
The Possibility of King's Beloved Community Going Forward

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In the following paper, I explain the underlying philosophical commitments of King's beloved community. I posit three moments of the United States of America's reconstruction: the Founding, the US Civil War, and the civil rights movement. The civil rights qua King's beloved community should be the governing ideal that situates our understanding of what America could be when contrasted against the other Founding moments of the United States. What's more, these challenges persist as we see the work that racial integrationism and beloved community have yet to be sufficiently formed and realized.

KEYWORDS: Martin Luther King, Jr; personalism; beloved community, Love

I COME TO YOU TODAY TO MEDITATE upon the legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and how to build toward a future utilizing King's insight.¹ As a philosopher, my duty is to build a bridge from King's written words and texts to some conceptualization of a future yet known, a future we may hope for. In effect, I am thinking about beloved community as reflected in one of his favorite lines borrowed from Theodore Parker, a nineteenth-century Unitarian that King summarized as "the arc of the universe

¹ The following essay is based on a lecture I gave at Bowie State University on April 4, 2023 to commemorate the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. I want to thank Robert Birt for the invitation and Karen Cook Bell who invited me to submit this piece for the new inaugural journal *Freedom: A Journal in Africana Studies*. I look forward to future collaboration in the same spirit that this essay addresses in building community with each other.

bends towards justice.”² The universe can bend toward justice, but it requires beloved community to do so. An ethics without attention to community is always theoretically incomplete. When asked how King’s philosophy might apply to the future and to our present needs in the twenty-first century, one must take stock of its actual commitments. We must understand what his philosophy was in light of its context within the United States at its time. One must carefully attend to the areas of ambiguity present in his words. Sometimes, King is not clear how a mentioned philosophical or theological idea should be understood, and it is the work of scholars to figure how best to interpret him.

In this lecture, I will not argue for the conclusion that I see Martin Luther King, Jr. as a representative and ardent defender of the larger school of Boston Personalism. I will take it for granted; I have exhaustively defended this interpretation elsewhere most recently in my article “Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Legacy of Boston Personalism” (2022). Instead, I want to speak to you today about the implications of what personalist philosophy stated and offer the thesis that King’s beloved community is the idealization of norms for community that are reflected in personalism broadly construed. In short, King’s beloved community would become a normative ideal to which the future and the arch of justice might realize a better world through. Beloved community is an ideal of multiracial democracy rooted in personalist thought. America is “a multiracial nation where all groups depend upon each other...this vast interdependent nation no racial group” where “no racial group can retreat to an island.”³ To put it more succinctly, what is assumed as the backdrop of the Poor People’s Campaign is beloved community and if the virtue of our democratic institutions is redeemable or not should be judged through what King meant as beloved community. Beloved community is central to all understanding of his critique of our political and economic institutions.

As with any argument, every argument assumes some level of assumptions to get underway, and I am no different. In the next section, I outline some basic assumptions about the conditions of white supremacy that operate *a tergo* in

² Martin Luther King, Jr. “If the Negro Wins, Labor Wins,” ed. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1986): 201-207. Here, I cite King, “If the Negro Wins, Labor Wins,” 207.

³ Martin Luther King, Jr. *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 63; Hackett J. Edward, “Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Legacy of Boston Personalism” in *The Pluralist* vol. 17 no. 3 (2022): 45-70.

the United States on a philosophical level and I end on outlining the three reconstructive moments of our nation's collective experience in which the United States had to re-constitute and renew its political authority.

I. WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURAL CONDITIONS, RECONSTRUCTION AND POLITICAL VISIONS

The Founding of the Constitutional Republic of the United States assumes the legitimacy of white supremacist thinking, if not philosophy. John Locke wrote the *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina* in 1669 that fixed standards for colonizing Virginia to Florida for the next century to come, and in that official document, proposition 110 reads as follows: "Every freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his negro slaves, of what opinion or religion soever."⁴ Freemen had "absolute power and authority over [their] negro slaves." Locke draws a distinction between freemen and slave. Such a distinction is baked into the Founding vision of this country.

