The Untold Story Of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., The Cyborg:
On the Post/Super/In-Human Conditions of Black (Anti)Heroism

> *Throughout the twentieth century, movements to free blacks from what followed in the wake of the abolition of chattel slavery ushered in the postbellum black cyborg: the call for a 'Talented Tenth' issued by white missionaries and echoed by a young W. E. B. Du Bois, Bayard Rustin's imploring a young Martin Luther King Jr. to become 'angelic' in his advocacy of civil rights and to remove the men with shotguns from his front porch despite the bombings and death threats against King, his wife, and their young children.*[1]

> *The cyborg is a matter of fiction and…a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion.*[2]

> *[H]eroism is a social activity: (a) in service to others in need—be it in person, group, or community, or in defense of socially sanctioned ideals, or new social standard; (b) engaged in voluntarily (or even in military contexts, heroism remains an act that goes beyond actions required by military duty); (c) with recognition of possible risks/costs, (i.e., not entered into blindly or blithely, recalling the 1913 Webster's definition that stated, 'not from ignorance or inconsiderate levity'); (d) in which the actor is willing to accept anticipated sacrifice, and (e) without external gain anticipated at the time of the act.*[3]

Heroism presumes "humanity." In other words, heroes are those who exhibit courage in the service of others, and courage is a "human" virtue. The courageous are those who *voluntarily* confront a credible personal threat; and as psychologists Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo explain, the heroic do so, not for their own sake, but for the sake of others. "Animals" are rarely courageous—or heroic—because, strictly speaking, their actions are not *chosen* or *voluntary*; rather they act impulsively or instinctually. And similarly, "gods"—insofar as they are of practical consideration—are rarely courageous because confronting a credible, personal threat requires vulnerability, which they generally lack.

Black heroism is often precluded in the American popular imaginary because American racism renders Black Americans sub-human, akin to animals. As Maria Lugones argues, according to the logic of colonialism—and by extension, American racism—"Only the civilized are men or women. Indigenous peoples of the Americas and enslaved Africans were classified as not human in species—as animals, uncontrollably sexual and wild."[4] Beneath the colonial line,

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[1] Vargas and James, "Refusing," 194.
[2] Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 6.
[3] Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo, "Heroism," 101.
[4] Lugones, "Decolonial Feminism," 743.

so to speak, human-like bodies retain *sexual* differentiation—that is, distinctions between "male" and "female," like the difference between a bull and a cow, for instance. *Gender,* on the other hand, that is, the distinction between "men" and "women," was the sole property of *humans*, namely bourgeois, white, Europeans. This logic devolved into what W. E. B. Du Bois called the "color line"[5] and persists today under the guise of institutional structures that maintain racial disparaties.[6]

In spite of these anthropological prejudices, there are, of course, several Black heroes. Consider any of the figures included in Molefi Kete Asante's *100 Greatest African Americans*. Or for a more judiciously curated list of those wtho exhibit courage explicitly in the service of Black freedom and justice, consider the six central figures in Celeste-Marie Bernier's *Characters of Blood*—Toussaint Louverture, Nathaniel Turner, Sengbe Pieh (aka Joseph Cinqué), Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman.

Nevertheless, candidates for Black heroism must overcompensate for their presumed sub-humanity. This can occur in a few ways. First, by telling their own story and thereby orienting the narrative lens, the Black candidate for heroism can force the reader to articulate a Black voice. The reader is thus compelled to concede that this Black speaker harbors a sense of interiority and self-consciousness like our own, insidiously inspiring sympathy and occasionally admiration. This Black voice will still lack "classic," American, "human" qualities, namely whiteness. Consequently, insofar as they inspire admiration Black heroes will become *exceptional,* leaving intact the racist anthropological schema. We call this exceptional yet unorthodox personage an *anti*-hero.

Alternately, the candidate for Black heroism can overcompensate for their presumed sub-humanity by becoming super-human, evading racism by literally becoming impervious to death. Leonard Harris poignantly describes racism in the United States as "a form of necro-being: it kills and prevents persons from being born."[7] Harris explains further that racism is "a polymorphous agent of death, premature births, shortened lives, starving children, debilitating theft, abusive larceny, degrading insults, and insulting stereotypes forcibily imposed."[8] Thus, perhaps like the Marvel Comic Universe character Luke Cage, super human Black heroes literally become bulletproof. Or more historically grounded, they may supersede their humanity by actually dying but attaining a "life" *beyond* death, namely, a legacy. Our body only dies once, so the voice that we might project from beyond the grave evades "mortal" vulnerabilities. Our legacy can be tarnished, of course, but in death we are also "bulletproof," so to speak. Both forms of super-humanity ironically require us to relinquish aspects of humanity. In one case, we relinquish the vulnerability characteristic of our mortality; and in the other case, one's actual life is lost, supplanted by an image that is dependent upon cultural interpretation and re-presentation.

[5] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 3.
[6] See Wynter, "No Humans Involved"; Harris, "Necro-Being"; Alexander, *New Jim Crow;* Baradaran, *Color of Money*; and Curry, *Man-Not.*
[7] Harris, "Necro-Being," 69.
[8] Harris, "What, Then, Is Racism?," 55.

One version of super-humanity manifests as what João Costa Vargas and Joy James describe as the *Black Cyborg.* They argue, "For a black person to be integrated ['into the white-dominated social universe'], s/he must either become non-black, or display superhuman and/or infrahuman qualities."[9] Either Black Americans must be innocent enough to withstand the most rigorous moral scrutiny, or they must be indestructible but non-threatening. They must be capable of withstanding fatal or crippling amounts of abuse—without dying—while simultaneously exhibiting and expressing patience toward and love for their abusers. For instance, "Trayvon can only be unmistakably innocent if he is angelic. To be angelical is to be supernatural or infantile; to not grow up, to not have autonomous agency, to not reach puberty, to never rebel against authority . . ."[10]

The Black Cyborg is necessary in a world where white Americans are "human" but "Black citizens are aspirations—thought experiments created from one's desire to motivate political theories beyond the excoriation many have toward Blackness."[11] There are many types of Black cyborgs. There are Fanonian cyborgs, "who have little hope for Western democracy's ability to embrace black life."[12] These personages are revolutionaries who "demand not democracy but freedom."[13] By contrast, Vargas and James characterize the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, for instance, as a Baldwinian cyborg: "a modified, improved human whose increased ethical, spiritual, and physical capabilities generate unusual strength, omniscience, and *boundless love.*"[14]

While Vargas and James present the "Black Cyborg" as a metaphor for the paradoxical socio-political dynamic wherein many Black American find themselves, I will present, here, a narrative that considers the possibility that King was, at least for some period of his life, literally "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction."[15] Mine is a unique account of the life of King—not quite truth, but a step away from fiction's grasp—a literary artifact that weaves speculative fiction into the silences of the historical record. I have included extensive footnotes to mark many of the "real" moments in King's life, especially when those moments are not widely known. My aspiration is, however, to make an argument. My thesis inheres in the *plausibility* of the speculative interstices.

