Twitter Thread by Deborah E. McDowell



Deborah E. McDowell
@dem8z

In my annual, ritual meditation on King, I keep thinking about those misused,spontaneous references to his “four little children” in “I Have a Dream.” As many have noted, this passage has been pressed into the work of domesticating King’s radical project, into inserting him 1/

into a reactionary, progressivist narrative emphasizing just how far “we’ve” come & overcome. Thinking too about the fact that King’s most enduring rhetorical tropes—the touchstones of American memory of the Civil Rights struggle—the dream, the mountaintop, the Promised Land, 2/

are all chosen from the end of the addresses in which they appeared. The beginnings of these speeches are seldom emphasized, although they are rich with suggestions for thinking about time and tense, ending and beginning, past and present. In his last sermon, 3/

“I See the Mountaintop,” widely considered his most apocalyptic, King took as his point of departure, the matter of time. “If I were standing at the beginning of time, “ he began, “with the possibility of a general, panoramic view of the whole of human history up to now, and 4/

The Almighty said to me, “Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?” King then takes the reader on an imaginary journey through the ages, pausing at historic sites and momentous occurrences, ending with Lincoln signing the Emancipation Proclamation. Then /5

turning to the Almighty, he says, “If you allow me to live a few years in the second half of the 20th Century, I will be happy.” The more familiar futuristic passages of that speech have eclipsed those emphasizing the “here and now,” those that speak to King’s desire to 6/

make change in the time of his time. Indeed, in his 1955 speech at the Holt Street Baptist Church in Montgomery, launching his career as a Civil Rights activist, King began, “We are here, we are here this evening for serious business.” There, King condemned the “world in which 7/

most men attempt to defend their highest values by the accumulation of weapons of destruction,” and there he planted the seed that would ripen into perhaps his least celebrated speech against the Vietnam War in 1967. In that speech, delivered 1 yr before his assassination 8/

King paused to assert that his path from Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery had led directly to the sanctuary of Riverside Church in New York City. In connecting these two points along the trajectory of his foreshortened life, King spoke implicitly to our frequently 9/

mistaken conceptions of time, of change, and the “march of progress.” As we prepare to mark his birthday, let us recall that King dedicated his life to struggling against the glaring, intractable injustices of his day: “the unspeakable horrors of police brutality,” poverty 10/

the “giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism,” the deplorable state of public education, high excessive incarceration, joblessness, stagnant wages, lowered life expectancy, among others. These injustices remain to be conquered here, now, in the time of our time.11/