KING OF DREAMS:

DREAMWORLD VS. UTOPIA AND THE SONIC TEMPORALITY OF KING'S TWO BODIES

Damien Marassa
(Duke University, USA)

Shadowed by the specter of destruction that increasingly characterizes our contemporary predicament, what can we learn from Martin Luther King? Is it not more important than ever to 'have a dream' of a better, more just, more equal world; and to live and act today so as to make such a vision a radical imperative, as opposed to an unreachable utopian fantasy?

In this vexed moment in the triumphant life of global capital an ironic counter-image is coming into view: the potential destruction of the human race by processes of its own agency. This ghastly vision projects itself across a historical landscape of nuclear Cold War imaginaries supplanted by the competing anxieties of environmental degradation and large-scale bio-political instability. If half a century ago Malraux observed that while 19th century Europe had witnessed "the death of God," its post-World War Two crisis had presaged the occasion for the same community to ask itself "whether, today, man [sic] is not dead." Pursuing this type of reflection might prove relevant for investigating the condition of humankind's contemporary relationship to the possibility of its own "imminent death" under the sign and temporality of globalization. The inauguration of such a global object for thought might well seem needlessly morbid until one considers the implications of the "Hegelian" concept of which Blanchot speaks where "[d]eath alone allows me to grasp what I want to attain." Through the necessary encounter with the extreme limits (and thus the 'totality') of its being in the irreducible fact of its mortality, the individual, collective, social, and indeed global subject enters into consciousness of its own historicity. In such a global awareness, the measure of life's finitude yields the possibility of tracing life's relation to meaning, filling consciousness with dreams and aspirations. It is in the process of such a becoming subject that we gaze in the reflecting pool of Martin Luther King's life and words, as the figure of an heroic response to the self-destructive violence of modernity, but also as the subject of a life lived under the continual the threat of death.

In 1955, at the very beginning of his participation in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, when asked if the death threats that he received as a result of his leadership caused fear, King responded that it was not his own life he was concerned about but "the triumph of a cause." In his celebrated "Drum Major Instinct" sermon, where he describes the desire inherent in every human being to be recognized and valued by society, King acknowledges first the darker sides of human ambition and their effects on the world. Continuing in strikingly personal tones on this theme, King urges his listeners to harness this power to motivate lives of service to humanity as he had become empowered to do: "Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major," he intones, "say that I was a drum major for justice; say that I was a drum major for peace; I was a drum major for righteousness." Notably he embellishes on these phrasings in a style that brings us deeper into the poetics of his

Painting of Dr. Martin Luther King by Joel Nankin
Photo: Reginald Patterson ©, courtesy the photographer

language than one might expect from the effects of public speech. "And that's all I want to say," he continues, "if I can help somebody as I pass along, if I can cheer somebody with a word or a song, if I can show somebody that he's travelling wrong, then my living will not be in vain." These words are, in fact, lyrics to the hymn "If I Can Help Somebody", popularized by Mahalia Jackson.

Acknowledgement of the afro-sonic and phonographic materiality of King's language amplifies the audibility of his poetic voice and the rhetorical effects of his speech. The supplementary nature of the oral that splices (the "ordinary speech" of printed *transcription* onto the aural palimpsest of traditional African American devotional music) enacts a cut on the denotative register of signification to produce song in the moment of speaking, to articulate dream in place of sight. As his utterance continues it is not only by means of what Blanchot describes as "ordinary language" that King addresses the con-

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr
Photo: Dick DeMarsico ©
US Library of Congress, public domain

gregation, but through strikingly literary utterance that collapses and expands the rhetorical boundaries between poetry, speech and song: "If I can do my duty as a Christian ought, if I can bring salvation to a world once wrought, if I can spread the message as the master taught, then my living will not be in vain." In the next movement, King proceeds to improvise over the form of the hymn by extemporizing on the hypothetical, and indeed inevitable, moment of his future absence, and in expressing his wishes for how his legacy should be memorialized, makes a curious distinction between worldly accomplishments and altruistic strivings. Preferring not to have mentioned that he has an astounding number of personal awards, honors and recognitions, and such empirical historical accomplishments, he requests that his commemorators, instead, say of the intention of his actions, and of the attempt to diffuse himself out into the world through the performance of the following inexhaustible tasks, that "Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to live his life serving others ... tried to love somebody.... I tried to ... serve humanity."

