



A review of *The Radical King* by Martin Luther King Jr. edited and introduced by Cornel West, 2015 (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014. 300 pp., ISBN 978-0-8070-1282-6), reviewed by Gregory T. Bailey (attygregtbailey@gmail.com), Ph.D. Partner of Atty. Greg T. Bailey and Assoc. Douglasville, Georgia.

Cornel West edited and introduced us to his book titled *The Radical King by Martin Luther King, Jr.* with great promise. This volume contained twenty-three items, mostly speeches, articles, or sermons, that were written or delivered by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. West divides his book into four parts: *Radical Love; Prophetic Vision: Global Analysis and Local Praxis; The Revolution of Nonviolent Resistance: Against Empire and White Supremacy; and Overcoming the Tyranny of Poverty and Hatred.* Within these sections, West's main objective is to uncover a Martin Luther King not known to most American. Furthermore, the editor notes that "This book unearths a radical King that we can no longer sanitize. His revolutionary witness—embodied in anti-imperial, anti-colonial, anti-racist, and democratic socialist sentiments—was grounded in his courage to think, his courage to love, and his courage to die (p. xvi). Finally West also asserts that this book will contain evidence of King's courage to think, to love, and to die that has been sanitized. This review seeks to examine the previous noted themes as well as West's attempt to discuss new speeches, articles and sermons or analysis of King that have been sanitized.

In the introduction of this volume West analyzed the hypnotical King's position on the Obama Administration. West shared with his audience his personal conversation with candidate for President then Senator Barack Obama. West lamented that he asked candidate/Senator Obama about his relationship to King's legacy. Although President Obama's answers satisfied West at that moment, years later West stated that President Obama's action since that time have not met up to the standards of King. Are there many men and women that can live up to the King standard and be the leader of the free world? Specifically, West stated that "the dream of the radical King for the first black president surely was not a Wall Street presidency, drone presidency, and surveillance presidency with a vanishing black middle class, devastated black working class, and desperate black poor people clinging to fleeting symbols and empty rhetoric" (p. xiv). However, West provided his audience with little support on how King would have envisioned the first black president. West does not mentioned the goals of the Poor People's March on Washington, where each person would be guaranteed some form of income, that the Federal Government would distribute some of the vast amount of land that it possesses to the poor to exacerbate poverty, that each person have access to capital and that each person is allowed to participate in the decision making regarding programs that affect their daily lives (Young 2004).

West also could have been objective and stated that despite wide spread opposition by the Republican Party, the Obama Administration passed legislation that saved General Motors and Chrysler from going out of business and saved millions of jobs. Likewise, West could have credited the Obama Administration with passing the Affordable Healthcare Act, popularly known as Obama care, which enabled nearly sixteen million people to have healthcare. Indeed, President Obama did lead the country out of the worst recession since the Great Depression. An objective analysis of King's legacy demonstrated that he was objective, patient, and persistent. If the President of the United States or other government officials did not yield to his persuasion, King would have used the tools of nonviolence to persuade them. His rationale was explained in the "Letter from the Birmingham Jail" that was included in the book but, West fails to reference it.

Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent resister may sound rather shocking (p. 130).

West missed an opportunity to state that King's Legacy would be fulfilled by protesting some of the actions of the Obama Administration and supporting some of its actions.

Nevertheless, Part One of these selected writings, speeches, and sermons of King is titled *Radical Love*, included two essays and three sermons. The essays are titled *The Violence of Desperate Men* and the *Pilgrimage to Nonviolence*. West provided the reader with some guidance on what to expect in the essays that identifies King overcoming his moment of fear in his kitchen at midnight. West stated, "we see the source of King's radical love: his spiritual mountaintop experience in his kitchen in Montgomery, Alabama" (p. 3). Moreover, West tells his reader how he deemed King to possess the concept of radical love. Specifically, West proclaims, "I understand the radical King as a spiritual warrior equipped with Christian armor willing to love, serve, die for his people. Radical love required the cowardly self to die in order for the courageous self to live" (p. 3). King recalled that Midnight Knock by God many times. In this context, West was correct in citing this account as the source for King's empowerment to take on injustice.

