COMMENTARY

Amy Schumer's misappropriation of Martin Luther King

Unguarded use of a guarded King's words

By RANN MILLER

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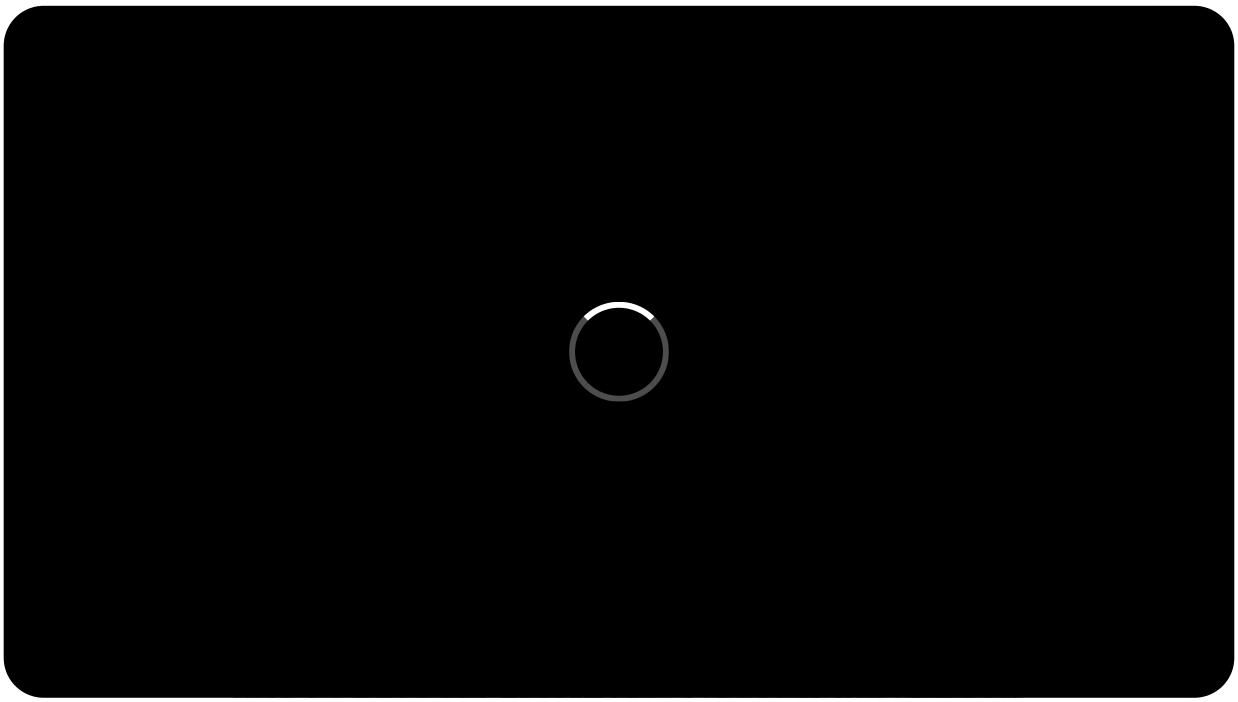


Amy Schumer attends the 2023 Good+Foundation "A Very Good+ Night of Comedy" Benefit at Carnegie Hall on October 18, 2023 in New York City. (Jamie McCarthy/Getty Images for Good+Foundation)

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The War in Gaza has generated impassioned commentary from all sides, including celebrities. Whether or not we care to agree, people are entitled to take a stance on this war. However, no one is entitled to misappropriate the views of others to justify state violence— especially not the words of Martin Luther King Jr.

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That is what Amy Schumer did. The comedian shared a clip this week of King expressing the thought that Israel has a right to exist and that antisemitism is wrong. Her share, without comment and amid the backdrop of the Israeli government's deadly response to the Oct. 7 attacks, was no better than that of an AI picture shared of Dr. King and Donald Trump. Truthfully, it may be worse.

Dr. Bernice King, daughter of the famed civil rights leader, replied to Schumer's post:

> "Certainly, my father was against antisemitism, as am I. He also believed militarism (along with racism and poverty) to be among the interconnected Triple Evils. I am certain he would call for Israel's bombing of Palestinians to cease, for hostages to be released…"

Dr. Bernice King has previously called out the misuse of her father's quotes. It was particularly necessary here because Schumer whitewashed King's words. She posted a selectively edited video, originally shared by the Jewish Journal, without regard to the nuanced nature of King's actual position concerning the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

King did support Israel and he was against antisemitism, however, he chose to keep the full extent of his thoughts private. Amongst advisors and friends, King acknowledged Palestinian

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land theft and the war against them, believing that peace would be achieved only when those matters were resolved.

> Any discussion of King in the context of this current war in Gaza must be honest with the history of King's stance. King did not blindly support Israel, although lies were told to say otherwise.

During the Civil Rights Movement, the Jewish community stood with African Americans; some even died with African Americans. Many of the Big 6 Civil Rights organizations, Including SNCC, the NAACP, and King's SCLC, received funding from Jewish benefactors. In addition, as a Baptist reverend, King was familiar with the hermeneutical linkage between Black enslavement and the plight of the ancient Israelites, who were enslaved in Egypt.