King's life and legacy have grown to form as much a part of the American mythos as the founding fathers. He is among three historical figures here in the US with named federal holidays, alongside George Washington and Christopher Columbus. Recently erected on the National Mall stands the Stone of Hope memorial, a 30-foot tall, granite relief of Dr. King surrounded by approximately two paragraphs' worth of inspiring phrases that he uttered or composed during his short but full life. His efforts and choices have, by all accounts, rendered

[9] Vargas and James, "Refusing," 194.
[10] Vargas and James, "Refusing," 196.
[11] Curry, *Man-Not*, 168-69.
[12] Vargas and James, "Refusing," 200.
[13] Vargas and James, "Refusing," 201.
[14] Vargas and James, "Refusing," 198; emphasis added.
[15] Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 5.

him a national hero, a Black (anti)hero. My contention is that he attains this status in the US in spite of his Blackness. In other words, in many corners of the white, American popular imaginary, a comprehensive and honest understanding of King's life *as a Black man* would disqualify him as a *national* hero. Yet, rather than confront and critique the racial strictures of American heroism, his life and legacy are selectively read and/or distorted in order to make an exception of his Blackness. Vargas and James's image of the Black Cyborg is a concise characterization of this prejudicial exceptionalism. As a literal cyborg, King manages to evade, at least for a while, the sub-humanity of the disposable, walking corpse, or the mute, commodified slave; but (d)evolves into the perfect victim, one "without rage; a superhuman with unnatural capacities to suffer and love."[16]

A final note on method: "literature" and "philosophy" are more rhetoreically akin than is often conceded.[17] Making a "strong" argument with a syllogism in an essay is much like attaining a compelling suspension of disbelief in literature. Both begin with "premises" and lead an audience to a "conclusion"; and while "truthfulness" certainly improves the believability of both, it is not necessary for either. The rhetorical advantages of an essay or a novel depend upon the kind of thesis one wishes to defend, and/or the kinds of premises that one wishes to use. A narrative is better suited when the premises necessarily include the three quintessential modes of particularity: time, place, and perspective. While an essay might include illustrative vignettes as (counter)examples, a narrative inherently includes sequences of events, a setting, and characters. Arguments concerning racism, for instance, like the one that I am making, necessarily include considerations of history, geography, and embodiment. Additionally, narratives are better suited for the kinds of arguments where the persuasive force depends on the reader's emotions and character, in addition to their reason.[18] There is a significant difference between *asserting*, for instance, that King was afraid, as opposed to leading a reader to approximate an experience of his fear through an imaginative presentation of the circumstances. And finally, narratives are particularly well suited for juxtaposing inconsistent—perhaps even contradictory—elements without the parts undermining the whole.[19]

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[16] Vargas and James, "Refusing," 199.
[17] Jaima, "Literature Is Philosophy."
[18] See Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*.
[19] I am grateful for the thoughtful comments of two anonymous reviewers. One reviewer was concerned with the literary form functioning *as* a philosophical argument. Short of an essay-style postscript as a supplement, I hope that the preceding paragraph at least gestures toward the scholarly context of my methodological considerations. One significant source of inspiration is the literary/philosophical works of scholars in critical race theory, such as Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, and more contemporarily, Glenn Bracey.

A second reviewer's most pressing concern was the "centrality of Black death to Black humanity [and heroism]" that my speculative account of King presumes; and that King arguably embodies a more Fanonian, revolutionary ethos than I have depicted. Three points: first, while King certainly exhibits qualities of the Fanonian, revolutionary cyborg, Vargas and James argue precisely that King exhibits more of the qualities of the Baldwinian variation, promoting "redemption through love and struggle"; I find their argument persuasive and have largely followed their lead. Second, following Leonard Harris's empirically-substantiated account of racism as "necro-being," confronting and resisting institutions and social practices that literally exacerbate death lamentably remains a salient part of any anti-racist effort in the United States. Third, King's candidacy for heroism does not

The Story

In light of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s considerable strengths, it was not evident that a shot fired from a model 760 Remington Gamemaster rifle could actually harm him, much less *kill* him. Thus, the shooter's assignment was, simply, "to make a spectacle." The FBI speculated that if King could be shown publicly to be "freakishly" superhuman, perhaps even *inhuman*—exposing his efforts to exempt himself from the dangers of racist violence while simultaneously advocating for nonviolent responses from fellow "humans"—it would do more harm to the public acceptance of his activist strategy of nonviolent direct action than any previous attempt to slander him. Yet, to the honest surprise of the gunman, the shot did not deflect off of his presumably impenetrable skin as he stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennesee, on the evening of April 4th, 1968; instead the 30-06 Springfield caliber bullet passed straight through his neck, "tore the major neck blood vessels and severed the spinal cord."[20] He died within minutes—not a "Cyborg" afterall, or at least not any more—just a mere mortal: flesh and blood and bone.

