



Uncivil Religion

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Upon the completion of the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in 2011, King took up residence alongside other American saints on the National Mall. Like most canonizations, the process was not without controversy.¹ Few, however, question King's place alongside figures like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln. Indeed, for many, King represents the best of the American tradition. He not only fought for a more inclusive America; he staved off cynicism when confronted with the worst it has to offer. If he did not quite redeem the nation, he certainly appeared to bring it back from the brink.

The murders of unarmed Black people by police, skyrocketing economic inequality, hyper-partisanship, resurgent white nationalism, and impending climate catastrophe are just some of the reasons that America seems perilously close to another cliff. Perhaps this explains the renewed interest—academic and public—in King; it seems prudent to learn from someone who helped steer the ship of state through troubled waters.² In this essay, I contend that those who take up

¹ Daniel T. Fleming, *Living the Dream: The Contested History of Martin Luther King Jr. Day* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022).

² See, for example, Tommie Shelby and Brandon M. Terry, eds., *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2020). Regarding public interest, a quick search of the *New York Times* reveals hundreds of articles and essays written in recent years that reference King. Even *Better Homes & Gardens* gets in on the act: Emily VanSchmus, "The Inspiring Meaning of MLK

Martin Luther King Jr. has entered the pantheon of American heroes, to be sure. But his legacy is contested, especially in his relation to the assumptions of American civil religion, the common ideals of the nation. Perhaps King pushed beyond these assumptions and challenged them to the core with his concerns for the poor and the radical nature of love.

this task ought to proceed with caution. I ultimately argue that returning to King unsettles as much as restores one's faith in America. Alongside the King immortalized on the Mall for his unflagging commitment to American civil religion is another, different kind of King. This other(wise) King is an unyielding critic of white supremacy and ethnic nationalisms, of course, but also of all kinds of enclosures, including communities and the self. Never content to be merely a critic, however, this King joins another church. The "freedom church of the poor" and the unruly love movement it precipitates, I conclude, are decidedly uncivil.

The remainder of this essay defends this claim by proceeding as follows: In the next part, I introduce the contours of American civil religion before turning, in the subsequent section, to King's canonization in that tradition. The final section demonstrates the limits of civil religion by briefly discussing King's unruly love movement.

At first glance, at least, the fact that King's birthday is a national holiday bespeaks the beauty of the American experiment: America is a place of endless possibility, yes, but also of redemption. It is a place where a Black man born in the Jim Crow South can eventually come to be celebrated alongside wealthy scions like Washington and Jefferson. In his seminal 1967 essay "Civil Religion in America," Robert Bellah identifies such claims as part and parcel of a distinctly American civil religion.³ A student of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, Bellah contends that religion cannot be reduced to a "cognitive commitment to an omnipotent deity." Rather, it is constituted by a rich "collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity."⁴ *Civil* religion, then, is a religion that is inextricably tied to a particular political order—nation-states in the modern world. Among the most sacred things in American civil religion, perhaps unsurprisingly given its European Protestant lineage, are *texts*: the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

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These texts, Bellah notes, offer more than just a set of legal principles. For Bellah, they authorize a way of life embodied by the "American people." Most obviously, this way of life celebrates hard work, self-reliance, and material prosperity. But Bellah also insists that American civil religion generates mutual obligations. For Bellah, America's founding texts are not merely economic contracts;

Jr. Day Will Change the Way You Celebrate," *Better Homes & Gardens*, January 6, 2022, <https://www.bhg.com/holidays/traditions/what-is-martin-luther-king-jr-day/>.

³ Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (1967): 1–21, http://www.robertbellah.com/articles_5.htm.

⁴ Bellah, 5.

they are covenants that bind people to one another vis-à-vis a set of shared values.⁵ The fusion of contract and covenant creates a distinctly *American* civil religion, according to Bellah. While an oversimplification, the American creed that results can be summed up as follows: America is the Promised Land for all who wish to do well while doing good.

The presence of Indigenous people, the enslavement of Africans, and an insatiable appetite for territorial and economic expansion seem to pose significant challenges for American civil religion, at least in its contemporary formulations.⁶ How to justify the dispossession and “elimination,” to use Patrick Wolfe’s fittingly brutal term, of Indigenous peoples living there?⁷ How to reconcile the existence of chattel slavery in the New Israel? How to pursue imperial wars in the name of liberty?