This sense of the meaning and merit of life as found in the interstitial expanse between historicity and mortality brings to mind the testimony of one participant in the civil rights movement who explains that "what Dr. King gave us, what Stokely Carmichael gave or Malcolm X gave, what everybody gave us, whether you agreed with them or not, the energy of that time and the goals we were all aspiring to ... is what it was all about at its best. At its worst was when we did nothing." In these comments musician and activist Harry Belafonte identifies "goals" and aspirations as the "best" thing about the Civil Rights Movement and these energies of *action* with the "worst" state of affairs, the passivity of doing "nothing." It is significant here to note that King saw his vision for America as "deeply rooted" in a transhistorical palimpsest of designs for a social world of freedom and justice for all. One might thus ask the question of what King's example remains to teach us about how to live with ancestors, spirits and heritages (as bearers of dreams) in this portentous moment in history.

Looking closely at a few key moments in King's public speeches, I argue that what we must retain – more importantly than the formal organization of any cause or political mobilization, and more imperatively than any form of historical accomplishment to which his legacy might conduce – can be found in his ability to dream in the face of death, and in the threat of annihilation to recognize the promise of the eternal. At a time in which it has perhaps never been more difficult to conceive of an alternative to the current world system, it has also never been more important, or more radical as it is now to dream, to imagine, to create differently. And yet so much of the discourse that critically evaluates the complex and multiple strivings for radically different social orders, by virtue of utopian characterization, seems to impute to these endeavors the inefficacy of fantasy.

it has also never been more important, or more radical as it is now to dream, to imagine, to create differently

Fredric Jameson, for example, asserts in his major study on utopia, *Archaeologies of the Future,* that, "the best Utopias are those that fail the most comprehensively" insofar as they can "at best ... serve the negative purpose of making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment" to really-existing life conditions. The entire dreamworld thus characterized as utopian therefore becomes evaluated not only as being incapable of realization, but is valued if at all in the very terms of its impossibility, valued as a negative psychological resource for its utter absence of worldly value. Though the word 'utopia' derives from the ancient Greek for "no" and "place," the term enters the modern vernacular through the coinage of Sir Thomas More in his fictional work, so influential on later generic forms of speculative fiction, satire and political theory, elaborately titled *A Fruitful and Pleasant Work of the Best State of a Public Weal, and of the New Isle*

Called Utopia. Jameson identifies the condition of possibility for the founding of utopia as the "closure" achieved by the digging of a "great trench between the island and the mainland and which alone allows it to become Utopia." Observation of this Manichean structure dialogically affirmed by utopia's hermetic self-enclosure would then be, for Jameson, a way of asserting the distinction between what he calls the reality "of our mental and ideological imprisonment" and the fictional or "literary" genre of utopian fantasy the dissolution of which bears the redemptive feature of revealing hegemonic claims on the present.

Yet, if King recognized a space such as Jameson describes utopia, this enclosure was for him a *dystopia*. If he saw an island separated by a great trench from the mainland it was the "lonely island of poverty in a midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity" on which African Americans had been stranded; if there was an "elsewhere" that King observed it was the cramped "corners of American society" in which African Americans were "in exile" in their "own land." That is to say that, if there existed a self-enclosed isle of utopia for King, this was not the goal of his striving, but rather the nightmarish historicity of the corruption of the American dream by the evils of racism from which the present must extricate itself. For King, the dream would mean the opposite of utopia so constructed – it would mean recognition of the mutuality of reality and dream, of island and mainland, of self and other.