Many of you probably think that you already know King's story quite well. Take for instance the assassination itself. According to the popular mythology—albeit substantiated by publicly available FBI reports—escaped convict James Earl Ray shot King from the common bathroom near room 5-B of the Bessie Brewer rooming house, which afforded a clear line of sight to King's room and the balcony where he last stood. The rifle was abandoned and recovered nearby, outside the Canipe Amusement Company. After a series of thin leads, Ray was apprehended on June 8th in the UK. The FBI resolution is that he acted alone, motivated by racial animus. It is a nice coherent account.[21]

There remain, however, several cold leads pertaining to King's death, as well as a number of inexplicable loose ends concerning his life. For instance, if Ray acted alone, how and why were Memphis Detective Edward E. Redditt and fireman Floyd Newsum—both of whom were Black—each removed from their duties at Firestation No. 2 on the day and time of the assassination?[22] And why did Ray spend the remainder of his life in prison trying to recant his confession? Until his death in 1998, he maintained that that he had been framed and his

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consist entirely in his willingness to die. Even as a cyborg, he could not escape all forms of vulnerability. He still risks his psychological, spiritual, and emotional well-being, not to mention the integrity of his legacy; and even more importantly, he risks the safety of his family and friends. Nevertheless, we cannot overlook the fact that the historically documented circumstances where King did evade death enabled him to live long enough to organize and participate in many important moments in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s. As King notes in his final speech on April 3rd, 1968, reflecting on his brush with death, thanks to Izola Curry:

> "I want to say that I am happy that I didn't sneeze. Because if I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around here in 1960, when students all over the South started sitting-in at lunch counters. . . . . [Or] in 1962, when Negroes in Albany, Georgia, decided to straighten their backs up. . . . [Or] in 1963, when the black people of Birmingham, Alabama, aroused the conscience of this nation, and brought into being the Civil Rights Bill. . . . [Or] later that year, in August, to try to tell America about a dream that I had had. . . . I'm so happy that I didn't sneeze" (*Testament* 286.)

20 United States, *Report*, 47.

21 United States, *Report*, 107.

22 United States, *Report*, 26-37.

confession coerced. Unresolved questions like these ultimatley led the King family in 1999 to file a civil suit in Memphis. The result: "a jury of six whites and six blacks implicated U.S. government agencies in the wrongful death" of Dr King.[23] The King family had asked Janet Reno, the US attorney general at the time, to make the inquiry a federal matter, but the request was all but refused.

The story that I have to tell begins on January 30th, 1956, two months after Rosa Parks made her fateful refusal—replicating the spontaneous protest of fifteen-year-old Claudette Colvin in March of the same year[24]—and thereby initiating the famous Montgomery Bus Boycott. At around 9:30 p.m., the parsonage in Montgomery, where King and his family were residing at the time, was bombed. King was at a meeting at the First Baptist Church, but Coretta Scott King, infant Yoki, and church friend Mary Lucy Williams were at home. Coretta recalls the moment in her memoir:

> I heard a sound: a heavy thump and a rolling noise. I yelled to Mary, "Something's hit the house; run to the back!" Before we could get halfway through the next room, a bomb exploded on the porch. The thunderous blast shattered the door and the window glass, leaving behind a cloud of putrid white smoke. . . . The noise frightened my baby, who awoke, crying.[25]

No one was hurt, physically. King was informed and rushed back to the home. Police arrived on the scene. An angry group of protesters gathered. Many of them were armed. One man challenged an officer to a shootout. "I ain't gonna move nowhere," he said. "That's the trouble now; you white folks is always pushin' us around. Now you got your .38 and I got mine; so let's battle it out."[26]

The next day, both Martin Luther King, Sr., a.k.a. "Daddy King," and Coretta's father, Obie Scott, arrived in Montgomery to make earnest but frustrated appeals that Martin Jr. and Coretta should leave Montgomery. The two fathers implored the young couple to allow others to organize the protest. "Bombers who had tried once might well try again [argued Daddy King]. Martin said no, that he could not desert his colleagues in the MIA [Montgomery Improvement Association]. Daddy King, his temper flaring, told his son, 'It's better to be a live dog than a dead lion.' Martin again refused."[27]

King's father at least persuaded him to carry a firearm. King also agreed to allow armed guards to protect his family and the parsonage. Robert Williams, King's close friend from Morehouse, "vowed to keep watch with a shotgun, while King and Abernathy decided to take up sidearms."[28] The sidearms were not legal, since their pistol permit requests submitted two days after the

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[23] King and Reynolds, *Coretta,* 317.
[24] Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*, 37.
[25] King and Reynolds, *Coretta*, 47.
[26] Carson, *Autobiography,* 79.
[27] Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 61.
[28] Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, *62.*

bombing were denied, as were their requests for permits to carry guns in their cars. Activist Bayard Rustin recalls seeing his colleague Bill Worthy almost sit directly on a handgun in King's living room.

> "Rustin queried [King] about whether the gun was compatible with a nonviolent movement. Yes, King said, they intended to harm no one unless violently attacked. That night they sat up late as Rustin attempted to persuade King that even the presence of guns was contrary to the philosophy that he was increasingly articulating."[29]

Quiet as it's kept, King was not always a wholehearted advocate of nonviolence. He understood that in a violent world, violence of some sort had a place, albeit qualified. In his early days at Crozer Theological Seminary, King held the radical belief that "the only way to solve our problem of segregation was an armed revolt. . . . that the Christian ethic of love was confined to individual relationships. [And he] could not see how it could work in social conflict."[30] By 1959, King articulates a more nuanced understanding of (non)violence. He writes:

> [T]here are three different views on the subject of violence. One is the approach of pure nonviolence, which cannot readily or easily attract large masses, for it requires extraordinary discipline and courage. The second is violence exercised in self-defense, which all societies, from the most primitive to the most cultured and civilized, accept as moral and legal. The principle of self-defense, even involving weapons and bloodshed, has never been condemned, even by Gandhi, who sanctioned it for those unable to master pure nonviolence. The third is the advocacy of violence as a tool of advancement, organized as in warfare, deliberately and consciously. To this tendency many Negroes are being tempted today. There are incalculable perils in this approach.[31]

King's ideas about violence ultimately coincide with the kinds of positions held by contemporary civil rights activists with whom he is often contrasted in the historical and political record, figures like Malcolm X and Robert *F.* Williams (not to be confused with King's childhood friend). For instance, in his 1962 memoir, *Negros With Guns*, Williams writes:

> I wish to make it clear that I do not advocate violence for its own sake or for the sake of reprisals against whites. Nor am I against the passive resistance advocated by the Reverend Martin Luther King and others. My only difference with Dr. King is that I believe in flexibility in the freedom struggle. . . In civilized society the law serves as a deterrent against

[29] Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 73.
[30] Carson, *Autobiography*, 23.
[31] King, "Social Organization."