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Sovereignty, a critical yet often overlooked aspect of American civil religion, helps answer these thorny questions.⁸ It does so, in no small part, by establishing boundaries. All creatures (human and nonhuman animals alike) who do not or cannot recognize God’s supreme and independent authority—God’s sovereignty—are excluded from the community. Why? In short, they do not or cannot choose to abide by the order that God has established, an order that both the Declaration and the Constitution implicitly acknowledge. As a result, these creatures lack the restraints required to responsibly exercise collective and individual freedom. Echoing the European Protestant conception of sin, in American civil religion liberty without limits inevitably is believed to devolve into licentiousness.⁹ If given freedom, then, these other creatures are not only liable to harm themselves, but their very existence threatens the fragile order that makes America the Promised Land. The sanctity of the community must be guarded. Hence the importance of

⁵ As Bellah notes, in this sense the United States belongs squarely to the modern contractarian tradition inaugurated by figures like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (New York: Seabury, 1975), 61–86. Bellah draws heavily on John Winthrop’s 1630 speech “A Modell of Christian Charity” to advance the covenantal claim.

⁶ See, for instance, Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

⁷ Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409.

⁸ The sovereign exercises that authority, first and foremost, by establishing the fundamental order of things or the value of values. In the Western world, law is usually the means to that end. Hence the importance of America’s founding *legal* texts—its higher law. While interpretation of such texts is a matter of ongoing debate, their supreme and independent authority is unquestioned in American civil religion. Something must be sovereign. In a certain sense, this is unsurprising. Most early settlers were European Protestants. For them, God’s sovereignty was a given.

⁹ Bellah, *Broken Covenant*, 112–38.

borders, both physical and moral/political. Only those creatures who pledge and maintain allegiance to the flag—and the republic for which it stands—can be full members of the community. But of course, even that is not enough; the community is also racialized.¹⁰ European Protestants eventually became white, perhaps to ensure that indentured Irish-Catholic servants did not make common cause with enslaved Africans and Indigenous peoples in the colonies.¹¹

Although they were excluded from citizenship, non-Protestants and people of color did not simply disappear. In disputes about land or labor or empire, God's American people often used force when negotiations failed. This was understood as a matter of security or even benevolence. The community must be protected, and these other "peoples" sometimes need to be saved from themselves.¹²

The brutal history of violence against non-Protestants and people of color in and by America that resulted is well documented. As Bellah notes, however, adherents of American civil religion need not deny the historical record to sustain their faith. Instead, they can point to progress. The fact that their fundamental order can be altered, in other words, is one—if not the primary—reason to remain committed to it. This brings us to the other critical piece of American civil religion: redemption. Alongside the contract/covenant that establishes the sovereign God's order and binds *some* people to each other (and separates them from everyone else) is the possibility of change.¹³ According to its partisans, this helps explain why American civil religion has become progressively more inclusive. The community can be transformed. Indeed, it no longer discriminates based on creed or color.

To be sure, there are still borders.¹⁴ But these boundaries are more like gates around a garden than the walls of a fortress. Gates help maintain the order necessary for flourishing. In this fallen world, at least, the garden would be ruined without them; the carefully cultivated community would collapse and everyone would be worse off, presumably.

Increased diversity, however, means that there is no longer any consensus about God's supreme and independent authority. What, then, of the fundamental order God once established—an order upon which liberty depends? Several entities now lay claim to sovereignty. Reflecting the tension between the contract and covenantal traditions, some suggest the community should be sovereign. For

¹⁰ Again, see Jennings, *Imagination*. Also see Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337.

¹¹ For a more detailed history of the Irish in America see Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995). On race and theology, see Jennings, *Imagination*. Also see Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon, 1993) and J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹² See, for instance, Jefferson's "Notes on the State of Virginia," Andrew Jackson's speech to Congress on "Indian Removal," and Theodore Roosevelt's campaign speech in defense of the Philippine War. All can be found in Isaac Kramnick and Theodore J. Lowi, eds., *American Political Thought* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018).

¹³ Bellah, *Broken Covenant*, 61–86.