The Founding Father, Thomas Jefferson, both owned slaves while saying that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness." A performative contradiction to be sure. At the same time, Thomas Jefferson remarked in a letter from 1790, "Locke's little book on Government, is perfect as far as it goes."⁵ In the same book, *The Second Treatise on Civil Government*, Locke defends the existence of slavery as won through a just war and we may no doubt speculate that England as a center of civilizing force in the New World could never be unjust.⁶ Jefferson approved of Locke. In another letter, Jefferson says of Bacon, Newton, and Locke, that these men were "the three greatest men that have ever lived."⁷ In considering Locke the greatest of all men, Thomas Jefferson agreed with him about the inferiority of Negro slaves. Jefferson

⁴ John Locke, "Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina, March 1, 1669," Yale Law Library, February 21, 2023, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/nc05.asp

⁵ Thomas Jefferson, "Extract from Letter to Thomas Mann Randolph, May 30, 1790," Thomas Jefferson Monticello, February 21, 2023, <https://tjrs.monticello.org/letter/1308>

⁶ Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 67-68. The *Second Treatise on Civil Government* contains provisions against hereditary slavery, but Locke writing the Carolina Constitution and investing in the Royal Africa Company prove as contradictory as the ideals and concrete practices of Jefferson.

⁷ Thomas Jefferson, "Extract from Letter to John Trumbull, February 15, 1789," Thomas Jefferson Monticello, February 21, 2023. <https://tjrs.monticello.org/letter/2153>

wrote in his *Notes on the State Virginia* that while blacks and whites were equal in memory, “in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid: and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous.”⁸

Many other examples could suffice for our purposes. The very thinking of America’s Founding Fathers assumed the legitimacy of white supremacy, and this white supremacy set the stage from the beginning of the United States. Clearly, if and when we find contemporary American conservatives who think that we should be loyal to the founding vision of the United States, we must demand of them an uncompromising *No* if we are to agree with King. Let me reproduce some words that not only implicate the United States culture that birthed the white supremacy we contend with today but also more provocatively American philosophy.

Slavery in America was perpetuated not merely by human badness but also human blindness. True, the causal basis for the system of slavery must be to a large extent be traced back to the economic factor. Men convinced themselves that a system that was so economically profitable must be morally justifiable. They formulated elaborate theories of racial superiority...This tragic attempt to give moral sanction to an economically profitable system gave birth to the doctrine of white supremacy. Religion and the Bible were cited to crystallize the status quo. Science was commandeered to prove the biological inferiority of the Negro. Even philosophical logic was manipulated to give intellectual credence to the system of slavery...So men conveniently twisted the insights of religion, science, and philosophy to give sanction to the doctrine of white supremacy.⁹

In these words, King specifically links white supremacy to the socio-economic, political, and cultural conditions of the United States and what I take to be the contexts that generated American philosophy. This system of slavery was birthed in America for economic reasons, what we might call racial capitalism, and entire spheres of culture, including religion, science, and philosophy “give sanction to the doctrine of white supremacy” for that racial capitalism to persist. What’s more, notice the present tense in the pre-

⁸ Thomas Jefferson, “Extract from the Notes on the State of Virginia, December 1, 1782-January 1, 1782,” February 21, 2023, <https://tjrs.monticello.org/letter/1314>

⁹ Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 37.

vious quote. It's "give," not gave. So, our attention today to King's life is to bring these insights as a counter to what presently gives legitimacy to white supremacy. Beloved community is a counterweight, a radical philosophical vision of community, to steer us clear of a world of anti-blackness.

Today, contemporary conservatives have never distanced themselves from the paradigm shift that occurred in the mid-1960s when Barry Goldwater—in running under the Republican nomination for President in the 1964 election—decided to court pro-segregationists as part of his platform. The Republican response to the civil rights movement was to object to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 under the guise of state rights. Even today, the national platform of Republicans mentions nothing about race at all.¹⁰ Republicans are the number one political force attacking African American Studies in College AP courses in Florida and attacking any mention of race as critical race theory in 18 states banning the teaching of the mention of race while not understanding the work of legal scholars in that tradition.¹¹ While writing this invited lecture in February 2023, more than 200 high schools students in Tuscaloosa walked out in protest of their high school after being told that a Black History Month event couldn't reference anything before 1970.¹² The disconnect between actual history of race and the politics of white grievance politics could be better mediated if we choose a more beloved community orientation for our politics and values. In other words, King's beloved community is the only legitimate source of political theology for the United States and the only working philosophy of community worth endorsing. Now you may ask: the only one worth endorsing?

¹⁰ "The Republican Platform of 2016," GOP.com, February 25, 2023, https://prod-static.gop.com/media/Resolution_Platform.pdf?_ga=2.206536016.293088243.1677387003-776341445.1677387003. The section on "Criminal Justice and Prison Reform" mentions only the lack of support for police from Democratic officials. It says nothing about the reasons why Democrats and progressives largely question police forces for the killing of unarmed Black people. The RNC has also indicated that a new platform will be composed in 2024, but for now, the statement from the 2016 platform holds. One might suspect that the killing of George Floyd has absolutely paralyzed the Republican ability to address race and galvanized the Republican avoidance of race altogether in its utter embrace of White Christian nationalism.