> lawless forces that would destroy the democratic process. But where there is a breakdown of the law, the individual citizen has a right to protect his person, his family, his home and his property. To me this is so simple and proper that it is self-evident.[32]

King emphasizes nonviolence, whereas Williams emphasizes self-defense; yet they both concur that nonviolence is preferable and that self-defense, even violent self-defense, is moral and just, even if it is not always legally sanctioned. Even as late 1967, King was not categorically opposed to violence. In his address, “Beyond Vietnam, or A Time to Break the Silence,” he says,

> As I have walked among the desperate, rejected and angry young men I have told them that Molotov cocktails and rifles would not solve their problems. I have tried to offer them my deepest compassion while maintaining my conviction that social change comes most meaningfully through nonviolent action. But they asked—and rightly so—what about Vietnam? They asked if our own nation wasn’t using massive doses of violence to solve its problems, to bring about the changes it wanted. Their questions hit home, and I knew that *I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed* in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today—my own government.[33]

King concedes here that while nonviolence is better in principle, in practice, for some, there may be a place for retaliatory violence or even *pre-emptive* self-defense, if not actual aggression.

Ultimately King didn’t carry the pistol for very long. Several years later, in 1963, he reflects, “one time I did have a gun in Montgomery. I don’t know why I got it in the first place. I sat down with Coretta one night and talked about it. I pointed out that as a leader of a nonviolent movement, I had no right to have a gun, so I got rid of it.”[34] King muses futher:

> *I had been carrying the pistol for about three weeks. At first, the knowledge of it in my possession gave me confidence. Should someone try to harm my family again, I might scare them away. But I also became preoccupied with the possibility that I would be compelled to actually kill someone. If I was unwilling to kill—a question about which I was at least ambivalent—having the gun put me at greater risk. The stakes of an armed confrontation are clear: shoot or be shot, kill or be killed. In addition to anger and contempt, the presence of a lethal weapon adds mortal dread. It also occured to me that I harbored a misplaced faith in the American judicial system; I believed that the law would be on my side and protect me in a clear case of self-defense. Upon reflection, this seemed unlikely, since disputing the law itself was the very purpose of our protests here in Montgomery. Any citizen who might attack us would most likely be white, which,*

[32] Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 40.
[33] King, “A Time,” 233; emphasis added.
[34] Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 642, n.48.

statistically, would reduce the chances of a just outcome. Moreover, if my adversary were an officer, their state-sanctioned authority would undermine my appeal to self-defense.

Coretta pointed out further that a pistol would make little difference in the face of a determined mob, or a trained assassin, or a more powerful weapon like a shotgun, a rifle, or another bomb. Also, they could not forget that the gun was unlicensed, rendering its use under most circumstance illegal. Should King be arrested with the gun, "we would have lost the moral offensive and sunk to the level of our oppressors."[35]

Coretta and King felt obligated to tell Daddy King in person that they had changed their minds, so on February 22nd King flew to Atlanta from Nashville. Coretta and Yoki had gone to Atlanta ahead of him to stay with their parents while he travelled to Fisk to give a speech. Both of his parents, Coretta, along with the three-month-old Yoki all met him at the airport. "Coretta showed her usual composure, but [King's] parents' faces wore signs of deep perturbation."[36] During the ride back to the house, Daddy King asked again whether they would consider leaving Montgomery; they could stay in Atlanta indefinitely. Everyone had heard on the radio that a grand jury ruled that the boycott was illegal, and several members of the MIA had been indicted, including King. Returning to Montgomery now meant that he woud be arrested.

"You know we can't stay," King replied.

"You most certainly can. It was only a matter of time before they fabricated some arbitrary reason to lock you up."

"We're going to continue the boycott. Legal or not, they can't force us to start riding the busses again."

"But do *you* need to be there for it to continue? You are their real target, you realize. They're using your friends to get to *You*."

"You're probably right, but that's all the more reason why I can't abandon my colleagues and allow them to to languish in jail *because* of me."

"Stubborn as ever."

"Like father like son."

"Watch your mouth," he said jokingly. "Well, I've invited some people over this evening to chat. You know most of them."

"The council of elders to talk some sense into me?"

He chuckled. "Exactly."

"Oh, another thing, I can't carry the gun anymore. *That* will just get me in the wrong kind of trouble."

He sighed. "I disagree, but I understand."

Shortly after dinner, several of Daddy's King's close friends, and a few respected acquaintances arrived at the house. Among them were "A.T. Walden, distinguished attorney; C. R. Yates and T. M. Alexander, both prominent businessmen; C.A. Scott, the editor of the *Atlanta*

[35] Carson, *Autobiography,* 82.
[36] Carson, *Autobiography*, 84.

Daily World; Bishop Sherman L. Green of A.M.E. Church; Benjamin E. Mays, president of Morehouse College; and Rufus E. Clement, president of Atlanta University."[37]

"Good evening everyone," Daddy King began. "Thank you for coming. I've asked you all here to help me talk some sense into my son."

Everyone laughed.

"But I've also asked you here for my own sake. As you all know, Martin is actively involved in the boycott in Montgomery. And as the current head of the the organization orchestrating the boycott, he has become the primary target of white racist frustration, anger, and violence there. Many of you already know as well that his house in Montgomery was bombed a few weeks ago. No one was hurt, thank God, but you know all too well what white folks are capable of in this day and age. They will certainly try again, and I worry that Martin, Coretta, and our new granddaughter here, Yoki, will not be so lucky next time. I have asked Martin to stay here in Atlanta, but he insists that he must return. Earlier today I also spoke to a lawyer"—Walden perked at the mention of his profession—"a liberal . . . and a white man . . . he concurred that Martin should stay here since the basis of the arrest is unlawful, but alas, I turn the floor over to you."

> There were murmurs of agreement in the room and [King] listened as sympathetically and objectively as [he] could while two of the men gave their reasons for concurring. These were [his] elders, leaders among [his] people. Their words commanded respect. But soon [he] could not restrain [him]self any longer. . . . "My friends and associates are being arrested. It would be the height of cowardice for me to stay away. I would rather be in jail ten years than desert my people now. I have reached the point of no return." In the moment of silence that followed [he] heard [his] father break into tears. [He] looked at Dr. Mays, one of the great influences in [his] life. Perhaps he heard [King's] unspoken plea. At any rate, he was soon defending [his] position strongly. Then others joined him in supporting [King]. They assured [his] father that things were not so bad as they seemed. Mr Walden put through two calls on the spot to Thurgood Marshall, general counsel of the NAACP, and Arthur Shores, NAACP counsel in Alabama, both of whom assured him that [King] would have the best legal protection. In the face of all of these persuasions, [King's] father began to be reconciled to [his] return to Montgomery.[38]

The meeting finally adjourned with a prayer, and everyone began chatting amongst themselves. After a few moments, King's mother approached him, accompanied by two unfamiliar guests. A man and woman with similar mahogany complexions, both dressed in dark suits; the similarity of their appearance suggested that they could have been siblings.

