

# Advertising & Society Quarterly

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## Additional Information

## Digital Collection:

40 Years of Advertising the MLK Holiday

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### **Abstract**

Building on the sample of advertisements featured in the accompanying *Advertising & Society Quarterly* article "His Light Still Shines: Corporate Advertisers and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday," this digital collection provides a cross-section of MLK Day-themed or inspired advertisements from 1981 to the present found largely in Black magazines. Collectively, these adverts and advertising features showcase the multivalent ways in which American companies—from multinational corporations to local businesses and commercial vendors—have attempted to walk the tightrope between commemorating and commercializing King, and between acknowledging and appropriating his activism and political legacy.

### **Keywords**

advertising, African American, American politics, archive, Black history, civil rights, commemoration, corporate social responsibility (CSR), cultural memory, digital collection, ethnicity, Martin Luther King Jr., MLK, national holiday, race

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[**Editors' Note:** See **related article** by E. James West.]

On April 4, 1968, African American Baptist minister and leading civil rights activist Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot and killed by a White assailant as he stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. Just days later, as race riots catalyzed by King's death continued to rage in dozens of cities across the nation, Democratic Congressman John

Conyers introduced a bill to make the fallen civil rights leader's birthday a national holiday. Underpinned by the support of labor unions, the King Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta, and the Congressional Black Caucus, the movement to establish a national holiday for King slowly gathered momentum. Throughout the 1970s, a range of bills introduced by Conyers and Senator Edward Brooke attracted a growing number of cosponsors in both the House and Senate. In 1979, the year in which King would have celebrated his fiftieth birthday, these efforts were given a boost when President Jimmy Carter publicly pledged his support. Conyers' bill would first come to a vote in the House of Representatives later that same year, although it fell five votes short of the two-thirds majority needed for its passage.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this setback, public and political momentum to establish a national holiday for King continued to grow. In January 1981, more than 100,000 supporters braved freezing weather in Washington, DC to attend a rally in support of the King holiday on the National Mall, headed by Coretta Scott King, Black entertainer Stevie Wonder, DC Mayor Marion Berry, and civil rights activist Jesse Jackson. Congressional debates rumbled on throughout Ronald Reagan's first term in office, before the President finally signed the King Holiday Bill into law in November 1983.<sup>2</sup> The holiday was formally observed for the first time on January 20, 1986. State-level resistance to the holiday would persevere into the 1990s, with the opposition of figures such as Arizona governor Evan Mecham drawing a lurid response from rap group *Public Enemy* in their 1991 hit "By the Time I Get to Arizona." In 2000, South Carolina became the last state to formally recognize the King holiday as a paid holiday for all state employees, although some Southern states continue to combine commemorations of King's birthday with other observances; most jarringly, the birthday of Confederate general Robert E. Lee.

As the King holiday movement approached critical mass during the late 1970s and early 1980s, the King Center and other allies looked to the support of American corporations to help their efforts reach fruition. Despite King's well-documented ambivalence towards consumer capitalism (something that had evolved into a more open hostility by the end of his life), American businesses seized upon King's memory as a means of demonstrating their support for racial equality. As a form of corporate social responsibility (CSR), support for the King holiday from businesses such as Anheuser-Busch, AT&T, and Coca-Cola quickly became an important part of broader efforts to strengthen ties with Black consumers. By the early 1980s, companies such as Greyhound had begun to print commemorative adverts in Black-oriented publications such as *Ebony*, *Black Enterprise*, and *The Crisis*, which expressed support for the passage of the King holiday and celebrated the enduring power of King's "dream." By the second half of the decade, such campaigns had spread beyond Black-oriented publications to include commercials on network television and other mainstream media outlets. In some instances, permissions were granted by the King estate, pointing toward the growing efforts of the King family to both police the portrayal of the activist's legacy and exert their commercial rights over his intellectual property.<sup>3</sup>