In King's acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize delivered on 10 December 1964, he claimed an "audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits." This dream was neither a utopia in the sense of a programmatic "[en] closure" of a new world set off from an old, or a liberal reformist aspiration to gloss the existing order, but a radical commitment to, and living involvement in, the temporality of a dream to be understood as in the process of unfolding, of realizing, of arriving. Neither ahistorical eschaton nor whimsical fantasy, King experienced this dream as an affective phenomenon manifest in both mind and body, whose ontological status was more contingent upon personal belief and individual action than the calculus of historical probability. In this same speech, King speaks of his "abiding faith in America and … the future of mankind," yet punctuates his acceptance of the award through the emphasis of a refusal "to subscribe to the idea that the 'isness' of man's present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal 'oughtness' that forever confronts him." In the structure of this phrasing alone can be seen the juxtaposition of a distinct set of two ontological conditions and correspondent temporalities in King's critical formulation.

this dream … was more contingent upon personal belief and individual action than the calculus of historical probability

If King begins by acknowledging historicity in "the 'isness' of man's present nature," he proceeds by asserting that this temporality is "confronted" by a commensurate force in excess of historical reality that he calls "eternal 'oughtness.'" In this formulation, King describes the foundational ontology of human life as composed not only of the temporality of past experience, but also as constituted by the historicity of human potential for change. This capacity, emerging out of the historical contiguity of "man's present nature," manifests itself, then, not as a nebulous future moment which ought eventually be realized beyond the horizon of lived experience. Rather, this condition of "the eternal 'oughtness' that forever confronts" humanity, and therefore perpetually suffuses, each moment of human existence, is itself a *presence* within the experience of everyday life. Such a formulation of the simultaneous presence of "isness" and "oughtness" in the reality of "man's present nature" in King's formulation sheds light on what Walter Benjamin labored to describe as "a conception of the present as the 'time of the now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time," and brings us to the discussion of what Jacques Derrida has theorized as *l'avenir*.

The temporality of concern for Derrida is not that space that will come to pass "tomorrow, later, next century," but the arrival of a future that "is totally unexpected." For Derrida, "the real future" is not the programmatic extension of causes and effects such as the rising of the sun or the arrival of a train on schedule, but rather, "that which is totally unpredictable … the Other who comes without my being able to anticipate their arrival." Thus, the "real future" is "*l'avenir* … that coming of the Other when I am completely unable to foresee their arrival." A reading of Antonio Negri's articulation of the 'to-come' further illuminates the salience of King's coinage "the eternal 'oughtness.'" For Negri, "the eternal is the common name of the materialist experience of time," that is 'time' as the ultimate site of contestation over the question of dreamworld vs. utopia (within even a Marxist theory of history). Negri argues that the "eternity of matter reveals itself as tem-

poral intensity, as innovative presence; and the full present of eternal time is singularity. 'Singular' and 'eternal' are," thus, "interchangeable terms; their relationship is tautological. Whatever has happened is eternal; it is eternal here and now. The eternal is the singular present. In materialism ethical experience is the responsibility for the present."

One might speak, then, of the way in which this responsibility of ethical experience comes into human "experience ... for the present" as the encounter with "eternal 'oughtness,'" that is, with the to-come which, one might even say, haunts the entirety of human being, the very "isness" of human historicity. Thus, rather than proving the incompatibility of this Marxist ontology with a valuation of the philosophical poetics of King's speech, we arrive at the vindication of the former by the latter insofar as Negri argues that "[i]n materialism, ethical experience" functions precisely in the structure of this relation to temporality being "always faced with the immeasurable and the opening of the eternal to the *to-come*." As the question becomes one of mapping the encounter between the temporality of the "to come" as "oughtness" and the present tense of the *to be* as "isness," we return to Jameson's beleaguered identification of Utopia as "a literary form," this time to cull rather than abjure his insights. For though King's dream may at base prove not to be utopian in the structure implied by the frivolity of fantasy or the superfluousness of wishful thinking, there is indeed, as we have seen, a literary feature of the language in which the dream is articulated, transmitted, and performed that bears resemblance to Jameson's identification of utopia as "a literary genre." For on the one hand, if we are to accept as true what Jameson calls "the great empiricist maxim" that maintains "nothing in the mind that was not first in the senses," we must also concede nothing in experience that was not first in history.