West next turned to the next section, titled Part Two as *Prophetic Visions: Global Analysis and Local Praxis*. Within these pages he included the articles *The World House*, *All the Great Religions of the World*, *My Jewish Brother! The Middle East Question*; *Let My People Go* and a speech titled *Honoring Dr. Du Bois*. West's editing process, however, does not provide the audience with much to support his rich insights that King provided to his audience prophetic visions. For example, in the article titled *The World House*, King recognized that the United States and its private sector provided the financial underpinning that permitted the apartheid state to operate.

Specifically, King states “We have been notoriously silent about the more than \$700 million of American capital which props up the system of apartheid, not to mention the billions of dollars in trade and the military alliance which are maintained under the pretext of fighting Communism in Africa” (p. 80). King also identified, decades before the United States ban investment in South Africa in the Reagan Administration, the economic impact of American capital into the apartheid nation. However, West does not note this point or alert the audience that King called for the elimination of all poverty in the world in this article. This became a mandate of the United Nations three decades later at the call of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Project 2014).

In Part Three, titled *The Revolution of Nonviolence Resistance: Against Empire and White Supremacy*, West provided the audience very few insights on King’s soul stirring work that live on as though they were stated just yesterday. These letters, speeches, and articles were included in many other books. Included in this section are the popular King items *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*, *Where Do We Go from Here*, *Black Power*, and *Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence*. In addition, there are some short pieces, such as *My Talk with Ben Bella*, *Jawaharlal Neru*, and *A Leader in the Long Anti-Colonial Struggle*. However, West does not provide his audience with the insights that these same items can be found in the edited and more comprehensive volume on King by scholars such as James M. Washington and Lewis V. Baldwin. Furthermore, West does not provide the readers with his selection criteria for this section. Finally, in as much as West titled this part nonviolent resistance, King’s work titled *A Showdown for Nonviolence* should have been included in this section. King intended for this article to support the reasons why he was leading the Poor’s People Campaign on Washington. The article was first published on April 18, 1968, two weeks after his death, by *Look* magazine.

West titled Part Four of his volume *Overcoming the Tyranny of Poverty and Hatred*. In this section he included speeches and sermons such as *The Bravest Man I Ever Met*, *The Other America*, *All Labor Has Dignity*, *The Drum Major Instinct* and *I’ve Been to the Mountaintop*. West does unearth a glowing tribute piece delivered by King to Norman Thomas, who was an extraordinary socialist in the twentieth century. West also provided an excellent editorial that inspires his audience to read the tribute and learn about a man that King gave an outstanding sketch of his life. He further offered some commentary on the *I’ve Been to the Mountaintop* speech. Furthermore, West does share that the black power movement challenged King to show less hope and unconditional love.

However, West does not really examine or highlight King’s economic critique of capitalism in the United State and globally anywhere in his volume, particularly in section. Without question he had a rich land field to uncover vast resources for his audiences to learn about the real King in the speech *All Labor has Dignity*. West missed a golden opportunity to state that King asserted that America would go to hell if it does not treat its poor people better.

In short West stated in his introduction of this volume that he will uncover a Martin Luther King not known to most American when he proclaimed, “This book unearths a radical King that we can no longer sanitize. His revolutionary witness—embodied in anti-imperial, anti-colonial, anti-racist, and democratic socialist sentiments—was grounded in his courage to think, his courage to love, and his courage to die” (p. xvi). However, in this volume West has only partially completed the task that he asserted that he would. The vault of articles, speeches and, sermons of King has been available for historians, scholars and interested parties for years. Thus, West needed to dig deeper in order to fulfill his goal of uncovering King and not merely allow material that is available in volume such as *Testament of Hope, the Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr., All Labor has Dignity*, and *A Single Garment of Destiny* to overshadow his volume on almost every turn. The complexity and diversity of topics that King grappled with are too rich for one to avoid a thorough undertaking to mine the land field where King’s ideas, philosophy, and thoughts are buried. West contribution to King scholarship is marginal at best and thus leaves too much of King’s treasures buried rather than revealed for his readers to marvel and ponder over for the current and future generations to come.