King’s Vibrato: Modernism, Blackness, and the Sonic Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Maurice O. Wallace  
*King’s Vibrato: Modernism, Blackness, and the Sonic Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.*  
Durham: Duke University Press, 2022  

In *King’s Vibrato: Modernism, Blackness, and the Sonic Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Maurice Wallace presents a novel understanding of King’s contribution to a peculiar reverberance that attends to the convergence of Black modern life and sound. Wallace tackles the Brobdingnagian task of writing something new about King by listening to a resonant life that is all too frequently reduced to a few memorable moments like the famous “I Have a Dream” speech. Drawing together discourses and methods from African American studies, sound studies, musicology, and homiletics, Wallace explores “the deep sonic properties inhering to King’s unique speech-making powers,” which he describes as a set of “absorbative instincts developed within the totality of sounds and silences animating black lifeworlds across modern time and space” (7). *King’s Vibrato* thereby brings King scholarship up to date by treating Black musicality to sustained aesthetic interrogation, and through its special focus on the forms of musicality that are epitomized by Black preaching. Wallace sees King not as a sui generis preacher possessing vocal qualities that were passed down patrilineally, but as a social orator whose techniques draw from the Black women who trademarked the modern gospel sound. King’s “vibrato,” Wallace’s key term, is a “diacritical noise”—vocal speech that escapes the proper logic of classification—arising from “the notional and expressive energy of black hope and insurgency condensed in, and reflected by, King’s spoken soul” (12). King’s vibrato is not simply the result of genetics coded for vocal timbre; rather, this sound emerges from (and is therefore revelatory of) the complexities of twentieth-century Black life.

As should be clear by now, *King’s Vibrato* does not tell the story of a Great Man, but rather illustrates this one voice’s inseparable ties to history and Blackness. Despite King’s near universality, Wallace renders King in decidedly particular terms; he is preoccupied with King’s complex relationships to time and place: the built architecture that envelopes King’s voice in order to improve its audibility to a specific audience; the aural technologies that demarcated units of King’s speech even as they endowed these utterances with a kind of immortality.

The first three chapters unfurl King’s relationship to the built architecture of the spaces his voice occupies—during his life and after his death. In Chapter 1, Wallace leverages the specter of King’s voice “preaching” his own eulogy, repeating the sound of Black emancipatory hope and political resistance. Beginning with King’s voice after his death, he theorizes King’s vibrato to understand world-shaking forces within Black modern life that oppose anti-Blackness. Chapter 2 introduces the “Preacher King,” to use Richard Lischer’s famous term, showing how King’s Afro-modernist homiletic was fashioned in his home church, Ebenezer Baptist. Wallace argues that the electric pipe organ at Ebenezer “struck the keynote of black modernist hope” to a crowd of mostly Black middle-class
Atlantans, the milieu that shaped King’s modernism (49). Chapter 3 constructs a Cantor King, fusing homiletical aesthetics with the architecture of a Black church on Chicago’s South Side to illuminate what the author calls a “harmonized precise speech and fugitive sound” (81). For Wallace, the fugitive sound of King’s vibrato “was far from an arbitrary tuning or timbral affectation,” but rather akin to Roland Barthes’ “something else” that maintained its fealty to modern Black Protestant sensibilities, while also signaling doom to a de jure era of segregationist America (88).

The second section of Wallace’s study advances a Black feminist interpretation of King’s voice, arguing that the modern gospel sound is an underacknowledged site of influence. Chapters 4 and 5 are notably subsumed under a section entitled “Nettie’s Gospel,” referring to the death of Thomas Dorsey’s wife, to better understand the Black modern forces that shaped King. In Chapter 4, Wallace breaks new ground by contending that Nettie should be figured as the mother of gospel music—directly subordinating Thomas as the father of the genre. He writes that “gospel’s greatest hit was conceived inside of Thomas Dorsey’s grief by Nettie Dorsey’s memory as an immaterial materiality . . . and heard in the register of Nettie’s voice” (126). As King famously requested “gospel’s greatest hit,” “Precious Lord, Take My Hand,” to be sung before his speeches, Wallace analyzes the white and blank spaces of Thomas Dorsey’s early sheet music for this song, which thereby created an opening for a musician’s interpretation and improvisation. Comparing these musical artifacts to the ontology of King’s sermonic manuscripts, for Wallace, King’s vibrato dons the Black maternal explaining the disjuncture between a sermon or a speech’s audio recording and its in-person performance that cannot be contained in a manuscript or even a transcript as a materialization of “the remonstrative grief-tones of ‘too much’ loss in black America” (136).

The recognition of the Black maternal is further amplified in Chapter 5 as King is set within a Black feminine genealogy in relation to his mother, Alberta King, the organist at Ebenezer Baptist Church; his wife, Coretta King, a vocal musician in her own right; Mahalia Jackson, who often opened rallies at King’s behest; and Aretha Franklin, the matrilineal inheritor of the modern gospel sound of the civil rights movement era.

The next two chapters ensconce the reader in the mid-twentieth-century technologies that attempted to capture both the Preacher King and the Cantor King. In Chapter 6, Wallace expands his interpretation of King’s vibrato by listening to the sound of photography and visual oratory. Relying on Black aesthetics, literary, and sociolinguistic studies, Wallace makes the case that the photographed King produces a sound that pays attention to his footing as a preacher, and the gesticulations of outstretched arms over podiums. Departing from the debunked research of early twentieth-century psychologists at the University of Iowa that fashioned phonophotographs to record visual orality, Wallace instantiates King’s vibrato as diacritical noise that invokes the sounds of Black resistance and revolution.

In Chapter 7, the author visits three renditions of King’s “I Have a Dream” speech and the auditory technology that accompanied them—the first in a high school in Rocky Mount, North Carolina; the second in a municipal auditorium
Rather than focusing on the grain of King’s voice at the 1963 March on Washington, Wallace reflects on the architecture of the spaces that receive King’s most famous speech, and the effects it has on the listening audiences.

Wallace’s Epilogue functions as an excursus on the sounds of Black grief made visible, recounting the deaths of George Floyd and Michael Brown, and, as sorrow visits the Black maternal, invoking the memories of Leslie McSpadden and Mamie Till Mobley. In the way that King’s words have an afterlife, Wallace joins the lament of loss to those recently slain in acts of anti-Black violence.

In the Introduction Wallace announces his intention to “examine the deep sonic properties inhering to King’s unique preaching and speech-making power” (7). But does this distinctiveness make it necessary to describe King as a possessor of natural-born ability? One might have wished for a more explicit description of how the “absorbative instincts” referenced throughout this text differ from previous scholarship’s focus on paternal and biological qualities.

Nevertheless, Wallace’s tome is a compelling distillation of the Black modern life that produced King’s sound. As he plumbs the depths of the spiritual, spatial, and sonic landscape of King’s vibrato, Wallace brings to bear a bevy of interdisciplinary modes of critique to make sense of Black modern life’s infrangible links to one of the world’s most recognizable voices.

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