Through the visual and textual content and framing of such commemorative advertisements, American businesses added to already complex and often fractious political and ideological debates around the "true meaning" of King's activism, and, by extension, the

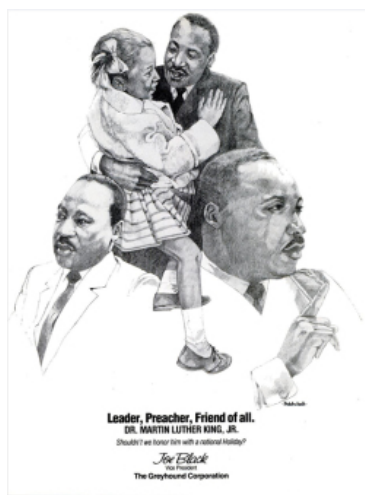
function and legacy of the African American Civil Rights Movement. For King's supporters on the left, the holiday represented a call to action and an opportunity to reinforce his reputation as a "warrior for peace on the domestic and global battlefields;" a figure whom Black philosopher Cornel West describes as "a staunch anti-colonial and anti-imperial thinker and ... a democratic socialist who sided with poor and working people in the class struggle taking place in capitalist societies."<sup>4</sup> For more moderate commentators, the holiday was a moment for Americans of all races and backgrounds to come together and celebrate King's appeals to "Brotherhood" and "unity" in inclusive and apolitical terms. For conservative commentators, the holiday provided an opportunity to recast King as an advocate of consumer capitalism and to reframe the language of "colorblindness" to justify the Reagan administration's dismantling of affirmative action programs and other race-based public initiatives.<sup>5</sup>

By the mid-1990s, companies appeared to have become more comfortable with capitalizing on the commemoration of MLK Day in order to sell their goods or services. This included consumer products in King's likeness, such as artwork or decorative porcelain, or personal checks that "pay tribute to his principles and beliefs." Over time, commemorative advertising has become less concentrated in Black-oriented publications and has filtered into general market media markets. At the same time, companies have increasingly chosen to fold specific acknowledgements of King and the King holiday into broader appeals to African American cultural heritage and the celebration of Black History, in line with the commemoration of Black History Month in February. By 1996, *New York Times* contributor Stuart Elliott suggested that American consumers could be excused for thinking the Madison Avenue calendar included "an annual winter festival of [B]lack advertising" that began in January and continued until the beginning of March.<sup>6</sup>

In more recent years, attitudes appear to have remained mixed on the question of how, and to what extent, American businesses have engaged with the observation of MLK Day. Some commentators have applauded the restraint of corporate advertisers, suggesting that unlike federal holidays such as Memorial Day and Columbus Day which have been "corrupted by commercialism," the national observation of King's birthday remains "mostly resistant to marketability" more than three decades after its inception.<sup>7</sup> Other activists and market researchers have criticized the apparent "hijacking" of the King holiday by companies, retailers, party promoters, and other commercial interests. High profile criticisms of recent King-inspired advertising campaigns has refocused public attention on this issue; most notably a Dodge commercial which aired during Super Bowl LII in 2018, and which used an excerpt from King's "Drum Major Instinct" sermon, but ignored other sections of the same speech in which King openly criticized advertisers as "those gentlemen of massive verbal persuasion." More broadly, the impact of the Black Lives Matter Movement had refocused the public eye on corporate appeals to racial justice and their utilization of King and other Black historical figures.

Building on the sample of advertisements featured in the accompanying article, "His Light Still Shines," this digital collection provides a cross-section of MLK Day-themed or inspired advertisements from 1981 to the present. Collectively, these adverts and advertising features showcase the multivalent ways in which American companies—from multinational corporations to local businesses and commercial vendors—have attempted to walk the tightrope between commemorating and commercializing King, and between acknowledging and appropriating his activism and political legacy.