¹¹ Sara Schwartz, "Map: Where Critical Theory is Under Attack," Edweek.org, February 25, 2023, <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/map-where-critical-race-theory-is-under-attack/2021/06>

¹² No Author Listed, "Students Walk Out After Told to Limit Black History Program," Associated Press News, February 25, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/education-school-curricula-tuscaloosa-alabama-civil-rights-072dd00df78c42094b0e9e7d8298efa2>

In answering that question, I'd like to propose that there are three moments when the United States dared to envision what the idea of *America* could be. The first we have already covered in the ideas of Locke and Jefferson. In this period and all the way up to the U.S. Civil War, white supremacy was a presumed assumption of our vision for what America could be.

The second moment of re-envisioning the United States emerged when the breakdown over slavery resulted in the Confederate South no longer hiding the presumed assumption of white supremacy declared war for their white supremacist way of life to continue. At that time, American philosophers flocked to Hegel to solve the problem of the conceptual rift left open from the conflict. In Hegel, two opposites, a positive statement and a negation can be synthesized to form something greater. Hegel became, for some, a wonderful resource to heal, but there's a philosophical story that the enthusiasm for Hegelian dialectics excludes persons of color due the operative assumption of white supremacy yet again.¹³

The third moment is here. Arguably, the civil rights movement, starting with the Montgomery Bus Boycott and perhaps even now is the third reconstructive moment for the United States.¹⁴ One might even say that Nixon's Southern strategy and Reagan's embrace of neoliberal capitalism resists the norms and work of beloved community. Neoliberal capitalism requires that people are out only for their self-interest and if you commodify all aspects of life, then individuating people as consumers, self-interested agents, and the satisfaction of desires generated through capitalism, solidarity is prevented.

¹³ Evidence for this claim can be gleaned in William Torrey Harris. Harris, co-founder of the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, the oldest philosophy journal in North America, organized the group known as the St. Louis Hegelians. These were a group of scholars fascinated with Hegel's philosophy and yet Harris was an accomplished philosopher and was appointed the first Secretary of Education (what was then called the US Commissioner of Education) in 1889. In this capacity and as a Hegelian, Harris advocated for the kidnapping of Indigenous children and relocating them to civilize them. He wrote, "We owe it to ourselves and to the enlightened public opinion of the world to save the Indian, and not destroy him. We cannot save him and his patriarchal or tribal institution both together. To save him we must take him up into our form of civilization. We must approach him in the missionary spirit and we must supplement missionary action by the aid of the civil arm of the State. We must establish compulsory education for the good of the lower race."

¹⁴ A working hypothesis of this essay is that the civil rights movement never ended, but has been consistently called into question with the continual racist murders of unarmed Black persons, the school-to-prison pipeline, mass incarceration, red-lining, bussing, economic inequality, reparations, and a more honest reconstructive moment yet to happen wherein true integration – beloved community – can be instituted among us.

For this reason, I want to suggest that to overcome and challenge philosophy and our culture, we cannot look to philosophical resources that are blind to white supremacy. We must address what gives it sanction by imagining a world from the victims of white supremacy and their point of view. In short, and speaking somewhat theologically, our duty is to love those who have been harmed. In essence, I agree with Jonathon Walton, that King's thought is invaluable because it "demonstrates that religious commitments need not be inconsistent with the normative values of modern democracy."¹⁵ Quite the contrary, beloved community should be the ideal of contemporary democracy.

II. THE MANY ITERATIONS OF BELOVED COMMUNITY IN KING'S THOUGHT

Beloved community is recognized as the most important concept from the beginning of King's ministry and activism up until his death. Walter Fluker makes this point comparing Thurman and King. "Like Thurman, community is the single organizing principle of King's life and thought."¹⁶ Kenneth Smith and Ira Zepp defend that beloved community consumed King from the beginning of his ministry until his death. "The vision of 'beloved community' was the organizing principle of all of King's thought and activity." Therefore, they continue, "All of King's intellectual concerns were directly related to the priority [King] assigned to the beloved community."¹⁷ Lewis Baldwin called it of "critical importance" when situating and understanding King's entire thought since one may find the term from the beginning of the late 1950s until his death in 1968.¹⁸ In addition, King's notion of beloved community is embedded in concepts like "the World House" and what King described as "genuine integration" in *Where Do We Go from Here* (more on this later). The assumption of its presence lurks under the surface of King's life and work. Therefore, I propose a survey of its sources in King's thought. First, we will

¹⁵ Jonathon L. Walton, "Dignity as a Weapon of Love," in *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* ed. Brandon Terry and Tommy Shelby (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2018): 339-348. Here I cited Walton, "Dignity as a Weapon of Love," 342.

