conceptions of disobedience like Gandhi's and King's hold potentially radical implications but their spiritual foundations render them inappropriate for a deeply pluralistic society. At best, religious arguments for disobedience disrespect secular citizens for failing to address them in public terms; at worst, they authorize modes of elitism that undermine the terms of democratic legitimation (Scheuerman 2018, 28-31). What reexamining the historical origins of King's civil disobedience in context reveals, however, is a vernacular political theology much less rigid, monistic, and dogmatic than Scheuerman's portrayal would suggest. A defining feature of this theology is *imitatio Christi*—positing the life of Jesus Christ as an example that exhorts others to follow rather than a law that commands them to obey. The meaning of love is exemplified by Christ's moral response to oppression rather than dictated by a body of dogma, whether sacred or secular. Furthermore, King's religious arguments sustained a form of pluralism rather than foreclosed it. Translation across religious differences, rather than transcendence above them, was the means through which King drew lessons from spatially and culturally distant struggles across the globe. Civil disobedience emerged in the United States as a "traveling theory," and it traveled by way of translation across religious imaginaries to encompass a plurality both within and beyond the secular terms of the nation-state.

This is not to conclude that any theory of civil disobedience requires theological foundations but is meant as a provocation to political theory to better distinguish *religion* from the *religious* in politics. John Dewey introduces this distinction to mark the difference between a body supernatural beliefs (religion) and an ethos or orientation in human conduct (the religious). Religion and the religious are not identical, and Dewey claims that the salutary functions of the religious in experience can be emancipated from the doctrinal and institutional frameworks of religion itself (Dewey 1986). Rethinking love in the theory and history of civil disobedience is an exercise in

examining the political and conceptual implications of the religious register of black political theorizing.¹⁶ Fidelity to love accordingly exceeds the social gospel tradition and finds expression in strains of black political theorizing not explicitly bound to the church. bell hooks, for example, offers a model for what it means to keep love at the center of resistance in her account of love as a practice of freedom. "Without love," she writes, "our efforts to liberate ourselves and our world community from oppression and exploitation are doomed" (2006, 243)—doomed because without an acknowledgment of the interlocking systems of oppression, struggles for self-liberation become self-defeating and capitulate to the status quo. hooks holds up King as exemplifying such a politics rooted in an ethics of love. But for all his insight into the liberating power of love, King's emphasis on overcoming fear sheds little light on love's labor of confronting the remainders of unreconciled grief, loss, and despair. Indeed, the very struggle against oppression risks its own traumas and exhaustion. Love, in other words, demands not only courage but care. hooks underscores this shortcoming by contrasting King's vision of love with Malcolm X's: "While King had focused on loving our enemies, Malcolm called us back to ourselves, acknowledging that taking care of blackness was our central responsibility. Even though King talked about the importance of black self-love, he talked more about loving our enemies" (2006, 245). King figures sacrificial resistance itself as a kind of self-care but as hooks underscores—and as other black feminists and queer theorists have also stressed—the work of loving care may require turning away from the burdens of political action and sacrifice to nurture practices of liberation beyond resistance alone. Self-love, in other words, often entails tending to the boundaries of the self rather than relinquishing them. Reconsidering civil disobedience as fidelity to love should therefore be a provocation to view it not as a privileged mechanism of constitutional rule but as one critical practice of freedom within a broader itinerary of transformative nonviolence and collective self-rule.

Notes

- 1 One notable exception is Milligan 2013.
- 2 Shulman introduces the notion of vernacular political theology to characterize the role of religion "as a language not only *in* politics but *of* politics"; Shulman 2008, 228. My own use of the term is indebted to Shulman but extends the idea of "vernacular" theory to highlight the conceptual claims, normative arguments, and political imaginaries embodied in the concrete practices of social movements and political actors. Vernacular theory is a syncretic genre that does not aim at the level of analytical precision characteristic of the academic genre of "high theory," and therefore seldom receives the study it deserves from political theorists. Studying vernacular theory therefore

requires not simply expanding the archive of political theory beyond familiar canonical sources, but also a methodological reorientation that places theory in what James Tully 2002 calls a relationship of “reciprocal elucidation” with movement practice and its languages. What this means for the study of civil disobedience in particular is a move away from the juridical concern with the justification of law breaking and towards a conspiratorial mode that puts theory in the service of contemporary movements and struggles. The form this takes here is an untimely reevaluation of the theory and practice of a past movement that, through its very transcription into the terms of “high theory,” has become synonymous with a moralized ideal of “good” protest. I discuss the history of translation and conscription conjoining vernacular and high theories of civil disobedience in Livingston (forthcoming).