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[37] Carson, 85–86.

[38] Carson, *Autobiography*, 86.

"Martin," King's mother, Alberta, began, "I have asked these two to be here tonight, and I want you to listen to what they have to offer." Her expression hovered between sadness and anxiety.

"Okay," King said and gave her a hug. He called Coretta over, and the four of them turned toward the dining room. His father nodded as they withdrew from the rest of the company.

"Good evening. Thank you for taking the time to meet with us."

"Good evening to you as well. What can we do for you?"

"We represent a small, private group of Black investors in and around the Atlanta area. The particular venture that we represent is a network of scientists and engineers who research technological developments that might . . . benefit the community. For the purpose of our conversation, we can refer to them as Black Atlanta Technologies." They paused to gauge the couple's response.

"They must be *very* private since I've never heard anything of this group," King remarked. "Anyway, go on."

"Indeed, 'private' would be a great understatement. C*ladestine* would be more appropriate; I'm sure that you can infer the stakes. But to get right to the point, this group would like to offer you one of our products to use while engaged in your various public endeavors." They paused again.

"Go on," King urged.

"We have developed an extremely discreet but highly effective form of body armor."

"Body armor!?" King exclaimed inquisitively.

"Yes. In light of your cicumstances—or in the words of one of our investors, *your importance and visibility*—we thought that you might benefit from its use."

"How much will this cost us?" Coretta asked.

"In terms of money . . . nothing. We offer it to you with our compliments," the woman replied. "Call it an investment in your, *our*, cause."

"That is very considerate of you, but how would it look to ask my colleagues to risk abuse and bodily harm while I sport a bullet proof vest?"

"We understand your concern. I assure you, however, that it is *very* discreet. Your colleagues would never know."

"How discreet exactly?" Coretta asked.

"Well, we are both currently wearing it," the woman replied.

King and Coretta both scrutinized the two guests anew, searching for any signs of their protective gear.

"I don't see anything."

"Exactly."

The man gently pulled a briefcase onto the table and opened it toward the couple. It contained what looked like a few of pieces of jewelry: two narrow, metallic-looking bands and one medium-sized medallion. "We install these on your body. These go on your wrists, and the medallion goes on your chest, just below the sternum. Your body will eventually absorb them, just beneath your skin, at which point they will be practically imperceptible."

"And these provide protection?" Coretta asked.

"Indeed, in a number of ways," the woman said. "Most superficially, it generates a cloak of sorts that will stop most metals from penetrating more than a short distance beneath the skin. It also provides some increased strength, agility, and regeneration abilities."

"Most metals . . . including bullets?" King asked.

"It will stop most commercial caliber amunition," the woman replied.

"You've tested this?" Coretta asked.

"Of course," replied the man.

"Would you like a demonstration?" the woman asked.

"Yes, actually," King said flatly.

"Let's step outside briefly," the man proposed.

They all rose from their seats and walked through the kitchen to the back yard. Once outside, the woman pulled a handgun from the inside of her blazer, an imposing .45 caliber M1911, to which she attached an intimidating sound suppressor. The man removed his coat and unbuttoned his white collared shirt, exposing a muscular torso to the lamp-like moon. He folded his clothes neatly and placed them carefully on the ground. He then faced the couple with his arms outstretched. The woman pointed the gun at her colleague and fired two quick shots, followed by a third. The muffled sound of the shots made the couple start. The shirtless man, however, had not even flinched. He lowered his arms and approached King and Coretta. As he neared, they could see the three bullets hovering against his abdomen.

"That's incredible!" King said aloud.

"As you can see, even shirtless, the armor is virtually undetectable."

Coretta and King looked at each other for a brief moment. In the silent exchange between their eyes, they recalled the "violence of desperate men"[39] that they had already endured since the boycott began. For instance, in January of 1956, shortly after arriving in Montgomery, King was arrested for "speeding thirty miles an hour in a twenty-five mile zone." King recalls the terror he experienced while riding in the police car:

> I was convinced that these men were carrying me to some faraway spot to dump me off. "But this couldn't be," I said to myself. "These men are officers of the law." Then I began to wonder whether they were driving me out to some waiting mob, planning to use the excuse later on that they had been overpowered. I found myself trembling within and without. Silently, I asked God to give me the strength to endure whatever came. By this time we were passing under the bridge. I was sure now that I was going to meet my fateful hour on the other side. But as I looked up I noticed a glaring light in the distance, and soon I saw the words "Montgomery City Jail." I

[39] King, *Stride,* ch. 8.

> was so relieved that it was some time before I realized the irony of my position: going to jail at that moment seemed like going to some safe haven! [40]

Corretta's voice broke their reverie. "We'll use it!" she said.

"Our investors will be pleased."

"Please relay our gratitude," King added.

"We certainly will."

The first occasion to test the efficacy of King's armor did not occur until two and half years later. Shortly before 3:30 p.m. on Saturday September 20th, 1958, 42-year-old Ms. Izola Ware Curry entered Blumstein's Department Store in Harlem, New York, where King was autographing copies of his newly published memoir, *Stride Toward Freedom*. She was "elegantly attired in a stylish [pin-checked] suit, jewelry, and sequined cat's-eye glasses"[41] that provided a flattering accent against her Sienna-brown complexion. Most notably, for our story, she carried in her purse a steel letter opener with a seven-inch blade and an irovy handle; also, secreted in her bra, she hid a .25 caliber, automatic, Galesi-Brescia pistol. She pushed her way through the crowd, and as she neared the desk where King sat, she inquired loudly, with a slightly Southern musicality, "Is that Martin Luther King?" But before King could look up, she punched him in the chest with the blade. A few guests grabbed her from behind and pulled her away.

As attention returned to King, observers stared in horror at the letter opener protruding from his chest. One panicked attendee yelled, "We have to do something! Somebody pull it out!" But as she reached for the ivory handle, a loud voice from the back of the room shouted, "STOP! Leave it in there. An ambulance is on the way."