¹⁴ In essence, democratic nation-states obscure rather than eliminate the boundary problem. See, for instance, Bonnie Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

this group—call them communitarians—diversity has, perhaps unwittingly, led to atomization and hyper-individualism. What is needed, then, is a rekindling of the covenant at the core of American civil religion.¹⁵ That covenant can provide the stable foundation that God once did. Others believe the individual should be elevated to the status of the sovereign. As many progressives rightfully point out, Black and brown individuals are still not afforded the same opportunities as white people.¹⁶ Rather than restore a (racialized) covenant, then, this group demands that white supremacy be finally dismantled so that everyone can reap the benefits of the Promised Land. America, in other words, needs a new social contract to ensure that all individuals are sovereign.¹⁷

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The appeal of sovereignty is eminently understandable. A supreme and independent authority seems not only necessary but also desirable. Who does not want some semblance of order in an increasingly fragmented world, especially when the authority is just (and who does not think of themselves—or their God—as just)? And while Christians might be wary of claiming sovereignty, one need not want to be God to see the draw of communal or individual sovereignty. With that kind of power, one could not only protect oneself and one's own, but prevent all kinds of harm. In other words, one could do tremendous good (and do well in the process, presumably). As Thomas Hobbes noted a long time ago, however, sovereignty is difficult to divide. What to do if equally supreme and independent authorities disagree about the fundamental order of things or the value of values? For Hobbes, the answer is clear: war.

While I do not want to assign a single cause to our current crisis or speculate about what comes next, the disintegration of American civil religion—particularly its neoliberal strand¹⁸—seems to mean that everything is once again permitted.¹⁹

¹⁵ See, for example, David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015). See also Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹⁶ Most prominently, perhaps, see the *New York Times*' recently published *1619 Project*. Nikole Hannah-Jones et al., eds., *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* (New York: One World, 2021).

¹⁷ See, for instance, Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014). And of course, some—call them Christian nationalists—maintain that God remains America's supreme and independent authority. For this group, Americans must once again recognize God's sovereignty. See, for instance, Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Penguin, 2018).

¹⁸ Adam Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capital* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018). Also see Nancy Fraser, "The End of Progressive Neoliberalism," *Dissent* 2, no. 1 (2017).

¹⁹ George Shulman, "Interregnum not Impasse." *boundary 2* (2021), <https://www.boundary2.org/2021/06/george-shulman-interregnum-not-impasse/> (accessed March 1, 2022).

Without the fundamental order that American civil religion provides, conflict seems inevitable.

As many progressives rightfully point out, Black and brown individuals are still not afforded the same opportunities as white people.

All this helps explain, I think, the recent rebirth of King. Like his namesake, Martin Luther, King appears to offer hope for a reformation. King, of course, is best known for his leadership of the classic phase of the civil rights movement that culminated with the passage of the 1964 and 1965 Civil and Voting Rights Acts.²⁰ Yet King was not satisfied with formal political equality. The right to eat a hamburger, the post-1965 King repeatedly said, meant little if one did not have the money to pay for it.²¹ In 1966, King turned his focus squarely to political economy. King insisted that nobody should be poor in a world with such tremendous wealth. The late King demanded a universal basic income, decent housing, and a massive jobs plan—all funded by the federal government. Hence the late King's calls for a dramatic restructuring of the American economy.²²

While there may be disagreement about King's emphasis on economic *rights*, King seems to be someone who can make America whole by revitalizing its creedal commitments, if not its civil religion. Indeed, he seems to offer support for both the covenantal and contractual traditions, suggesting that one can do well (individually) *and* do good (communally); King never went so far as to embrace socialism, after all. King's rejection of violence as a means to the end of social justice seems to signal his commitment to American redemption; King reasons (rather than riots or outright revolts) because he recognizes that America is a flawed but perfectible place. It can change. Finally, he is a Black preacher who consistently and unabashedly invokes the name of God when demanding that (white) Americans adhere to their stated ideals. Taken together, then, King seems to have uncovered a synthesis of sovereignty. He delicately but deftly balances supreme and independent authority of God, community, and individuals. This order is both communal and inclusive. If we follow his lead, the logic goes, America might once again be brought back from the brink.

²⁰ Erin R. Pineda, *Seeing Like an Activist: Civil Disobedience and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

²¹ David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Perennial, 2004 [1986]). The remainder of the autobiographical details are also taken from Garrow's foundational study.

²² As George Shulman has discussed, this distinguishes King from Barack Obama, even though the latter often embraced comparisons to the former. Whereas Obama was committed to a market economy managed by financial elites, the late King seemed intent on overturning the tables, so to speak. Shulman, "American Exceptionalism Revisited: Taking Exception to Exceptionalism," *American Literary History* 23, no. 1 (2011): 69–82.