¹⁶ Walter Earl Fluker, *They Looked For a City: A Comparative Analysis of the ideal of community in the thought of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989), 150.

¹⁷ Kenneth L. Smith and Ira Zepp, *Search for Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, (Valley Forge: PA, Judson Press, 1974), 119.

¹⁸ Cited here as seen in Burrow, *God and Human Dignity*, 171. See the first opening section of Lewis Baldwin, *Toward the Beloved Community: Martin Luther King, Jr. and South Africa* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1995).

analyze what it means that beloved community is the aftermath of nonviolence and to understand what King meant by beloved community as “genuine integration and the metaphor of the “world house.”

As Robert Birt drawing from Rufus Burrow who noted it in Walter Muelder, ontologically, King accepted that persons are not radical individuals. Instead, persons are persons-in-community.¹⁹ There is ample evidence that King accepted this conception. Consider this profoundly metaphysical statement from “The Man Who Was a Fool”:

In a real sense, all life is interrelated. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what I ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.²⁰

Elements of this passage are used in his *Letter from the Birmingham Jail* and *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* In this way, King did not just state that personalism was his “most basic philosophical position,” but devoted years to figuring out how to conceptualize personalism in his life of activism. Part of that conceptualizing personalism in activism is to assume a world of relations in constant community with others. To say that all are related is to posit that there are ontological relations that permeate our social reality as the very basis of and for community. Those social relations are immanently existent here and unfolding in this very lecture hall or between you and others if you are reading this as a published lecture. Look around you even now, the strangers with whom you share the physical space are more than likely not attempting to harm you. The general default condition of human beings is to be in harmony with each other if the right conditions and values exist concretely between you and all with whom you are physically present. These relations are also ethical as well as social since the normative image of one person’s striving sets the limit of what another normative image of a person can be. If a stranger starts having a seizure before you, then you

¹⁹ Robert Birt, “King’s Radical Vision of Community” in *The Liberatory Thought of Martin Luther King Jr: Critical Essays on the Philosopher King* (Lanham, MA: Lexington Books, 2012): 157-175. Here I cite Birt, “King’s Radical Vision, fn 1 on 172.

²⁰ King, *Strength to Love*, 69.

could walk away and read this essay elsewhere, but people will fault you for leaving another person in distress.

Likewise, if you were suddenly injured, you would want another to call for help for you, so even in sharing a space with absolute strangers, we owe them the best in us and they, too, by their actions limit what's possible in the same way that I could limit the normative potential of what they might. In this way, community and ethics are linked in the very relations they occur.

King understood that personalism is both an ethical system and metaphysical position. There is an onto-relationality of persons that is the condition for ethics. As Robert Birt wrote: "Community is essentially an ethical relation between human beings—between persons—that enables the flowering of the human personality and the inherent worth of every human being."²¹ In King's words, personalism "gave me a metaphysical basis for the dignity and worth of all humanity."²² In this statement, metaphysics and ethical language of dignity and worth, the language of values, constitutes the two sides of personalism as a metaphysics and ethics. A normative ideal of my realizing inherent dignity in relation to others constitutes their ability to reciprocate in kind. What are the six principles of nonviolence in King's *Stride Toward Freedom* if not but concretizations of the ethical insight that the moral limit of what can be is set by others? In this case, as we will see, the more nonviolence is embraced as a standpoint of social and political reform, the more love and infinite dignity that love fuels can concretize in American political spaces and thus challenge the longstanding belief of American racial supremacy.

Following Rufus Burrow, I do not know if King intended the term "beloved community" to echo or relate in some fashion to Josiah Royce. King never references Royce in his published writings.²³ In private discussion, I have adopted Tommy Curry's interpretation. Curry would say that King's usage of the term "beloved community" is what he is protesting in Royce as Royce had

²¹ Birt, "King's Radical Vision of Community," 158.

²² Martin Luther King Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 88.

²³ I am unaware if it appears in unpublished writings. From those unpublished works I have seen, as my access to them is intermittent at best, I do not think King references Royce at all.

written on the Negro question revealing his cultural racist commitments.²⁴ Indeed, we do not know if he even read where Royce first mentions the term.²⁵ Regardless of where King heard it, his usage differs significantly. Whereas Royce is writing in the tradition of absolutist pragmatic idealism with a more rationalistic flare, King intends beloved community as a more personalist term, more in line with a commitment to the theological language of the Kingdom of God and realizing the Kingdom of God is based on love in the immanence of daily life.²⁶ There are two moments that give flavor and context. The first occurs in *Stride Toward Freedom*.