The voice came from New York City police officer Al Howard. "Don't sneeze, Dr. King," he said as he approached. "Don't even speak."

Officer Howard and officer Phil Romano carefully lifted the chair where King was still seated and slowly carried him down the stairs to the street.[42] The ambulance was just arriving. King was securely installed and rushed to Harlem Hospital where he was greeted by the notable Guyanese-American physician, Dr. Aubre Maynard,[43] and a team of trauma surgeons, including Dr. John W. V. Cordice Jr[44] and Dr. Emil Naclerio.[45] The high-profile medical procedure naturally garnered significant public concern. A few of the particularly well-known observers in the surgical gallery during the procedure included A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, and New York State Governor W. Averell Harriman.[46] Also in attendance were two completely unknown guests, two representatives from Black Atlanta Technologies.

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[40] King, *Stride*, 118.
[41] Fox, "Izola Ware Curry."
[42] Daly, "Black and White."
[43] Saxon, "Dr. Aubre de Lambert Maynard."
[44] Martin, "Dr. W.V. Cordice Jr."
[45] Celona and Jaeger, "Inside the Friendship."
[46] Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, "From Dexter."

They had attempted to intercept Dr. Maynard before surgery—something about a "technical" obstacle; or had he heard "technological"?—but he had waved them off. At first, based on the imaging, it seemed as though they could safely withdraw the blade by hand, since no major organs were struck, and only about half an inch of the blade had actually punctured King's chest. That was still deep enough to bring the point of the blade uncomfortably close to King's aorta; the average heart hangs only about an inch below the skin.[47] Many years later, during King's 1968 speech, "I See the Promised Land," he reflects, "the X-rays revealed that the tip of the blade was on the edge of my aorta, the main artery. And once that's punctured, you drown in your own blood—that's the end of you . . . if I had sneezed I would have died."[48] Nevertheless, though the sternum is a relatively thick bone, the blade seemed to be affixed more securely than one three times as deep. Dr. Maynard was unable to dislodge the blade in the least, even cutting his surgical glove during the attempt; fortunately, he did not cut his hand. The team then attempted to make an incision at the puncture site in order to loosen the blade, but this also proved futile. Their scalpels slid over King's skin like newly sharpened ice skates on a freshly resurfaced rink.

As Dr. Maynard got a new glove from the scrub technician, reflecting on the predicament his team faced in the surgical theatre, a nurse whispered, "Excuse me, Dr. Maynard, there is a gentleman outside the OR who says he has an extremely urgent message for you. He says you waved him away earlier, but he has crucial information that bears upon the success of the surgery."

This time, Dr. Maynard was intensely curious about what this mysterious man might say. "Invite him in," he said, while sticking his hand in the open, outstretched glove. "Tell him he has two minutes."

Entering discreetly was one of the representatives from Black Atlanta Technologies. He stopped a few feet away, so as not to contaminate the sterile operating space. "I will be very brief, Dr. Maynard. Dr. King is outfitted with a piece of top secret technology that may make it difficult to operate on him."

"What sort of technology? Who are you?"

"I can't explain, but place this object near his body. While it remains near him, it will temporarily deactivate the device. You should be able to operate normally."

Dr. Maynard stared incredulously at the small gold medallion in the man's hand. He waved over a nurse. "Please take this."

"After the procedure, I will need to retrieve it," the man added. "Thank you."

Dr. Maynard returned to the operating table. "Follow me," he said to the nurse. "Stand there with the . . . thing," gesturing toward King's lower body. Dr. Cordice and Dr. Naclerio looked at Dr. Maynard curiously. Dr. Maynard shrugged, but no sooner had the nurse positioned herself than the letter opener slumped slightly. Dr. Maynard immediately grabbed a pair of surgical clamps, and made a second attempt to pull out the object. To everyone's surprise, it slid

[47] Rahko. "Evaluation of Skin-to-Heart Distance."
[48] King, "Promised Land," 285.

out easily. They sutured and patched the wound. Two hours and fifteen minutes had passed; the case was a success.

Meanwhile, Izola Curry had been taken to the 28th Precinct where she was to be held until the following evening, the 21st, when Assistant District Attorney Howard Jones would interrogate her.

When Jones asked Curry what happened the previous day, Curry said, "Well I shopped around there in Blumstein's for a good while and some—so finally this doctor whatever you might call him King came in and I walked up to him and I said to him you have been annoying me a long time trying to get this children, I have no objection of you getting them in the schools at all but why torture me, why torture me I'm no help to him by him killing me don't mean after all Congress is signing anything. By torturing me don't mean Congress is going to sign, I can still get a blood clot from this aggravation today. After that day Congress isn't going to sign anyting and I'm just dead."

"What did he say?" Jones asked.

"I was drunk in my head I don't know what he said. He looked up at me and what he said I don't know."

"Then what happened?"

"Then I hit him with this paper opener."

"You had this paper opener?" Jones asked, pointing to the item on the table before him.

"Yes, I did."

"Where did you have it?"

"In my bag."

"And is that your paper opener?"

"Yes, it's my paper opener—letter opener."

"And what did you do with that letter opener?"

"That, he has it."

"But when you pulled it out of your bag in Blumstein's what did you do with it, tell us what happened?

"I just told you, I hit him with it."

"And where did you hit him, what part of the body?"

"I didn't even look to see. . . . At first I thought I missed and hit the table or something."

"Why did you think that?"

"It wouldn't go in. It was almost like it bounced off. I had to try a few times."

"But you eventually stabbed him?"

"You tell me, did I get him?"

"I wasn't there."

"Well, that's why I'm here, aint it?

"Ok, but you did *try* to *hit* him with the letter opener?"

"That's what I said. I just don't know if I got him. It was like someone kept grabbing my arm from behind, or there was a bubble around him. . . ."

"*Why did* you hit him with the letter opener?"

"Because after all if it wasn't him it would have been me, he was going to kill me."

In his report, Jones judged Curry to be "quite emotionally disturbed," and had her sent to Bellevue Hospital's psychiatric ward for observation. Ultimately, Jones's report was amended to exclude Curry's "strange" comments on her apparent inability to actually stab King. At Bellevue Hospital, Curry received a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia and was deemed unfit to stand trial. After the grand jury hearing a few weeks later, where she was ultimatley indicted on charges of attempted murder, she was committed to Matteawan State Hospital for the criminally insane. In the psychiatric report to the grand jury, the doctors note her "delusional ideas that people are persecuting her." Additionally, "Among the signs of disturbance are irrelevant answers, neologisms, extreme confusion, perseveration, etc."

