



Jennifer J. Yanco. *Misremembering Dr. King: Revisiting the Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013. 111 pp. \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-01424-5.

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Bulldozing the Forest Dr. King Planted

Here is a succinct eighty-one-page reminder that Americans currently experience collective amnesia when it comes to Martin Luther King Jr. Immersed in his sanctification via the King holiday, the new King Memorial in Washington, DC, and thousands of schools, boulevards, and events named in his honor, King himself is lost. It's a normal human response, notes Jennifer Yanco: when someone dies, we are immediately drawn to memories that comfort us and reassure us that we have done well by the departed. Still, it is only by engaging with the thorny details, the things that we can't tie up neatly, she notes, that we do a better job of being human (p. xiii).

It is these thorny details about King that she engages in the book's three chapters: "What We Remember," "What We Forget," and "Why It Matters." Charlie Mingus once famously noted that creativity is not just playing something strange or new: "Anyone can do that. Making the simple complicated is commonplace. The genius came from being as simple as Bach. Making the complicated simple, awesomely simple, that's creativity." Jennifer Yanco, an African language and policy scholar at Boston University, here makes a case for King as a political Bach.

At its center, she argues, King's work held high the need for each person to live with dignity and respect. The three barriers to that, laid out time and again in his work and writings, were the triplets of materialism, mili-

tarism, and racism (p. 2). Yanco notes Americans have all but ignored the issues about which Dr. King spoke out most forcefully. To the contrary, as a nation we've gone backwards, becoming more warlike and promoting higher extremes of inequality. "If someone devotes his life to planting trees," she notes, "it's disingenuous to claim to honor his memory while bulldozing the forest. Yet it sometimes seems that that is just what we are doing to Dr. King's legacy" (p. 21).

Why not remember these brutally clear triplets? Yanco finds clear intent behind our inaccurate memories of King. When we hear the "I Have a Dream" speech section on black and white children walking hand in hand, it reinforces our national illusion of progress, which is the opposite of what King intended—a call for pursuing a more just society (p. 5). The speech excerpts almost never include King's observation that "America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds.'" We don't hear about images of Dr. King at antiwar rallies in New York or Chicago, where he spoke out forcefully against the government's military engagements (p. 6). Nor do we see images of him in Los Angeles's Watts neighborhood, decrying the economic conditions and police brutality that provoked the rebellion there. The national holiday celebrations, street and high school commemorative naming, and space in the nation's capitol monuments permit us to claim that we honor him, while at

the same time erasing and thereby dismissing his overriding concerns. Media and corporations play a role in this distortion, but the public bears responsibility as well: if we continue to be served a watered-down version of Dr. King's life, it is at least partially because we have not questioned it and demanded otherwise (p. 7).

King's understanding of how far the United States had come divided progress into two phases. The first, 1956-66, was in his words "a struggle to treat the Negro with a degree of decency, not of equality" (p. 14). The next step was to commit fully to help African Americans "out of poverty, exploitation or all forms of discrimination." Yanco notes that not only did Americans never embrace the second step; over the last several decades, some of the "formidable gains" of the first phase have been under severe attack (p. 16).

With tremendous economy of language aimed at a broad audience and drawn from both primary and secondary sources, Yanco lays out the cost of militarism, data on inequality, and a sobering parade of facts on how stunted our progress is toward color-blind public policy. On militarism, she examines the consistency of King's rejection of war between 1957 and 1968, reminding us that he demanded not just an absence of war but "government policies clearly aimed at the vigorous pursuit of peace" and "offensive action in behalf of justice" (pp. 27, 29). Inequality that had been lessened by the programs of the 1930s and 1960s is now as extreme as it has ever been. We reactivate racism "on a daily basis through an elaborate web of institutions," she finds: "The education system, religious institutions, the justice system, the transportation system, housing, public safety, social services" (p. 69). Each "work in their own ways to deny society's resources to those deemed outsiders," and are now so well established that they require "very little to keep it going" no more than the silence and complacency of the population. Such observations may cause some to see Yanco's work more as cultural criticism than proper history. But by raising a fundamental point about Dr. King's legacy "the nation has moved farther from his

dream, not closer to it" she creatively highlights the best aim of history: improved understanding.

For Yanco, it is obvious that benefits would accrue to the whole nation if it were to set its sights on carrying out his vision. To be sure, "Institutions have lives of their own and are resistant to change," she observes (p. 72). "If we are to transform them into institutions that serve everyone and not just the few it will require major changes in our everyday behaviors and concerted efforts on the parts of each of us." As an experienced white activist in antiracism, she notes that for whites who have "long benefited from preferential access to housing, employment, education, and other social goods," the work in front of them is to "sit with feelings of discomfort" and follow King's teaching to "tell each other the truth about who and what have brought the Negro to the condition of deprivation against which he struggles today" (pp. 72-73). "Repairing centuries of marginalization and exclusion comes with a high price tag," Yanco writes (p. 76). Whites resist because it "masks the shame involved in acknowledging the gross inequalities of the current state of affairs and white complicity." The prophetic vision of King, coupled with his call to actively pursue justice, is something Americans have turned away from to "follow a path of extreme materialism enforced by militarism both at home and abroad" (p. 79). To Yanco, a good antidote to such errant path would be to "revive the memory of Dr. King's leadership and use it as a guide to action" (p. 81).

As a focused meditation on the widening gap between King's message and the reality of life in American society, *Misremembering Dr. King* succeeds, and does so eloquently. As a potential guide, it is decidedly less helpful. One can only wish Yanco had engaged the many debates among activists and social movement scholars about innovative forms of organizing. A broader understanding of the civil rights movement reveals that history provides better answers than prophetic leadership to the question of how best to challenge self and society for the purpose of fulfilling King's dreams.

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