

Hence, Gates creates a subtext of valuing linguistic forms and the linguistic revoicing of even earlier linguistic forms, while ignoring what surely connects them—the consciousness to revoice and rewrite the place or status of the racial self in Euro-American history. Gates prefers to believe that racial essentialism must be either textually or socially immanent rather than ontologically creative. He implies, in other words, that race is either a social or a linguistic process but is almost never a qualitative and active expression of human intelligence as well as of literary art. Yet it is precisely this last process that transforms the reading of sterile “texts” into the more valuable reading of “works,” vindicating the communal mission of the humanities.

My very talented—but sometimes misguided—colleague inscribes himself as a textually archetypal structuralist who prefers to erase the process of human knowing from critical knowledge. Personally, I find his rather prescriptively narrow posture neither unthinkable nor uninteresting. But it is quite unlivable. What unifies his voice in the beginning with that of the gifted Soyinka at the end is the sacrosanct metaphor of Cambridge.

R. BAXTER MILLER
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Reply:

I thank R. Baxter Miller for his witty history of the Division of Black American Literature and Culture, but readers who have to infer my introduction from his remarks will have a difficult task. They may be surprised to discover that I made no pretense of discussing the history of that division. That I never thought to chart the institutional history of African American literary study. Now I did, for the sake of schematism, discuss the proceedings of three conferences, two of which were sponsored by the MLA, that seemed to instantiate the developments that came in the later seventies. But I was never foolhardy enough even to attempt to invoke the names of the major critics of black literature, then and now. Miller is rather less cautious than I in this respect. So on his behalf, let me try to calm future correspondents who will be shocked—shocked—at the names curiously omitted from his roster of “important” critics. For surely it is implicit in his piece (as it was explicit in mine) that he meant only to provide an institutional cross section of convenience and had no ambition to be exhaustive.

I fear some readers may be puzzled by Miller’s references to Cambridge, which (I assume) have to do with an autobiographical anecdote about the resistance I faced when I set out to study black literature at graduate school in England. I compared my experience unfavorably with the much more receptive environment generally found in the American academy today. Miller thinks this rendered Cambridge “sacrosanct,” by which logic his letter must be a praise song in my honor.

If Miller finds my view that you needn’t be black to teach black literature “profoundly reactionary,” I am more troubled by the converse view that would disallow black scholars from teaching Milton. But I despair of pleasing Miller. Having recently published an article attacking me for using an inacces-

sible critical vocabulary, he now faults me for speaking “within the language that now has democratic favor.” Miller would have me be more alert to “the *being* of textuality,” the organic “*essence*” of literary art, and the “ontologically creative” nature of racial essentialism. As seductive as these Heideggerian virtues are, I can’t be the only one who would hesitate to shackle another generation of critics with such *Schwarzwald*-school pieties.

Miller offers us a vision of black lit. crit. as a rather clubbish affair, complete with seniority rules, in which I myself hardly qualify as a full-fledged member. I would be the last to criticize Miller’s devotion to the professional establishment and its official MLA-sponsored institutions. And I deeply regret it if Miller feels slighted in his role as an organizer (this “performed voicing of black America within the MLA itself”). But it may be useful to remind ourselves that the Modern Language Association was not the birthplace of black literary criticism either.

And while I wish Miller had paid as much attention to my text as to its supposed subtext, I’d be remiss to ignore the plangent subtext of his letter. So let me state for the record that I had no involvement in the selection process of the *PMLA* issue in question, which was conducted through blind review by a number of specialists in the field. At the same time, I wish to convey my apologies to Miller for any hurt feelings thereby aroused.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.
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Martin Luther King, Jr., and His Sources

To the Editor:

I have happily taught the essays of Martin Luther King, Jr., in my community college classes for years, but after reading Keith D. Miller’s “Composing Martin Luther King, Jr.” (105 [1990]: 70–82), which documents King’s unacknowledged “borrowings” in “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” I am not certain I will ever be able to do so again with a clear conscience. You see, I teach the research paper in those classes too. And what Miller calls “borrowing,” we who teach freshman English call plagiarism (a word that, incidentally, never occurs in the article). And we don’t like it. We fail students who commit it. We try to have them dropped from our classes, even, in egregious cases, from our college community (for example, the student who submitted to my colleague a “borrowed” paper in which he neglected to replace the original writer’s name with his own). But we always give the student a hearing, so let’s listen to Miller:

1. Is the plagiarism intentional or accidental? Miller implies that it is deliberate when he says that “[b]y substantially exaggerating the significance of his formal education at white graduate schools, King’s essay masks a careful process of self-making . . .” (71). And the comparative passages that he quotes throughout the article and in the appendixes display a word-for-word similarity seldom accidental.

2. Is the plagiarism incidental or blatant? Miller uncovers in King’s essay the most inexcusable form of plagiarism, in

which the writer presents a conclusion as though it had been achieved by rigorous reading of original sources when, instead, it had been copied from secondary sources: in King's case, not ideas from *Das Kapital* and *The Communist Manifesto*, but words from McCracken; instead of Gandhi, Wofford; rather than Rauschenbusch, Fosdick.