The following week, on Sept. 30th, King released a statement to the press while recuperating. He thanked Dr. Maynard, his associates, and the staff at Harlem Hospital. He thanked his many supporters who expressed their concern for his well-being. He also forgave Izola Curry for the attack. He said, "I feel no ill will toward Mrs. Izola Curry and know that thoughtful people will do all in their power to see that she gets the help she apparently needs if she is to become a free and constructive member of society." And finally, he offered the lament that this incident "demonstrates that a climate of hatred and bitterness so permeates areas of our nation that inevitably deeds of extreme violence must erupt." He concluded with a declaration of faith in the "spririt of nonviolence" and a commitment "to rejoin my friends and colleagues to continue the work that we all know must be done regardless of the cost."[49] He remained at the Harlem Hospital for observation for two weeks before returning to Montgomery.

Izola Curry, on the other hand, was confined to Matteawan State Hospital for about 14 years. Eventually, in 1972, she was transferred to the Manhattan Psychiatric center, and then released, conditionally, into a series of residential homes. She died in 2015, at the age of 98, while living at the Hillside Manor nursing home in Jamaica, Queens.[50]

One of the most significant consequences of this harrowing incident was the relatively public disclosure that the technology developed by the Black Atlanta group existed, and, moreover, that King was probably using it. It seemed certain that Izola Curry would have succeeded in killing him had it not been for the protection this unknown device afforded. The surgical team, particularly Dr. Maynard, had many questions for the representatives from Black Atlanta Technologies, but they declined to offer any clarity. Dr Maynard's persistent and relatively public curiosity, paired with Izola Curry's odd account of the attack, eventually piqued the interest of at least one US government agency.

Subsequently, this particular government agency made a few attempts to learn more about the technology. One well-documented incident occurred on September 28th, 1962, in Albany, GA. The agency recruited twenty-four-year-old Roy James to "make a scene"; they

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[49] Quotes of historical events retrieved from Bastone, Goldberg, and Jesselli, "Woman Who," and accompanying *Smoking Gun* document archive.

[50] Buster. "Izola Ware Curry."

promised him a few hundred dollars and the assurance that any "assault charges wouldn't stick." Historian David Garrow recounts the incident:

> Late Friday morning, September 28 [1962], King addressed the convention's final session from the stage of the L. R. Hall Auditorium. During his remarks, a young white man who had been sitting in the sixth row rose suddenly and approached King. Without warning, the man punched King in the face. A shocked stillness came over the crowd, which watched in amazement as King stood his ground and accepted several blows. As one eyewitness described it, King made no move to strike back or turn away. Instead, he looked at his assailant and spoke calmly to him. Within seconds, several people pulled the attacker away. While others led the crowd in song, King and his colleagues spoke with the assailant at the rear of the stage. Then King returned to the podium to tell the audience that the man, Roy James, was a twenty-four-year-old member of the Nazi party from Arlington, Virginia. King said he would not press charges against him. Birmingham police arrived and insisted that the city would press charges even if King chose not to. Without delay, James was hustled before a local court judge, convicted of assault, and sentenced to thirty days in jail and a $25 fine. Birmingham's segregationist mayor, Art Hanes, visited the courtroom to tell James to his face never again to set foot in Birmingham. The entire incident, from assault to sentencing, took barely four hours. It left most onlookers stunned and impressed by King's lack of fear when confronted by direct physical violence.[51]

While the ordeal was quite impressive, the assault was not quite dramatic enough to lead spectators to question who or what they were seeing. King leaned into the blows, and accepted the "brass"-knuckled fists like a monastic flagellation. Most were simply horrified as they bore witness to further evidence of the tense racial climate. The most skeptical of the audience members wondered whether King himself had staged the incident, a cheap ploy to demonstrate his resolve and commitment to nonviolence. How do you explain how and why he could remain so calm? Most people would retreat a few steps after the initial blow, or raise their arms to protect their face. Yet, no one other than Roy James found King's resilience to be uncanny. No one else noticed that King didn't recieve any bruises. Upon realizing his blows were not having the anticipated effect—for King was barely even dislodged from his spot on the stage, much less afeared—James's strikes became more desperate, devolving from mischievousness jabs to indignant hooks to confused and fearful flailing.

"He's not *human*!" some heard him shout as he was dragged off the stage.

By the beginning of 1965, several events occurred in relatively close succession that ultimately led King to question his use of the protective technology. On November 18th of 1964,

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[51] Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 221.

King received word that FBI director J. Edgar Hoover had "labelled him the 'most notorious liar' in America"; this public denouncement roughly coincided with the delivery of an anonymous letter addressed to King—though most inferred that it too was from the FBI—containing a crude attempt to blackmail him.[52] And on February 21st, 1965, El-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz, a.k.a. Malcolm X, was killed in Harlem. Also weighing on King's mind was the murder of fellow civil rights activist Medgar Evers on June 12th, 1963; as well as the assisasination of President John F. Kennedy on November 22nd, 1963, allegedly to forestall the radical social and political changes that he promised to make.

Superficially, King found the letter that he had received rather amusing, an indication of the desperation of his critics. The author of the letter implied that they were a fellow Black American—writing, "you are a complete fraud and a great liability to *all of us Negroes*"[53]—but King intuited otherwise; and the scholarly consensus is that the author was Deputy FBI Director William C. Sullivan, under the orders of Hoover. The letter writer claimed to possesses evidence that would irreparably defame King and ultimately harm the civil rights efforts: "you are a colossal fraud and an evil, vicious one at that. You could not believe in God and act as you do. Clearly you do not believe in any personal moral principles." The letter continues:

> Lend your sexually psychotic ear to the enclosure. You will find yourself and in all your dirt, filth, evil and moronic talk exposed on the record for all time. I repeat—no person can argue successfully against facts. You are finished. You will find on the record for all time your filthy, dirty, evil, companions, male and females giving expression with you to your hidious [sic] abnormalities… It is all there on the record, your sexual orgies. Listen to yourself you filthy, abnormal animal. You are on the record. You have been on the record—all your adulterous acts, your sexual orgies. . ."