There is certainly something to be said for these readings of King. Indeed, the early King seems to have embraced a version of American civil religion.²³ Yet I also think there is another way to read King. Before doing so, though, it is worth briefly noting the ways that Black thinkers are often assimilated into American civil religion. As political philosophers Tommie Shelby and Brandon Terry note, Black political thought has been “reduced largely to strategic thinking concerning how best to advance black interests by exploiting convictions and sentiments widely held among whites, and the *rhetorical* identification of black interests with the most deeply cherished American ideals and practices.”²⁴ Melvin Rogers and Jack Turner put it this way: “Too often scholars of American political thought fold black thinkers into their preexisting conceptualizations of American political thought without asking whether those conceptions are adequate to the thinkers in question or in need of change in order to capture both what those thinkers are saying and what they are revealing about the United States.”²⁵

Such readings render King an “essentially *tactical* and *rhetorical*” figure, as Shelby and Terry put it. He plays his prescribed role in the unfolding American narrative: he helps usher in the triumph of “national unity” over “racial division” by way of a return to its sacred texts and historical progress. Approaching King in this way not only risks delimiting his broader challenge to American civil religion; it also renders invisible the unruly love movement King was increasingly drawn into.

In the space that remains, I want to try to foreground what is missing from accounts that approach King—consciously or not—as an adherent of American civil religion, whether in its communitarian or progressive versions. There is something about King, I think, that exceeds the fundamental order that American civil religion secures. While certainly not limited to the last year of his life, the unruly love movement he is drawn into is most visible after the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts.

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²³ George Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

²⁴ Brandon M. Terry and Tommie Shelby, “Introduction: Martin Luther King, Jr., and Political Philosophy,” in *To Shape a New World*, ed. Terry and Shelby (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 1–16.

²⁵ Melvin L. Rogers and Jack Turner, “Political Theorizing in Black,” in *African American Political Thought: A Collected History*, ed. Melvin L. Rogers and Jack Turner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 1–30.

Rather than rest on his laurels, King refused to punch his ticket into the burgeoning Black middle class or take a position in academia (he had his PhD, after all). He went precisely the opposite direction, moving into Chicago public housing in 1966 as part of his efforts to expand the freedom struggle northward. This *move* is worth lingering on, at least for a moment. King, a highly educated and internationally lauded Nobel laureate, celebrated the culmination of the classical phase of the civil rights movement by relocating his family into a housing project in one of the United States' most segregated cities. He also spent significant time in Watts and Newark and Detroit and Memphis, both during and after riots. King, then, did not merely lament the loss of national unity or demand new anti-poverty policies. Instead, he moved directly into the alleged disorder.

This experience seemed to change him.²⁶ He becomes less preoccupied with rekindling community or expanding individual rights and more focused on building a love movement with the poor and dispossessed. To return to the language of American civil religion, this King is not as concerned with reforming the American way of life as he is with finding a different form of life together. His plans for a Poor People's Campaign illustrate.

In late 1967, King and his closest allies gathered at the Penn Center in Frogmore, South Carolina, to discuss the next stage of the freedom struggle. In order to draw attention to the desperate poverty that continued to plague urban slums, migrant farming communities, Native American reservations, and deindustrialized Rust Belt towns, King planned to lead the poor and dispossessed into the gleaming heart of the United States' capital city. And they were to stay—literally living on the Washington Mall—until the federal government took action. King intended to shut the city down, if necessary.²⁷

The campaign was criticized by almost everyone, including many of King's closest confidants. It had no concrete policy goals, some said. Others argued that building such a diverse coalition of the poor and dispossessed—and moving onto the National Mall—was sure to provoke a backlash.²⁸ And of course, there was the philosophical problem that King never explicitly addressed: Why would the very government responsible for, or at least complicit in, creating the conditions that the campaign was contesting work to dismantle them? Or to use Audre Lorde's formulation, why did King think the master's tools could be used to dismantle his house?²⁹

There are two possible responses. First, King might have thought that America could be reformed so that all might be able to belong in the (beloved)

²⁶ Isak Tranvik, "We Will Not Bow: The Late King's Black Faith," *Political Theory* 50, no. 6 (2022): 889–912.

²⁷ Martin Luther King Jr., "Why a Movement," Unpublished speech delivered at SCLC Meetings (Atlanta: The Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Date Unknown). More generally, see Sylvie Laurent, *King and the Other America: The Poor People's Campaign and the Quest for Economic Equality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).

²⁸ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 599.

²⁹ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Penguin, 2020).

community and exercise their individual rights. King seems to suggest as much at times. One can see why doing so would be rhetorically powerful. To be sure, King may also have believed it. There is another possibility, though. And this possibility is missed by those committed to American civil religion, the order it secures, and the way of life they authorize: the movement was not a means to some other end, either communal or individual; rather, movement itself was the point.