That is, if we are to accept this formulation in our heuristic of evaluating future-striving social movements as utopian, we must concede that both "eternity" and its "oughtness" are incapable of the moral reach of humanity's "isness." And even if we are tempted to side with Jameson over King on this proposal, which might arguably provide for a more pragmatic historiography, it must be asked to what extent we are prepared to articulate the phenomenological boundary of the senses. Upon what rostrum do we stand when we dare to speak of a sensorium uninformed by the operations and inheritances of dreams? In other words, even the acceptance of "the great empiricist maxim" – if we can be persuaded to consider it great – raises questions as to the relationship of embodied experience to the life of the mind. It should appear as no accident therefore, that in the discourse of Martin Luther King one might encounter a quintessential challenge to this empiricist rubric in the language of his own public speech. Indeed, in King's final public act, his ultimate formal utterance invokes and animates a body of phenomenal experience embodied in traditions of evangelical prophecy, a collective assemblage of oral historiography and annals of future-orientated generational cultural production that aggregates complex histories of African (American) Diasporic resistance, epistemology and self-creation. Here I am attempting to describe the inestimable historical redolence and contemporary urgency of the last line of King's final sermon, delivered on April 3 1968 at the Bishop Charles Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee: "Mine eyes have seen the coming of the glory of the Lord." The phonographic ur-text of this utterance which directly cites "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," itself a source of New Testament references, functions as a sort of discursive bed track over which King's ministerial vocals layer a genealogy of Western thought culminating the aporetic dilemmas of Ancient Greece in the crises of a humanism facing the radical limit of its boundary.

Having surveyed a vast expanse of historical time in the course of his sermon, King most portentously identifies his *present* moment of human experience as the most covetable moment in history to be a participant, yet punctuates this by restaging the somewhat familiar claim and ancient prophecy of a 'promised land.' "It's all right to talk about 'long white robes over yonder,' in all of its symbolism," he says "[b]ut ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here! It's all right to talk about 'streets flowing with milk and honey,'" he continues, "but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta," etc. From this (re)state(ment) of ontological priorities it is clear that the ethics of "oughtness" unfolds from the tension between the two state(ment)s above; "the fierce urgency of now," encountered in confrontation with the eternal "which perpetually confronts [us]."

It might more appropriately be remembered that the words to the hymn that ended King's final sermon were merely the last *audible* vocalization given by King at that engagement, given that the entirety of his spoken words were not amplified sufficiently to be archived in the surviving recording. Having

Martin Luther King leaning on a lectern
Photo: Marion S.Trikosko ©
US Library of Congress, public domain

yet to gain all there is from what is audible in King, and to thus gain all we ought to from the tenor of his voice, we strain to incline our ears to the silences and silencing of King's extemporaneous creations. We return, then, to the aural and historical record in devout attention to King's insistence on the phenomenal importance of seeing in the way that we have been referring to as 'dream.' Indeed in this insight, foresight is the vision of a "dream deeply rooted in the American dream" on the horizon of whose visibility "his truth is marching on." The dreamtime of King's poetics manifests in his last words the reality of a literary and historical space of realization. Not only has he "seen the coming of the glory of the Lord," he had done so with his own eyes, and is here to speak about it.

In tones of indefatigable courage King pauses on the subject and advent of his own death, declaring: "it doesn't matter with me now... because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind." This claim to experience is of the utmost relevance here. "And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain," he famously continues. "And I've *looked* over. And I've *seen* the promised land." Indeed, this conviction, the conversion of this certitude into faith, this sight into vision, bespeaks the quality of a composure that hundreds of thousands of people joined King in expressing during the tribulations of the civil rights movement. Significantly, in his ode to Marx, Derrida describes the *Communist Manifesto* not just as a revolutionary document but as a "real event" interpolated in history between the legendary specter of Communism and its ultimate incarnation in "the universal Communist Party." The notion of a human labor(time) as the translative material of a dream that is to come, a specter that begins by coming back, reintroduces us to the structure of historical production in Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" speech. The conviction that proximity to such a specter adjures King informs the auspiciousness he declares on that day of his speech's delivery, which would "go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation."