The letter concludes:

> "The American public, the church organizations that have been helping—Protestant, Catholic and Jews will know you for what you are—an evil, abnormal beast… King, there is only one thing left for you to do. You know what it is… There is but one way out for you. You better take it before your filthy, abnormal fraudulent self is bared to the nation."[54]

As an attempt at blackmail, Sullivan's arguments were not persuassive, at least not in the manner that he intended. Though King was comfortable in the spotlight, he was not primarily motivated by celebrity or fame; thus the threat of public humiliation did not necessarily grant the FBI "leverage." Furthermore, the majority of the evidence consisted of sordid details regarding King's extramarital liasons. Yet, King's sexual habits were already an "open secret" of sorts in

[52] Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 360; 373-74.
[53] Gage, "Uncensored Letter," emphasis added.
[54] Gage, "Uncensored Letter."

the Black community.[55] Regarding the "way out," Sullivan had audaciously implored King to commit *suicide*. The FBI could not have been sincere, though, because King was not in the least inclined to be suicidal. Yet, in conjunction with the three recent assassinations—Shabbazz, Evers, and Kennedy—the letter did have a significant *indirect* effect.

First of all, in characterizing King as beastial and abnormally animalistic, Sullivan spoke in a manner consistent with the typical rhetoric of colonialism and American racism. Recall the influential, racist pronouncements of a few notable, white, Western thinkers: Hume, Kant, Hegel, and Jefferson. In "Of National Characters" (1753), Hume asserts that negroes are "naturally inferior to whites"; he goes on to make the boldly false assertion that, "There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white."[56] In *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764), Kant repeats Hume's remark and cites him, but adds that the dark complexion of an individual is "clear proof that what [the Negro] said was stupid"; and the "Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling. . . . So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man [white and Black], and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color."[57] In his "Anthropology," (1830) Hegel asserts that "Negroes are to be regarded as a race of children who remain immersed in their state of uninterested *naïveté*. . . . they do not attain to the feeling of human personality, their mentality is quite dormant, remaining sunk within itself and making no progress."[58] And Thomas Jefferson famously argues in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) that equal citizenship for the Black enslaved was impossible due to insurmountable political, physical, and *moral* differences.[59]

Thus, on the one hand, King heard Sullivan's insults as simply the signs and sounds of the racist, American, popular imaginary, where the idea of *Black* humanity is ultimately oxymoronic. One cannot be both "Black" and "human." In *Where Do We Go from Here* (1967), King recites the racist syllogism defended by academics, ethnographers, and politicians of the time: "All men are made in the image of God; God, as everybody knows, is not a Negro; Therefore the Negro is not a man."[60] King inveighs that "The greatest blasphemy of the whole ugly process was that the white man ended up making God his partner in the exploitation of the Negro."[61] While King claims, though, that "This terrible distortion sullied the essential nature of Christianity," we must appreciate that this anthropological schema *originated*, as Sylvia Wynter explains, as a Christian idea: as a theocentric metaphysical category of Otherness that originally divided the peoples of world into Christians, Enemies of Christ, and savages.[62]

On the other hand, however, undergirding much of the history of American *anti*-racism has been the social and political counter-claim that Black Americans *are* "human," and thus fully

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55 Garrow, "Other Woman"; Garrow, "Troubling Legacy"; Miller, "Activist so Close"; Brockell, "'Irresponsible.'"
56 Parris, *Being Apart,* 29; in his "Silvers Lecture," Gates notes that Hume's remarks on Africans were inserted into the 1753 second edition, 36:01.
57 Yancy, "Forms of Alienation," 17-18; see also, Kant, "Different Human Races."
58 Yancy, "Forms of Alienation," 18-19.
59 Jefferson, *Notes*, 136*ff*.
60 King, *Where Do We Go*, 77.
61 King, *Where Do We Go*, 79.
62 Wynter, "1492," 29, 34, 40.

deserving members of the moral community. Obviously King was not a "beast"; in his mind, as well as the minds of many others, he was a "Man." Yet, in refuting the racist diminution to sub-humanity—alongside the recent assissinations—King confronted a dilemma. Evading death through the use of his protective technology had ironically rendered him *non*-human in another respect; he had become *super*-human. Yet, reinstating his "human" vulnerabilities almost certainly ensured his untimely death. Was he so important that he should exempt himself from his essential mortality while others died or were maimed or psychologically scarred by the various manifestations of white racist violence?

If indeed, Sullivan's characterizations were false, that his personal moral principles were virtuous and just, then like the pistol in Mongomery, King decided ultimately that he could not continue to use the body armor. So in the Fall of 1967, King spoke to the congregation at the Ebenezer Church in New York City about the significance of his *return* to "humanity," or rather, the importance of embracing one's mortality. He said,

> I say to you this morning, that if you have never found something so dear and so precious to you that you will die for it, then you aren't fit to live. . . . some great opportunity stands before you and calls upon you to stand up for some great principle, some great issue, some great cause. And you refuse to do it because you are afraid. You refuse to do it because you want to live longer. You're afraid that you will lose your job, or you are afraid that you will be criticized or that you will lose your popularity, or you're afraid that somebody will stab you or shoot at you or bomb your house. So you refuse to take the stand. Well, you may go on and live until you are ninety, but you are just as dead at thirty-eight as you would be at ninety. And the cessation of breathing in your life is but the belated announcement of an earlier death of the spirit. You died when you refused to stand up for right. You died when you refused to stand up for truth. You died when you refused to stand up for justice.[63]

The congregation at Ebenezer church knew that King spoke sincerely and from experience. The reasons to be afraid that he listed were publicly known incidents from his own life. They did not know, however, that in recent years King was not afraid for himself, physically; they did not know that he had been relatively invulnerable for a period, a cyborg, effectively. Thus, the congregation could not fully appreciate that under the guise of a meditation on courage and death, he had made a confession. He had disclosed that his technological evasion of death was worse that cowardice; it had been a death of the spirit, a sacrifice that he was no longer willing to make. Recall King's haunting words the day before his death:

> Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the

[63] Carson, *Autobiography*, 344.

> mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.[64]

In spite of his relative youth—he was 39 years old—these are the words of someone who knows that they are going to die and has made peace with that eventuality, the most human of resignations, the most heroic of revelations.

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[64] King, *Testament*, 286.

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