- 3 Farred 2015 introduces the term “asymmetrical love” to distinguish the sacrificial character of Christian love from the reciprocity of pagan love. Christ’s martyrdom on the Cross exemplifies an asymmetrical love that gives without asking, and can never be fully reciprocated. While Farred’s essay deals with writings of James Baldwin, this way of distinguishing Christian and pagan love maps neatly onto King’s distinction between *agape* and *philia*.
- 4 On *Stride* as “political autobiography” see Carson 2010, xii. Threadcraft and Terry 2018, 223, rightly point out that King is an untrustworthy narrator of the boycott. Many central figures and key events in the campaign are conspicuously missing from *Stride*’s narrative, most centrally the role of women and the boycott’s emergence from a longer history of women’s organizing against sexual violence in the deep South; McGuire 2011. I focus on King’s partial history of the campaign in this article in order to retrace how his account of nonviolent resistance emerged from a dialectic of theory and practice – at once drawing theoretical lessons from concrete struggles and retrospectively reinterpreting those struggles from the perspective of a broader philosophical/theological framework developed in his contemporaneous sermons and writings.
- 5 The question of the fidelity, originality, and even sincerity of King’s adoption of Gandhian concepts and strategies is hotly contested. I take no position on these debates. Rather than seek to appraise King’s theory of civil disobedience by comparison with its Gandhian origins I take a pragmatic approach that asks how thinkers in the black social gospel tradition made use of these ideas. I therefore present Gandhianism here in the terms in which these thinkers interpreted it without adjudicating whether or not these purposes remain true to Gandhi’s own purposes.
- 6 Whether or not the Montgomery boycott should be considered a case of civil disobedience is contested. Rosa Parks’s act of conscientious refusal to give up her seat that sparked the boycott offers a clear case of civil disobedience, conventionally defined. The law-breaking and arrests that followed over the course of the campaign, by contrast, were more a function of the municipal and state governments weaponizing various ordinances to break up the protest rather than acts of conscience per se. Compare Storing 1991 and Perry 2013 with Bedau 1969 and Martin 1970 for contrasting views on this question. For the purposes of this paper, I follow King’s use of civil disobedience and nonviolent resistance as interchangeable concepts. Strict definitions of civil disobedience are a critical element of the retrospective invention of an analytical philosophical tradition seeking to interpret and justify civil rights protest, not a critical concern of the vernacular theory of protestors themselves.
- 7 On the interpretive insights close scrutiny of King’s earliest sermons avail, and on the persistence of these arguments throughout the arc of his career, see Rose 2019 .
- 8 Chabot 2012 introduces this distinction between the interwar years as a period of “translation” followed by one of tactical “experimentation” in the diffusion of the Gandhian repertoire in the United States.
- 9 Here again King is an untrustworthy narrator. The congregation of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church was decidedly middle class, and a center of black political organizing efforts in Montgomery prior to King’s arrival. Members of the congregation organizing through the Woman’s Political Council, most vitally Jo Ann Robinson, played a critical role in launching the bus boycott that King’s narrative erases. I thank an anonymous referee for underscoring this point.
- 10 “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” follows this theological distinction between just and unjust laws by restating its argument in secular and procedural terms. Some early interpreters took this distinction as grounds for claiming that the letter’s argument could be stated in strictly secular terms, particularly those of U.S. federalism’s distinction between higher and lower laws. King, by contrast, understood the letter’s “messy justification” to illustrate the place of the American constitutional order within a religious framework rather than its antithesis; Scheurman 2018, 24-26. Reform of positive law is a vital concern of King’s conception of civil disobedience but he maintained that a theory of political change oriented exclusively in secular legal terms can secure desegregation but not integration. I discuss the constitutionalization of “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” and its implications

- for King's conceptions of desegregation, integration, and freedom further in Livingston forthcoming.
- 11 Burrow perhaps understates the influence of Boston personalist theology on King's development in order to affirm the roots of his homespun personalism in black religious traditions in response to the one-sidedness of an earlier generation of King scholarship. Dorrien 2018, 255-354 offers a more balanced view of King's theological sources.
 - 12 This way of distinguishing conscience as a degree of moral insight from a natural moral faculty is indebted to Brownlee 2012, 51-71.
 - 13 Rose 2019, 42-43, helpfully illustrates how the Myrdalian view of race prejudice King confesses in *Stride* undergoes a process of transformation over the course of the following decade that moves beyond Myrdal's creedal frame, and with it a greater understanding of the structural logic binding the psychic and material dimensions of white supremacy over the course of American political development.
 - 14 In making this distinction I mean to do more than acknowledge the interpretive challenges posed by the phenomenon of "double audience" in black political thought. King's major publications, including his books and editorials, were often co-authored if not ghostwritten. This makes them a valuable repository of arguments circulating in the wider movement but also unreliable sources when taken themselves for understanding the nuances of King's political thought. King's corpus of sermons, by contrast, were for the most part composed by King alone and therefore offers a valuable complement for reinterpreting these more familiar sources.
 - 15 The action-oriented dimension of King's conception of prophecy and faith is discussed in greater detail in Glaude 2011, 114-120.
 - 16 I draw this pragmatist approach to African American religion, and its distinction between religion and the religious, from Glaude 2018, 5-19.

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