In *Stride Toward Freedom*, King will describe the six principles of nonviolence. In a way, beloved community seems at work constantly without mention in the backdrop. This seems evident with the personalist connection because King inextricably links his intellectual odyssey in the same chapter within *Stride Toward Freedom* with his stated six principles of nonviolence. Elsewhere, beloved community is mentioned in a sermon King delivered in 1959 titled “Palm Sunday Sermon on Mohandas K. Gandhi.” In that sermon, King writes: “The aftermath of violence is always bitterness; the aftermath of nonviolence is beloved community.”²⁷ Since this sermon is delivered in 1959, it’s reasonable to assume that it carried weight in those principles of nonviolence also in *Stride Toward Freedom* published in 1958, and the same phrasing appears at the end of the second principle of nonviolence in *Stride*

²⁴ I do not know the date of this conversation with Tommy Curry. It occurred sometime ago while I was teaching at Savannah State from 2017-2020. It could be immediately before the release of his book on the same topic or just afterwards. These two forms of beloved community are drastically different. For more information, see Tommy Curry’s *Another White Man’s Burden: Josiah Royce and the Quest for Racial Empire* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2018), 190-197. In a more detailed analysis, while critical of scientific racism, Royce regarded British colonialism as a civilizing force and even included the Lost Cause and Robert E Lee as positive symbols as to what it meant positively to have loyalty to a cause. The problem is that thinkers like Kipton Jensen are convinced that the elements of King’s philosophy can fit snugly inside Royce’s philosophy of community so easily that the usage of the same word convinces there is a direct line from Royce to King. For his uncritical interpretation of this direct line of transmission, see Kipton Jensen, “The Growing Edges of Beloved Community: From Royce to Thurman and King” in *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* vol. 52, no. 2 (2016): 239-258. Another article that wrongly pushes a line of direct transmission is Gary Herstein’s “The Roycean Roots of Beloved Community” in *The Pluralist* vol 4, no. 2 (2009): 91-107.

²⁵ Rufus Burrow, Jr., *God and Human Dignity: The Personalism, Theology, and Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 164

²⁶ Burrow, *God and Human Dignity*, 163.

²⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr. *The Radical King* ed. Cornell West, (Boston: Beacon, 2015), 31. This phrase also

Toward Freedom, "The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community."²⁸

One can see beloved community's motivations within the first to the sixth step of nonviolence. First, nonviolent resistance is not a method of cowardice. If someone is nonviolent because of a means of lacking access to weapons or resources, then one is not sincerely interested in nonviolence at all nor is this method passive resistance. Second, "nonviolence does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his friendship and understanding." Even if one uses boycotts, marches and the like, these are but means "to awaken a sense of moral shame."²⁹ Such moral shame respects the integrity and value of persons. Third, nonviolence is "directed against the forces of evil rather than against persons who happen to be doing the evil." Against the forces of evil, the fourth quality is the nonviolent resistor will suffer without retaliating in which "unearned suffering is redemptive."³⁰ One suffers so that others may learn.

In the fifth principle, King made clear that we are to avoid the external threats of violence, and we are to avoid "the internal violence of spirit." By this phrase, King means a type of "understanding, redemptive goodwill" that is not affectionate, but an agapic love that is "disinterested love."³¹ For him, this is love by what the existential phenomenologists might call an orientation of our being in relation to others, and I carry forth this assumption in reading Scheler and King. When King describes how love has an effect in experience, I read him as an existential phenomenologist. In doing so, agape "springs from the *need* of the other person—his need for belonging to the best in the human family." In doing so, King affirms this type of love is at the basis of forming community with others. Instead, King uses the terminology of brotherhood and imagery of the ideal human family for what is best in us. For this reason, agape never discriminates against others. There are no distinctions between worthy and unworthy as one might accept even the worst of one's family because this orientation begins by "loving others *for their sakes*."³²

²⁸ King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 91.

²⁹ King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 90.

³⁰ King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 91.

³¹ King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 93.

³² King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 93.

Finally, the last sixth principle, that the whole of the universe is moving toward justice, is the culmination of a passage about love that is at the heart of beloved community.