## 40 Years of Advertising the MLK Holiday



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**Fig 1.**

Greyhound (1981). In celebrating King as a "Leader, Preacher, [and] Friend of all," this feature from Greyhound makes the case for the King holiday several years before it was finally signed into law.<sup>8</sup>



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**Fig 2.**

Greyhound (1985). This advert celebrates the passage of the King Holiday Bill and highlights some of the key individuals involved in the victory, including Coretta Scott King, Congressman John Conyers, and entertainer Stevie Wonder.<sup>9</sup>

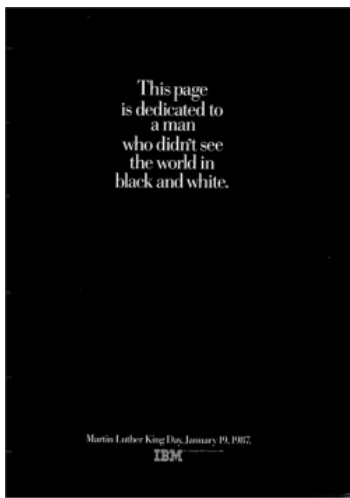


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**Fig 3.**

Coors (1986). A simplistic advert which calls for a "moment of silence" to celebrate King's life and accomplishments.<sup>10</sup>



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**Fig 4.**

IBM (1987). In describing King as a man "who didn't see the world in black and white," this advert leaned into the rhetoric of conservative colorblindness.<sup>11</sup>

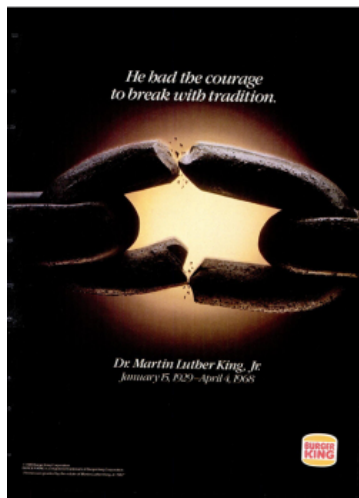


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**Fig 5.**

Kentucky Fried Chicken (1987). The message of the advert—"it's left to us"—is deliberately vague, allowing KFC to acknowledge the King holiday without taking a clear political position.<sup>12</sup>