In the last year of his life, King appears to articulate as much when defending the campaign. “Now in any movement,” King told advisors, “you have to have some simple demand around which you galvanize forces, but that doesn’t mean that’s all you are going about, and that doesn’t mean all you’re going to get out of it.” King continues, “In this case, we’ve mentioned jobs or income . . . it’s a simple thing—jobs or income. And as I said the other day, it may be true [that] Jesus said that ‘Man cannot live by bread alone,’ but the mere fact that the ‘alone’ was added means that man cannot live without bread.” After briefly describing the ways that demonstrating in adverse circumstances can clarify one’s goals, King proceeds to articulate the other “purpose” of the Poor People’s Campaign: “We don’t have to worry about just jobs or income—nothing—get to Washington. . . . It doesn’t matter what, just get to Washington. We’re going to take our grievances. If you get caught up with an idea, it moves that idea, and you fire up other folks. I don’t know what Jesus had as his demands other than ‘Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.’ . . . And He just took that simple theme, and He fired up people. He went around, and they were sitting around fishing. One of them said one day, ‘Master, I fished all day and caught nothing.’ He said, ‘Come on with me, and I will make you fishers of men.’”³⁰

King called the planned gathering in Washington, D.C. a “freedom church of the poor.” And he connected this church to the plight of “the poor, the dispossessed, and the exploited of the whole world.” King continued: “It is clear to me that the next stage of the movement is to become international. . . . We in the West must bear in mind that the poor countries are poor primarily because we have exploited them through political or economic colonialism.” He concludes with a note of caution: “Although it is obvious that nonviolent movements for social change must internationalize, because of the interlocking nature of the problems they all face, and because otherwise those problems will breed war, we have hardly begun to build the skills and strategy, or even commitment to planetize our movement for social justice.”³¹ What begins, then, with a move into public housing in Chicago ends with a call for a transgressive movement of all the poor and dispossessed. The latter, it is worth emphasizing again, followed the former.

This King, I think, has left American civil religion for a different congregation: the freedom church of the poor. He was less interested in renewing a covenant or establishing a new contract than he was in moving toward and with

³⁰ King, “Why a Movement,” n.d.

³¹ Martin Luther King Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperOne, 1986), 651.

those who had failed to do well while doing good. Put otherwise, this King seeks sociality rather than suturing together a supreme and independent authority that might reform a fractured nation and its civil religion. Indeed, he breaches all the borders that secure America and its fundamental order. King crosses racial, class, and geographical boundaries by promising to bring a broad coalition to the glimmering halls of Congress. And he hopes, ultimately, to do so on a global scale.³² By physically moving toward and with the poor and dispossessed—and calling others to do the same—he challenged the boundary that allegedly separates the private and public spheres. This King, in other words, *demand*s movement; he does not leave it up to the (sovereign) individual to decide if they want to participate. If all this is not enough, he also explicitly condemns the forces designed to secure America's borders. He argues that American militarism sustains white supremacy and poverty throughout the world, including, of course, at “home.”³³ King, then, does not necessarily intend to create a more inclusive America. On the one hand, someone will always be left out. And on the other hand, inclusion into what? King was always less interested in sovereignty than most Americans.³⁴

King's alternative—movement toward and with the poor and dispossessed—is the means *and* the end. It is unbounded and unbinding—unruly, even. As such, it challenges the core of American civil religion: that it tethers people to the place called America vis-à-vis a set of sacred texts and the way of life they authorize. Although uncivil, King remains deeply religious. Rather than fix or restore some political order, King is animated by a God who makes a way out of no way with love.³⁵ Hence the unruly movement is also a love movement. This means that for King, violent forms of revolution are not too radical; they are not radical enough. Violence, after all, is the language that sovereignty speaks. And if nothing else, King thinks that we need something different, something other(wise). ⊕

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³² King, 651.

³³ Jared Loggins and Andrew J. Douglas, *Prophet of Discontent: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Critique of Racial Capitalism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2021).

³⁴ See, for instance, the essay King wrote on Calvin and Luther while in graduate school. In essence, his critique of both is that their emphasis on God's sovereignty overwhelms the fact that God is a God of love, first and foremost. Martin Luther King Jr., *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr., Volume II: Rediscovering Precious Values, July 1951–November 1955*, ed. Clayborne Carson, Ralph Luker, Penny A. Russell, and Peter Holloran (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

³⁵ Tranvik, “We Will Not Bow,” 897.