3. Is the writer ignorant of the codes of academic scholarship? Miller does not attempt a defense of the indefensible: "Despite his years of immersion in academia, however, King failed to treat the word as a commodity when he wrote 'Pilgrimage'" (79).

4. Why, then, was the plagiarism committed? Miller reminds us of King's background: the oral tradition of the black pulpit, a tradition based on freely copying and recasting because "reiteration ensures that knowledge, which cannot be recorded, will be remembered by both speakers and audiences" (77). And in an oral tradition, "people only rarely develop a sense of what Ong terms 'proprietary rights' to a piece of discourse" (77). An acceptable argument since teachers like to think that we take students' backgrounds into account. But then Miller goes on, "Surely this strategy [combining "eight texts by seven authors"] endeared King to his white audiences, who, failing to recognize and respect the intellectual resources of the black church, would not have responded favorably to a straightforward tribute to his father and his community" (79). Doesn't this defense belittle the audience and insult the teacher?

We are left with Miller's unpalatable conclusion: "to ignore King's borrowing is to ignore his original act of yoking black orality and print culture. . . . We honor King by analyzing and comprehending his powerfully creative act of rhetorical self-making" (79).

I don't buy it. I wouldn't buy it from a student and I won't buy it from Miller. And my pleasure in teaching King, even if he creates through plagiarism a "tapestry instead of patchwork" (75), is tarnished.

SUZANNE C. COLE
Houston Community College

Reply:

I appreciate the opportunity that Cole and *PMLA* have given me to elaborate some of the points I made in "Composing Martin Luther King, Jr." I suspect that many people share Cole's misgivings.

She bases her entire criticism on an analogy comparing King to a college student. This analogy is completely inappropriate. "The codes of academic scholarship" had absolutely no relevance for King.

My essay analyzes King's "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," which appears in *Stride toward Freedom* (1958), his autobiographical account of the Montgomery bus boycott. Clearly the major purpose of the boycott itself and of "Pilgrimage," *Stride*, and King's other discourse was to prompt a nation to dismantle legalized segregation. In this context, King's obligation was to select the language most likely to persuade white Americans to eliminate an evil, racist system, not language conforming to belletristic standards beloved by our profession. He charmed moderate and liberal Northern white Protestants in part by

reviving language that Fosdick, McCracken, and other leading preachers had already tested on precisely that audience.

If King had composed differently by adhering to "the codes of academic scholarship," there is *no reason whatsoever* to believe that he would have been equally persuasive in convincing white Americans to eradicate segregation.

Consider Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Francis Grimké, W. E. B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, Langston Hughes, and James Weldon Johnson. Using original language, these figures—some as eloquent as Amos, Cicero, and Jefferson—repeatedly blasted racial inequities and demanded justice. Yet white America ignored all of them. Consider black agitators during the civil-rights era. Malcolm X, James Farmer, James Lawson, Fannie Lou Hamer, John Lewis, James Bevel, Diane Nash, Hosea Williams, Jesse Jackson, James Baldwin, and Lorraine Hansberry often used original language to vocalize African American demands with verve and great skill. Some of them offered positively electrifying appeals. Yet white America largely ignored them. Comfortable in white corridors of power, Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young served as smooth, moderate leaders for civil rights who were always willing to compromise and negotiate. Yet white America largely ignored them as well.

But white America did not ignore King. Many of the whites who were deaf to a host of eloquent black speakers lionized King and opened their wallets for his cause. What sense does it make to argue that King should have abandoned his successful method of composition and adopted the same method of composition that other eloquent African American speakers and writers used to no avail? To argue that King should have composed differently is to claim that black America should have surrendered the best method it ever devised for persuading whites to enact racial justice.

Moreover, Cole's term *plagiarism*—which denotes stealing—is completely out of place in a discussion of the sermons of Fosdick, McCracken, and other liberal white preachers whose texts served as sources for King. In my forthcoming book, I explain in detail how Fosdick, McCracken, and their colleagues often looked to one another's sermons for biblical cornerstones for preaching, forms of argumentation, themes, illustrations, analogies, literary quotations, patterns of arrangement, and other homiletic elements. Their sermons are highly intertextual because they treated homilies not as private property but as the fluid expressions of a common gospel. And they often failed to acknowledge sources. Furthermore, Fosdick strongly supported the civil-rights movement, and McCracken enthusiastically welcomed King to preach at his church almost annually. Both did so *after* King had replayed their material in "Pilgrimage."

If we allow our "pleasure in teaching King" to be "tarnished," we should also avoid teaching other writers. Shakespeare would not qualify for our classrooms because he borrowed without acknowledgment from Holinshed and other sources. And Shakespeare supplies few, if any, original plots. Because many other medieval and Renaissance writers also borrowed material, we should never teach them either. We should also refuse to teach the Bible as literature because, as biblical scholars almost unanimously testify, the authors of the Gospel of Mat-