



The Speech: The Story Behind Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Dream

By Gary Younge

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This summer marked the fiftieth anniversary of the landmark March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Tens of thousands of citizens commemorated the historic event of 1963 by assembling once more at the feet of the Lincoln Memorial and alongside the banks of its reflecting pool. And when either the sun's heat or the temptation to cool oneself in that long strip of water became too unbearable, marchers could find reprieve in joining the thousands who flowed continuously beneath the canopied paths which frame the historic site.

The atmosphere—from the subway, up into the procession, across the crowd, and throughout the lines for the porta-potties even—was almost festive. One might even say it was celebratory, but not at all for the reasons that some might suspect. While the air was rich with solidarity and human connectedness, the feelings of triumph and progress could not be found lingering readily on the humidity of the day. Instead, posters prominently displayed thoughts and demands about poverty, joblessness, incarceration, disenfranchisement, and school re-segregation. Thousands of t-shirts and placards hung heavy with photos of the young Trayvon Martin, and each one served as a poignant reminder that the tendrils of racism continue to strangle large portions of American society. Thus, the slogans and images gave one the distinct feeling that many who gathered in DC this past August were there to celebrate the fact that they were *not alone* in their frustrations about the state of things.

After the march that evening, author and columnist Gary Younge spoke to a packed house at DC's famed Busboys and Poets. As he shared the stage with Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor and Cornel West, he reminded the audience that we must take great care “not to mistake nostalgia with history or nostalgia with analysis” the way that the popular media and the dominant discourse have (WeAreManyMedia, minute 12:44). In Younge's newest book, *The Speech: The Story Behind Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Dream*, he strives to do just that. Fittingly, he draws on history as a way to respond to the questions of “change” that have emerged in light of President Obama's second term and the anniversary of Dr. King's *I Have a Dream* speech. Interwoven throughout his piece are reminders of the fact that while much has changed, racist practices have become more subtle, and thus more problematic.

The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was the first event of its kind for America, and a particularly important aspect of Younge's work is the way in which he articulates the immense amount of upheaval that facilitated the birth of the march. Specifically, he discusses how international power shifts, violence, technological development, concerns about national image, and fears of the unpredictable nature of a mass of motivated people came to benefit the movement in rather ironic ways. One point that he touches on (and which is frequently excluded from the popular discourse on the American civil rights movement) is that the struggle in the

U.S. was part of a broader international struggle. As power dynamics shifted around the world in the early 1960's, they appeared to edge toward racial equality. According to Younge's count, eighteen African and island nations gained independence in the three years preceding the March on Washington. This meant that "Internationally, non-racial democracy and the Black enfranchisement that came along with it were the order of the day." This factor helps contextualize the American movement because it alludes to the problems these international changes posed for domestic power relations and national image. That is, "The longer America practiced legal segregation, the more it looked like a slum on the wrong side of history rather than a shining city on the hill" (p. 18). And while the international shift undoubtedly fed into and influenced the vision of possibility for many African Americans, it simultaneously agitated the Kennedy administration's ability to maintain a "good" public image.

The civil rights movement inside the U.S., meanwhile, gained some propulsion in 1960 with the student sit-in at Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. It continued to accelerate over the next couple of years but then, for several reasons, things absolutely ignited in 1963. First, the people were on the move at an astounding rate. In the two months that led up to the March on Washington, "...there were 758 demonstrations in 186 cities, [that resulted] in 14,733 arrests" (p. 17). Another influential factor was that the mainstream news media started reporting on civil rights stories with a previously unknown ferocity: "In May 1963," for instance, "the New York Times published more stories...in two weeks than it had in the previous two years" (p. 17). Of course, there was no shortage of action to report on, but the movement was further aided by a third aspect: the unprecedented presence of television. As Younge points out, in the nine year stretch between the banning of segregation and the airing of the March on Washington, the number of households with televisions had risen from 54 to 91 percent (p. 29). So for the first time in history, imagery and video footage made aspects of the struggle unavoidable; the message of equality and the violent responses to it were thrust into the face of the public via broadcast news. Not surprisingly, though, "As segregationists' violence escalated, so did the militancy of Black activists" (p. 18). This reality worked to stoke public fears about the emergence of more violence, particularly as it became evident that Malcolm X was gaining the support of those who had become disenchanted about the ability of pacifism to bring about social change.

With the fears of violence hovering in the background, the conflict in Birmingham—with all its tragic imagery—became a major turning point. King had attempted an entirely new tactic by organizing the series of children's protests that took place in May 1963. The viewing public witnessed the arrest of 959 people, most of whom were kids, on the first day alone (p. 29). The next day's events then provided journalists with the opportunity to chronicle the pivotal moment and some of the most disturbing images of protest in America's history. "The sight of children being bludgeoned, hosed, and hounded shifted both national awareness and the political calculus of what was both possible and necessary for the civil rights movement" (p. 62). Thus, the demonstrations, the violence, the media, and the technological prevalence symbiotically worked to impact the growth of the cause. These forces culminated in Birmingham and inevitably forced open the final gate that allowed the movement to tread the path to Washington.

While *The Speech* certainly is not an in-depth historical analysis of the civil rights movement, it is an easily digestible survey of the period's precariousness and the struggle for power. Younge rightfully complicates the circumstances that surrounded the march, he dissects King's dream for its inherent meaning and timelessness, and then he drops this most famous speech into the current American context to unsettle any beliefs that tie notions of permanence or rest to systematic change. By doing so, Younge speaks to the power *and* the responsibility of the

people. Nowhere is this more beautifully stated than in his description of the people's energy on the day of the march: "The restless and excited crowd...proved irrepressible. While the leaders were chatting with the politicians, the masses started the march without them...Loud speakers called for them to stop, but no one listened" (p. 84). The people were on the move. Younge reminds readers that while charismatic leaders are important, power rests with the many thousands—both then and now—who go unrecognized but who are ultimately responsible for *being* the movement that perpetually forces change.

References

WeAreManyMedia. (2013, August 27). *A dream deferred? MLK, Trayvon, and the fight against racism today*. Retrieved from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5esY2KeDx4E>.

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