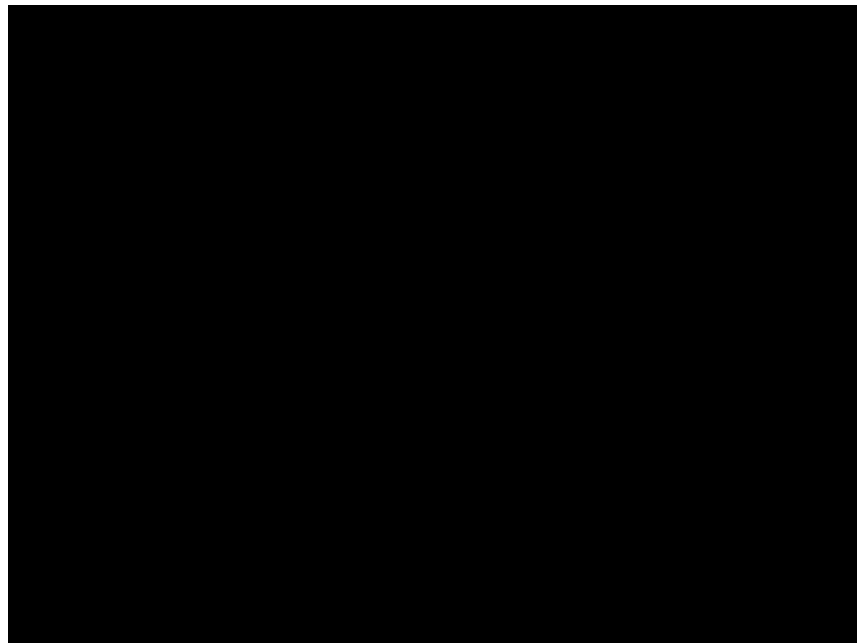


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**Fig 6.**

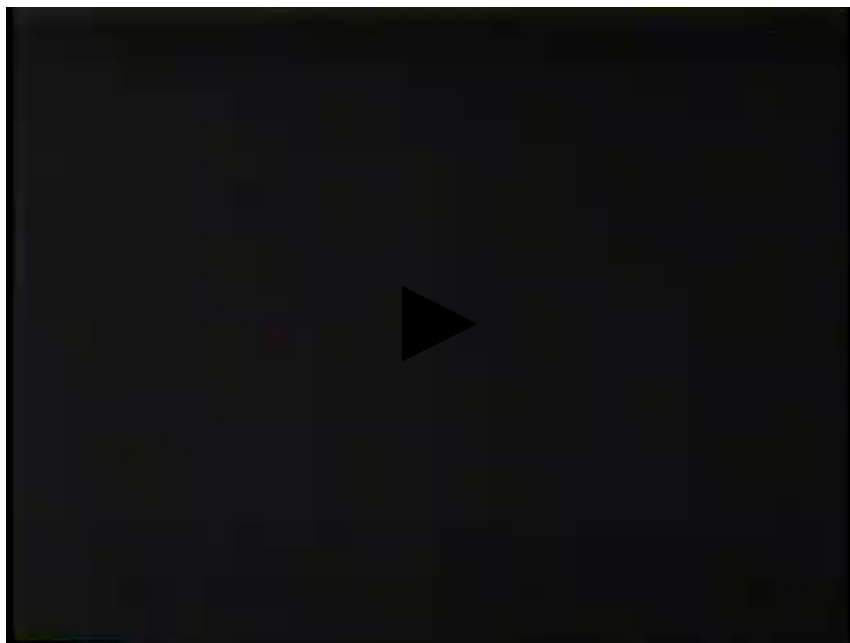
Burger King (1988). The evocative imagery in this advert gestures towards King's place within a Black radical tradition.<sup>13</sup>



**Video 1.**

Sears (1988). With its strong multicultural message, this advert was one of the first major King-themed television campaigns.<sup>14</sup>

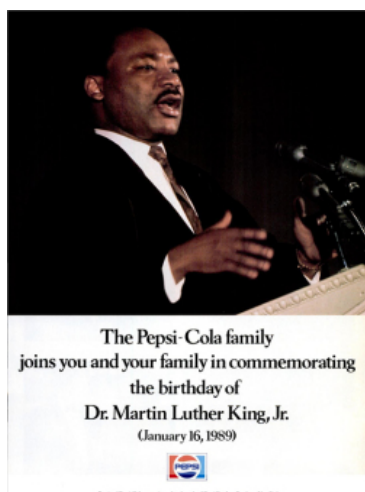
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**Video 2.**

Burger King (1988). Literally weaving together ideas about racial identity, patriotism, and social progress, this advert pushes back against conservative critiques of King as "un-American."<sup>15</sup>

[Click to view video](#)



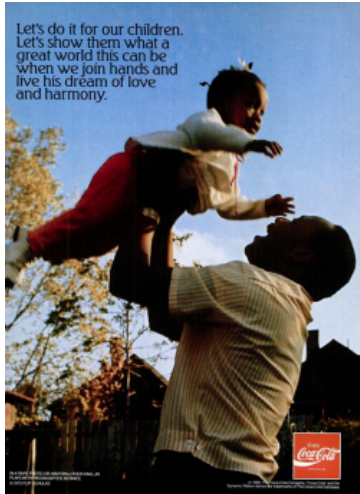
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**Fig 7.**

Pepsi-Cola (1989). Another campaign which avoids making any kind of political statement.<sup>16</sup>





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**Fig 8.**

Coca-Cola (1990). Taking a slightly different approach, this advert provides an intimate look into King's role as a father.<sup>17</sup>

**DREAM  
POWER**



There is no limit to the power of one who believes in a dream. What began as the singular dream of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. captured the imagination of millions and revolutionized American society. As a company dedicated to providing the kind of environment where relationships flourish, the American Express family salutes

the accomplishments of Dr. King as a towering role model to current and future generations. We believe in the dream and the pursuit of dreams.