Agape is not a weak, passive love. It is love in action. *Agape* is love seeking to preserve and create community. It is insistence on community even when one seeks to break it. *Agape* is willingness to sacrifice in the interest of mutuality. *Agape* is a willingness to sacrifice in the interest of mutuality. *Agape* is a willingness to go to any length to restore community...It is a willingness to forgive, not seven times, but seven times seven to restore community. The resurrection is a symbol of God's triumph over all the forces that seek to block community. The Holy Spirit is a continuing community creating reality that moves through history. He who works against community is working against the whole of creation. Therefore, if I respond to hate with a reciprocal hate I do nothing but intensify the cleavage in broken community. I can only close the gap in broken community. I can only close the gap in broken community by meeting hate with love. If I meet hate with hate, I become depersonalized, because creation is so designed that my personality can only be fulfilled in the context of community.³³

In this passage, we see several things that King contributes to personalism. First and foremost, we see that for King love is an existential orientation that enables several features of the interpersonal relations between persons. Chief among them is both the creation of community's possibility to persist into the future as the Holy Spirit manifests between persons to create more bonds that constitute community—this is the second feature as well as the meaning of the phrase “Kingdom of God.” In this way and thirdly, the loving orientation enables mutuality. In doing so, the relations between me and you are a “thou” relation; the infinite value of both persons is a reality no matter which way you and me relate.³⁴ We exist as persons. The fourth feature is that these relations can be broken by foregoing the choice to adopt a loving-orientation towards others. When I act on hatred, I demean the possibility of those relations to manifest again. To act on hatred is to devalue and objectify

³³ King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 94.

³⁴ Here, King means Martin Buber, *I and Thou* trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970). See especially pp. 62 and 150.

a person by removing them out of being in relation to others. In doing so, I prevent the Holy Spirit from manifesting. Accordingly, the loving relation is what is required for us to participate in the fullness of our Divine nature as created in the normative image of God as infinitely valuable persons.

For King, these ultimate truths affirm that all life is interrelated, and in being so interrelated, we can have deep faith into the future. The possibility of beloved community rests on the faith that results out of this loving orientation. In the loving orientation of another person, I find “the universe is on the side of justice,” which is another way of saying that someone’s “struggle for justice” reveals “cosmic companionship.” So even if someone is not a believer in the Christocentricity of King’s social and political ethics, there is a dialectical emphasis on how interpersonal relations acting on a loving orientation work towards social, economic, and political unity. For even the non-Christians...believe in the existence of some creative force that works for universal wholeness. Whether we call it Brahman, or a Personal Being of matchless power and infinite love, there is a creative force in this universe that works to bring the disconnected aspects of reality into a harmonious whole.³⁵

If the universe is bending toward justice, then it requires love that recognizes working toward bringing these disconnected aspects of reality into a harmonious wholeness. We find this call for wholeness and disconnection peppered throughout *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* In transitioning to that book, that’s the second moment that provides flavor and context to the idea of beloved community. In fact, the title is a question that poses a disjunct between chaos or community. The term “community” hints toward the underlying assumption that the community King is attempting to bring about requires looking at both religious and secular understanding of the dimensions of beloved community.

One might say that *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* is a book dedicated to the living question of how to achieve beloved community. I locate two senses of beloved community in that text.

First, beloved community is a multiracial ideal within the United States. “A people who began a national life inspired by a vision of society of broth-

³⁵ King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 95.

erhood can redeem itself.”³⁶ According to King, the potential for the United States is there, but to bring about that redemption through agapic love, America would have to take stock of its past in an honest way. Within our religious and American heritage, King draws on *the image of God* as “a legacy of dignity and worth” since “every human being has etched in his personality the indelible stamp of the Creator.”³⁷ In other words, since God loves every person infinitely, this love fixes the standard that worth of every person is similarly infinite as the moral law. “The worth of an individual does not lie in the measure of his intellect, his racial origin, or his social position. Human worth lies in relatedness to God.”³⁸ Persons have value to God. Whenever this infinite value to God is recognized, “whiteness and blackness pass away as determinants in a relationship and son and brother are substituted.”³⁹ In beloved community, the social determinants of reality are the expansion of family and brotherhood at the expense of other ontological and social classifications imposed by oppressors. beloved community is, at its core, a metaphysical and ethical view of social reality that states all persons are interrelated and stand in relation to each other.

In order to get to achieve this ideal, we can longer enact policies that treat people instrumentally as a means to an end. Instead, the Holy value of persons must hold sway, even in churches. For King, the churches are places where these efforts start. “The church must take the lead in social reform... And [the church] must lead men along the path of true integration, something the law cannot do.” In this passage, the phrase “true integration” and its synonymous counterpart “genuine integration” are logical equivalents to beloved community. “Genuine integration will come when men are obedient to the unenforceable.”⁴⁰ In other words, beloved community is the only solution when read this way. “The ultimate solution to the race problem lies in the willingness of men to obey the unenforceable.”⁴¹ The ultimate solution is to choose a loving orientation towards others and realize the partial fulfillment of beloved community.

³⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr. *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 88.

³⁷ King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, 102.

³⁸ King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, 102.

³⁹ King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, 103.

⁴⁰ King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, 105.

⁴¹ King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, 106.

The unenforceable refers to the obligation of respecting the infinite worthy and dignity of another person. These moral obligations are beyond the law. Civil rights legislation may end segregation and other discriminatory practices. Laws cannot convince people to alter and transform their racist hearts. Instead, unenforceable obligations concern “inner attitudes, expressions of compassion” and “one’s commitment to an inner law, a law written on the heart...a higher law [that] produces love.”⁴² In other words, the moral law of King’s personalist ethics seeks lower “the barriers to a truly integrated society” if we find “that love is mankind’s most potent weapon for personal and social transformation.”⁴³ Whence these ideals are achieved, it’s found that white American cannot deny the force such love should have over the heart. This insight leads to the secular and possibly divine passage where King describes beloved community without naming it. “In the final analysis the white man cannot ignore the Negro’s problem, because he is part of the Negro and the Negro is part of him. The Negro’s diminishment of the white man, and the Negro’s salvation enlarges the white man.”⁴⁴

Second, beloved community is, then, projected as an analogy for the entire world when we look beyond the United States. As King reminds us later in the same chapter, “The present struggle in the United States is a later chapter in the same story.”⁴⁵ Beloved community is “the World House,”

This is the great new problem of mankind. We have inherited a large house, a great “world house” in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Hindu—a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.⁴⁶

In other words, overcoming one form of oppression does not mean that there are other social categories and systems that have historically contributed to

⁴² King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, 106.

⁴³ King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, 107.

⁴⁴ King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, 107. Implicit here is an unrefined dialectics that may be a synthesis of Hegel and personalism. I have yet to work out how exactly this ontological machinery works. One interesting fact is that King had his Hegel seminar with Brightman, so a personalistic mediated Hegelian dialectic is possible as to what undergirds claim of struggle and working towards wholeness and unity.

⁴⁵ King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, 180.

⁴⁶ King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, 177.

the suffering of others. While acknowledging the diverse problems, King still includes black and white as one example of the unavoidable possibility that peace must be found and such racism is perpetuated through European colonization. These concerns are now global, and any formulation of a global ethics will have to meet them head on. For this reason, the unavoidable possibility takes on a Biblical tone as he describes “all inhabitants of the globe are now neighbors.”⁴⁷ beloved community’s Judeo-Christian roots are clear with the tradition of neighborly love. As King says nearly at the end of this chapter, “This call for a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one’s tribe, race, class and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all men.”⁴⁸

Still, this larger sense of beloved community resonates with both racism and economic exploitation. King will go onto themes of Pan-African liberation, South Africa, racial apartheid and address the ontological realities of *homo economicus*. All the while, King insists that we must let the spiritual inner nature of the person take hold against the external material powers of technology, devices, and abundance. Again, even on the international level, King repeats the necessity of the value persons possess in the world house (or beloved community) when we see them for whom they spiritually are. They are, in King’s words, “souls of infinite metaphysical value,”⁴⁹ and that’s how personalists define the value of all persons. In their inescapable and mutual interrelatedness, every person’s infinite value establishes the limits of my becoming and vice versa. “I’ cannot reach fulfillment without ‘Thou.’ The self cannot be self without other selves.”⁵⁰

Within this international level, King addresses concretely three threats to the world house qua beloved community, the first is racism. As King puts it, “If Western civilization does not now respond constructively to the challenges to banish racism, some future historian will have to say that a great civilization died because it lacked the soul and commitment to make justice a reality for all men.”⁵¹ Indeed, beloved community is first invoked to deal with segregation in the United States. Here, we see it on a larger level precisely because King is addressing “the racism of the white Western world.”⁵²

⁴⁷ King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, 177.

⁴⁸ King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, 201.

⁴⁹ King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, 191.

⁵⁰ King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, 190.

⁵¹ King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, 187.

⁵² King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, 186.

Next, King moves on to consider poverty. At this time, King is working on instituting the Poor People's Campaign, and as this text is his last book, it's clear that poverty goes hand and hand with racism. Morally perceived through beloved community, King wants the wealthy nations of the world to put an end to poverty such that nobody should remain unfed and uneducated. While calling for these reforms, King warns against instituting a new form of neo-colonialism, and that is achieved if and when we act on the idea of beloved community.