One might even submit that the greatness of this day was constituted not merely by the sheer volume of activist-participants who thronged the nation's capital for the March on Washington of August 28, 1963, but precisely by the manner in which the dreams that contributed to such a movement were announced and performed. Reviewing the score of King's speech in the sonic temporality of an ancestral voice singing across the landscape of half a century we come into contact with not just the legacy of a historical heritage, but the urgent responsibility of a global calling. The now world-renowned refrain of "I have a dream" delivered in the speech by which dominant discourse has been given to commemorate King without shedding light on what it might mean for King to dream, to dream like King calls out to our attention today in its temporal emphasis in the variation less often quoted: "I have a dream today!"

to dream like King calls out to our attention ... in the variation less often quoted: "I have a dream today!"

The importance of this transition cannot be overstated. Upon closer examination, not just of the transcript, but of the sonority of his speech, the stress of the words falls not on a rhetorical emphasis of the futurity of this awaited day. Rather, his intonation stressed the message that "today" was the object connecting him to the dream he found in his possession. The temporal manifestation of this dream then appeared, in the moment of his verbal discourse, not only as a personal, imaginary or spiritual resource, but as the historical unfolding of a "real event" every bit as poetic and lyrical as social and political. Returning to Derrida's reading of Marx, we encounter the striking similarity between the rhetorical operation in the opening salvo of *The Communist Manifesto* and the declarative gesture of King's "I Have a Dream" refrain.

According to this analysis, at the moment in which Marx can speak of a specter haunting Europe, the specter of Communism has already become his (and Europe's) inheritance. He now, already *has* a

dream. Or more appropriately, in the case of both Marx and King, one might speak of a dream having *him*. From the pen of Marx flows the speech act that introduces a movement, an event, a dream into history and the workings of human consciousness. What holds for Marx here holds true for King as well in the performance of his speech on August 28, 1963, speaking in the present 'now' of his "dream today!" We might therefore follow by saying, with Derrida, that the "future is not described, it is not foreseen in the constative mode; it is announced, promised, called for in a performative mode." The dream thus imparted in the "performative mode" of King's speech requires a faithful listening to the sonic vocabulary of his utterances in which is recorded the historical evidence not just of historical accomplishments, but of discursive, poetic, and literary strivings to live despite the portents of death. For if this "learning to live … remains to be done," as Derrida has described, "it can happen only between life and death. What happens between [the] two … can only *maintain itself* with some ghost, can only *talk with or about* some ghost. So it would be necessary to learn spirits."

what dreams we are willing to allow to possess us and to what extent we will allow ourselves to be seized upon by a dream

It seems, then, that there are two Kings we might call to memory, two modes of living with his legacy that might both faithfully reflect how he wished to be remembered and express his ontological state(ment)s: the King of actions and the King of dreams. The former, archival body familiarized to us by the official account of the empirical effects of King's presence in the world is commemorated on a day of national recognition. Yet, without questioning the veracity or appropriateness of commemorating King's momentous contribution to world history through material symbols like the Nobel Peace Prize, we focus our attention and attune our hearing to the afrosonic, phonographic, literary qualities reverberant throughout King's language the way he lived through the actions of his life the striving toward that "eternal 'oughtness' which perpetually confronts him." Thus, the question that may now befall is no longer one of how or when we may encounter our mortality, or even of what we may yet dare to dream, but precisely of what dreams we are willing to allow to possess us and to what extent we will allow ourselves to be seized upon by a dream. To question thus in the midst of an engulfing global crisis empowers us not only to cite King's speeches or recast the phonetic legacy of his memory in novel terms, but to learn to live with the specters, voices and oralities of a global inheritance. This call strikes us as a far more encouraging vocation than that arising out of a utopian discourse which seeks hopelessly for the affirmative by way of negation exemplified in the furtive Jamesonian endorsement of "anti-anti-Utopianism." Dispensing with such quixotic enclosures we open to the affirmative resonance of a tradition which calls us, in the words of Langston Hughes, to "hold fast to dreams." May we so consent then, even in the face of death, not only to the holding or being held, to the possessing or being possessed, but to the living with and being lived by dreams.

Crowds surrounding the Reflecting Pool, during the 1963 March on Washington
Photo: Warren K. Leffler, US Library of Congress, public domain