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**Fig 9.**

American Express (1991). Reconciling King's "dream" to the pursuit of consumer capitalism, this advert positions American Express as a company which embodies his legacy.<sup>18</sup>

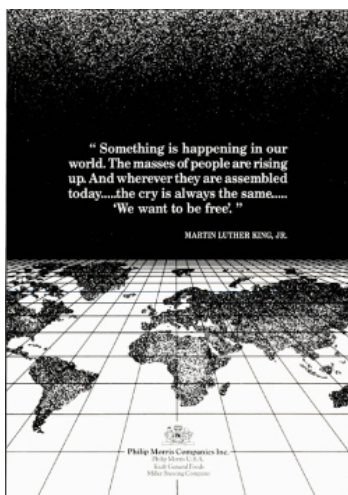


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**Fig 10.**

BP (1991). This feature demonstrates how companies attempted to align themselves with the King Center and play up their appeals to social responsibility.<sup>19</sup>

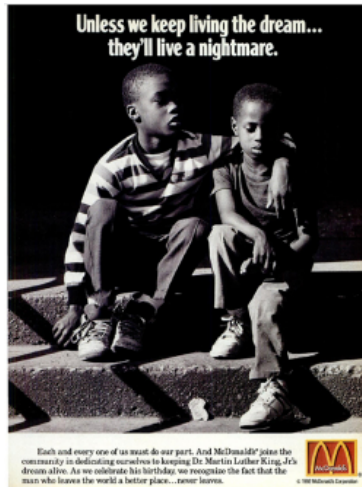


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**Fig 11.**

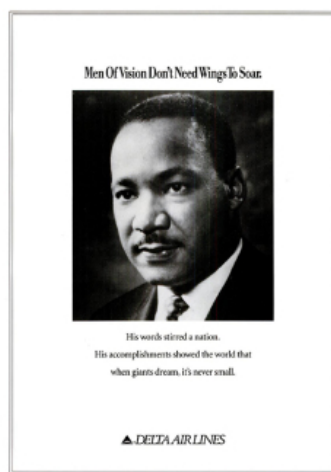
Philip Morris (1991). Another advert which gestures towards more radical components of King's philosophy; in this case, his diasporic understanding of the struggle for racial equality.<sup>20</sup>



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**Fig 12.**

McDonald's (1992). This advert leans heavily into conservative messaging about absent Black fathers and the "urban crisis."<sup>21</sup>



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**Fig 13.**

Delta (1993). By the 1990s, companies appeared more willing to use wordplay to link their products or services to King's memory.<sup>22</sup>



**Video 3.**

McDonald's (1993). By 1993 variations of this McDonald's campaign had been running for more than 5 years, suggesting that it was well received by the general public.<sup>23</sup>

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**L**iberty And Justice For All Was Meant To Be A Practice...  
Not Just Theory  
The King Center For Non-Violent Social Change  
Practices What It Preaches Keeping The Dream Alive...

**FLAGSTAR**

Dorco Haskelb...  
Flagstar Companies Salutes The King Commemorative Holiday

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**Fig 14.**

Flagstar (1994). Another campaign which makes connections to the King Center in Atlanta.<sup>24</sup>



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**Fig 15.**

American Airlines (1995). The text of this feature echoes that an earlier Delta Airlines advert and provides another example of businesses using wordplay to link their services to the King holiday.<sup>25</sup>