The final challenge to the world house is war. Having seen the prospect of near atomic war with the Soviet Union during Kennedy's administration, King insists that we must act on the neighborly ethic to love all neighbors. Developed nations cannot desire peace in their utterances when their defense budgets bulge. Instead, a moral awakening is necessary to view that the same mutually interrelated ontological condition holds for all the earth's people. In doing so, King calls for a role that philosophy can play. "Therefore, I suggest that philosophy and the strategy of nonviolence become immediately a subject for study and for serious experimentation in every field of human conflict."⁵³ A personalist philosophy in which reality hinges on moral foundations in which all persons ought to be treated with infinite dignity in and respect is at the bottom of what the international and national system needs. When conceptualized in this work, the aggregation of these moral laws writ large becomes beloved community.

Just as *Stride Toward Freedom* interpreted beloved community as the aftermath of nonviolence to the point that it became necessary to explain the connection of King's love ethic within nonviolence, so, too, would I like to end on and explain the last two pages that ends on love in *Where Do I Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* The first passage is from the book and the second is King quoting from the First Epistle of John from the King James Version of the Bible:

When I speak of love, I am speaking of that force which all great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is the key that unlocks the door to ultimate reality. This Hindu-Muslim-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the First Epistle of John:

⁵³ King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, 194.

Let us love one another: for love is of God: and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love...If we love one another, God dwelleth in us us, and his love is perfected in us (1 John 4: 7-8, then 1 John 4: 11-12, KJV).⁵⁴

In these passages, King discerns that an existential standpoint of love is what would hold and constitute the affective bonds of a future not-yet community. For King, the bonds (or relations) are constituted by love. To move people to honor their unenforceable obligations, they must act on love, and King is very aware of the power love holds in the Judeo-Christian tradition. What's more, the reason why love is the key to ultimate reality is that there is a type of seeing that love fuels, and something of this positive vision is discernible in other wisdom traditions. In this way, King ends his longest meditation on the possibility of beloved community in the same way that he ended on the power of love in *Stride Toward Freedom's* Chapter 6: My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence when he spoke of a creative force that moves reality into greater wholeness. I take this as further evidence that, like previous scholars mentioned in this essay, King's thought from the beginning till the end can be united around the theme of beloved community.

Having reviewed two instances of beloved community and the aspirational tones the idea took in his earliest thought in the late 1950s to his last published work in 1967, I am in a decent place to summarize overall those propositions that may be derived from looking at how King conceived of beloved community within the philosophical and theological terms of the vocabulary he employed.

1. Persons may act on an affective orientation of love that opens up the true dimension of seeing another person as infinitely worthy of dignity as the ethical basis of beloved community.
2. The infinite worth of dignity stems from God loving anyone such that we are called to stand in the same relation as God loving another as an earthly responsibility. Even if someone doesn't exactly believe in the Abrahamic God, there are plenty of interpretations of the Divine that get us outside of ourselves to realize that we are all interrelated with each other and that

⁵⁴ King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, 201.

love in realizing infinite regard of the other is moving our shared social reality to greater possibilities of unity.

3. Persons exist alongside other persons in community, which ought to be an ethical relation born out of an existential orientation of love.
4. If we act on the feeling acts of love, then we create more positive value into the world and thereby constitute the possibility of our social reality becoming unified in the love that manifests between us.
5. The love manifesting between two persons in mutuality is called the Holy Spirit in Christianity or relational ontology in my explication of personalism elsewhere.

With these five points, I hope we can together forge a pathway forward and read King more generously along philosophical lines he intended. The United States has never fully addressed the sins of slavery, and as a nation, we seem hellbent on preventing any critical discussion in the American South from occurring, and while this lecture was given to Bowie State University, an HBCU in Maryland, it should be mentioned that I inhabit the same pedagogical space of an HBCU in Louisiana at Southern University and A&M College. I have the same hopes as the people I have met at your institution. I hope that someday my students can read these words (or a message like it) and know that they resonate with the soul of every American. To understand King's beloved community and to make it happen should be the goal of everyone. John Lewis has famously said multiple times that he has gotten into trouble for beloved community. That work is now more needed than ever as the state-sponsored lynching of George Floyd has reopened a complete reassessment of the failure of American racial integration that beloved community sought to inaugurate.

Finally, I should add that our attempts at integration, if sincerely realized on a form of love described herein, may not perfectly realize beloved community, but as attacks on democratic institutions from an ever-increasing conservative populism continue, living out these feeling acts of love and what values are picked out in that loving relation, we can attempt to restore and heal both our political and social institutions. Beloved community is an ideal that we can achieve more and more if we habituate ourselves to the empowered concepts undergirding our very act of living out these ideas.

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