So the prospect of alienating Jewish supporters—and their material contributions—was understandably concerning for King. As a result, King and Jewish organizations shared a symbiotic relationship rooted in support of each other. Still, according to Michael Fischbach's *Black Power and Palestine*, "King was worried about appearing too supportive of Israel." What drove King to a place of concern was the 1967 war:

> "*The fact that the apostle of nonviolence had come out strongly against the American war in Vietnam in his famous speech 'A Time to Break Silence' speech at the Riverside Church in New York in April of 1967 was another reason why it was becoming increasingly difficult for King to be associated with Israel's preemptive strike and subsequent military occupation of Arab territory, territory that included the holiest shrines in Christianity. King was also worried about Israel becoming "smug and unyielding" after its massive victory*."

Acknowledging that war was the enemy of the poor made it difficult for King to support a state waging war on a people that he himself acknowledged were impoverished. He was likely able to reflect on his time in East Jerusalem in 1959 hearing directly from Palestinian

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people. He was also sensitive "to the intersection of racial politics and the Arab-Israeli conflict" and jeopardizing his place among the Black Power Movement's rank in file.

The hypocrisy was not lost on him.

King was fighting public opinion; his reputation, as it was foundational to his effectiveness, was on the line. As of 1966, King had a 63% unfavorable rating.

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Upon consulting with his advisors, King made a political case for Israel and an economic case for Palestine. King's approach was to affirm what an advisor called "Israel's territorial integrity," while simultaneously acknowledging the violence and poverty experienced by the Palestinians. He would distance himself from pro-Palestinian critiques of Israel, even admonishing Black nationalists and young militants alike who professed those critiques. However, King was aware that the question of what would be of the Palestinians had to be answered for peace to be achieved.

However, when pressed to expand on his thinking in an interview with ABC, King went a bit further:

> "*I think for the ultimate peace and security of the situation it will probably be necessary for Israel to give up this conquered territory because to hold on to it will only exacerbate the tensions and deepen the bitterness of the Arabs*."

Any discussion of King in the context of this current war in Gaza must be honest with the history of King's stance. King did not blindly support Israel, although lies were told to say otherwise. Simply put, he walked a tightrope.

Schumer is part of a tradition of white people who have not only gotten King

The Gallup Corporation asked the same question about King's approval rating in 2011 as they

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> wrong but have politically appropriated King's words.

did in 1966. When comparing the polls, they found a stark difference. Whereas only 33% of Americans had a favorable opinion of King in 1966, it was at 94% in 2011. What changed was white America's approach towards King; following the course of Ronald Reagan, whose view of King was based on a crafted image of King not rooted in reality.

That explains why conservatives misquote King and call them a hero while remaining, in King's words, either sincerely ignorant or conscientiously stupid. I am unsure what category Schumer falls in.

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What is true is that Schumer is part of a tradition of white people who have not only gotten King wrong but have politically appropriated King's words, disarming their prophetic and convicting power in an attempt to weaponize them on behalf of an agenda that promotes the very evils King was against: racism, militarism, and capitalism.

Those evils are the foundation of (white) settler states; they define the kinship between the United States and Israel. The history of the United States as a white settler colonial project is indisputable. It's a history rooted in the genocide of indigenous persons and the enslavement of African peoples, resulting in wealth generated from acquiring territory and its resources as well as the production of raw materials by enslaved labor.

Although Ashkenazi (European) Jews are now the minority throughout the settler state of Israel and Palestinian territories and the aspirations and struggle of Mizrahi (North African & Arab) Jews are known, the Zionist state that is Israel was inspired by antisemitism in Europe, sanctioned for European Jews. As such, a land promised in 1917 became a European (white) settler conquest without regard for Palestinian sovereignty or Mizrahi humanity.

In the United States, two-thirds of all American Jews identify as Ashkenazi Jews and the majority of American Jews identify as white on the U.S. Census. So, while Israel is not "white" in the traditional sense, they are white adjacent and it is that white adjacency that foments a

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settler colonial rationale, that normalizes occupation, apartheid, and genocide in the name of “a right to exist.” Such is manifest destiny.

I suspect that Dr. Bernice King can view 2023 through the 1967 lens of her father better than most. Yet, it's likely that those of the opinion of American-Israeli scholar Martin Kramer would say of Dr. King’s daughter the same he said of Michelle Alexander and Robin D.G. Kelley, that they “haven’t a single King arrow in their quivers” to assert how King would approach the current war in Gaza. I suppose that King’s own words, words readily available to us, fail to offer us any arrow — probably because they’ve all been whitewashed.

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By **RANN MILLER**

Rann Miller is an educator and freelance writer based in Southern New Jersey. His Urban Education Mixtape blog supports urban educators and parents of children attending urban schools. Miller is also the author of "Resistance Stories from Black History for Kids the Expanded Edition." You can follow him on X @RealRannMiller.

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