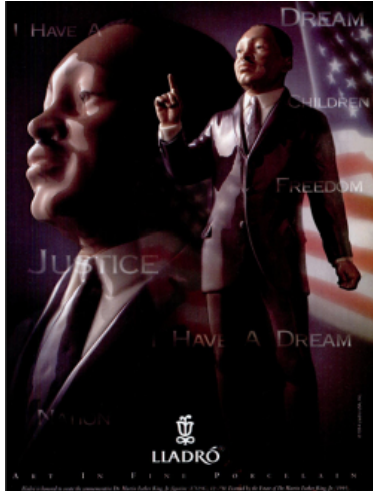


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**Fig 16.**

Du Pont (1995). One of the more visually striking adverts in this collection, this feature gestures towards King's notions of "brotherhood" and interracial unity.<sup>26</sup>



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**Fig 17.**

Lladro (1995). By the mid-1990s, adverts had begun to appear for King-themed memorabilia or consumer products.<sup>27</sup>

Keep the dream alive.

HONOR THE LEGACY OF DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., WITH YOUR OWN PERSONALIZED COMMEMORATIVE CHECKS.

Keep the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. alive with personal checks that pay tribute to his principles and beliefs. Each order includes your choice of 200 wallet checks for \$15.00 or 150 duplicate checks for \$10.00 with four different check scenes from Dr. King's life along with a flow strip cover. Leather cover (shown) is available for an additional charge. These Dr. King commemorative checks are available only from DeLuxe, creators of the world's most popular checks.

A portion of the proceeds will be used to honor people who are the principle of Dr. King through the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center.

To order call 1-800-4-DELUXE.

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**Fig 18.**

DeLuxe (1996). The speculative contention that these checks paid tribute to King's "principles and beliefs" was moderated by DeLuxe's contention that a portion of proceeds would be redistributed through the King Center.<sup>28</sup>

**THIS AD  
IS BLACK  
AND WHITE.  
HIS MESSAGE  
WAS NOT.**



When he speaks, his words reach a million in almost any community, because  
they are simple. He speaks of the things of the heart and the things  
of the mind. He speaks of the things of the heart and the things  
of the mind. He speaks of the things of the heart and the things  
of the mind.



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**Fig 19.**

McDonald's (2001). Echoing the language of earlier adverts by IBM, this feature returned to the theme of "colorblind" messaging.<sup>29</sup>



He dreamed of this day.

Celebrating Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day 1.16.06

**Publix.**  
WHERE SHOPPING IS A PLEASURE.

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**Fig 20.**

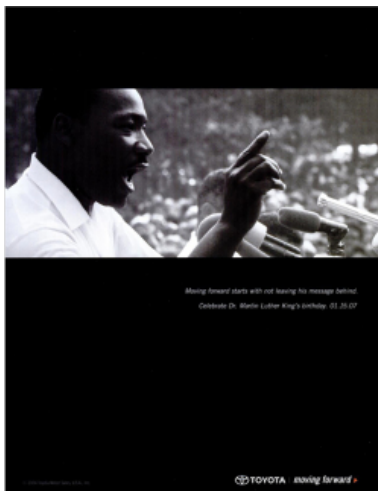
Publix (2006). Images of interracial groups, particularly children, were becoming an increasingly popular component of King holiday features by the late 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>30</sup>



**Video 4.**

As King-themed advertising became more widespread, Black cultural producers began to push back. One example can be seen in this 2006 clip from the first season of popular animated series *The Boondocks*, which landed creator Aaron McGruder a Peabody Award.<sup>31</sup>

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**Fig 21.**

Toyota (2007). This advert showcases a now familiar approach to commemorative campaigns: a photograph or image of King, a politically ambiguous appeal to his memory or "message," and subtle corporate branding.<sup>32</sup>



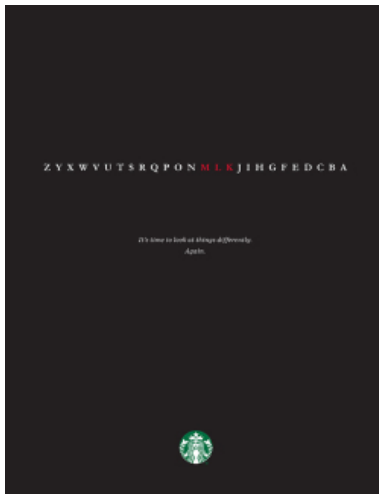


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**Fig 22.**

Thalia Surf (2011). This ill-conceived advert received national attention in 2011, demonstrating the dangers of small business or local companies attempting to capitalize on the King holiday.<sup>33</sup>



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**Fig 23.**

Starbucks (2015). In contrast to the public backlash to advertising missteps such as the previous feature, this Starbucks campaign which appeared online and print media was applauded as "simple" and "powerful" by outlets such as *Adweek*.<sup>34</sup>

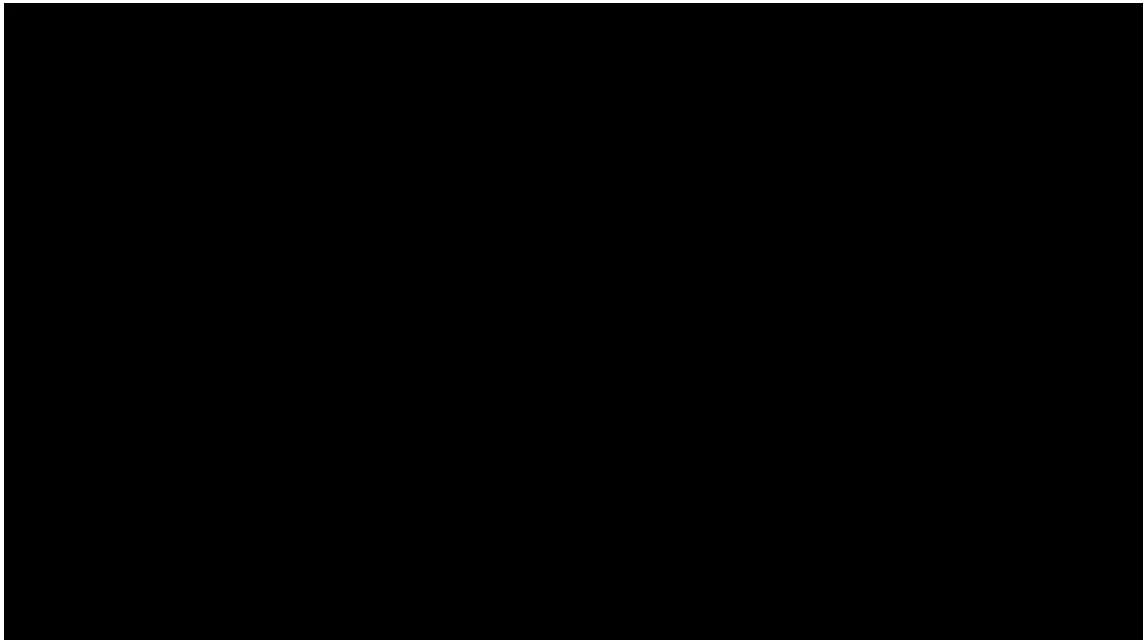


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**Fig 24.**

Comcast (2017). Another sophisticated campaign; one which combined compelling visuals with a strong central message, but which also avoided staking out a clear political position.<sup>35</sup>



**Video 5.**

Dodge (2018). While many earlier business missteps can be attributed to a lack of marketing planning or investment this Dodge campaign which aired during Super Bowl VII was still widely criticized despite high production values.<sup>36</sup>

[Click to view video](#)



**Video 6.**

The Late Show with Stephen Colbert (2018). This stand-up about the Dodge ad provides a humorous reminder of the potential dangers facing American businesses which seek to capitalize on King's memory.<sup>37</sup>

**[Click to view video](#)**

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**E. James West**

E. James West is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in history at Northumbria University, UK. He is the author of *Ebony Magazine and Lerone Bennett Jr.: Popular Black History in Postwar America* (University of Illinois Press, 2020). West can be contacted at [ejwestuk@gmail.com](mailto:ejwestuk@gmail.com).

**Footnotes**

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