

MLK at the LA Riots: Civil Rights, Memory, and Neoliberalism in Charles Johnson's *Dreamer*

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As writers, I think we are obliged not so much to always add new layers of interpretation onto what we know as we are to strip away as best we can the official interpretations that prevent us from undergoing a fresh experience with our subject.

—Charles Johnson, “Lessons”

Martin Luther King Jr. is invoked indiscriminately today. His name and image can be found everywhere and yet rarely with any context or complexity. It is this ambiguous legacy that animates Charles Johnson's *Dreamer* (1998), which fictionalizes the civil rights leader's Northern campaign in 1966. Johnson began writing and researching the project that would become *Dreamer* just months after the 1992 LA Riots, a historical moment that inflects his fictionalization of 1966 Chicago. Johnson points to a need to reimagine and remember the civil rights era in order to combat the pernicious effects of neoliberalism on processes of racialization at the end of the twentieth century. In revisiting King's life in the 1990s, Johnson works to rematerialize King's antiracism and contest his co-optation as a champion of deracialization or “colorblindness.” In positioning *Dreamer* as a presentist consideration of the civil rights movement and of Martin Luther King Jr., I first consider the state's response to the LA Riots as it relates to the civil rights movement. Second, I discuss the confluence of neoliberalism, race, and the disremembering of King

that this response demonstrates. Third, I read *Dreamer* as a response to and correction for this racial-neoliberal entanglement, one that, as Johnson notes in the epigraph, casts off “official interpretations” that function to obfuscate King’s career. Tracing a direct historical line from the civil rights movement to the LA Riots, his novel underscores the urban dimension and class politics of the movement as they persist into the neoliberal present. Johnson’s fiction thereby encourages us to rethink black freedom struggles not as frozen in history but as ongoing and under threat.

Invoking the civil rights movement in 1992

On April 29, 1992, Los Angeles erupted. In response to the acquittal of the four LAPD officers charged in the Rodney King police brutality case, citizens in South Central began an episode of protest, assault, arson, and looting that would bring Los Angeles to a standstill for close to a week. Mayor Thomas Bradley instituted a dusk-to-dawn curfew. President George H. W. Bush sent in the National Guard, then the Army and the Marines. LAX shut down, as did the Rapid Transit District, Amtrak, and the local interstates. In total, the LA Riots left 54 people dead, 2,328 injured, 862 buildings razed, and almost 900 million dollars in damages (Cannon 347). Considering its apparent similarities to the 1965 Watts Riots, commentators were quick to cast the 1992 riots in relationship to the civil rights era and the racial unrest that took place across the nation in the mid- to late 1960s (Applebome; Norris).¹

The Bush administration, on the other hand, reacted to this historical semblance in contradiction. Whereas White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater blamed the riots on the social reform programs of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society—programs that were in part responses to the unrest of the 1960s—Bush refused to grant the LA Riots the rhetorical weight of a comparison to the civil rights movement or the programs it mobilized. Addressing the nation on May 1, 1992, Bush asserted,

What we saw last night and the night before in Los Angeles is not about civil rights. It’s not about the great cause of equality that all Americans must uphold. It’s not a message of protest. It’s been the brutality of a mob, pure and simple. And let me assure you: I will use whatever force is necessary to restore order.

Occurring fourteen months after he proclaimed Vietnam syndrome “kicked” at the conclusion of the Gulf War and six months before the 1992 presidential election, Bush and his staff struggled to address what a race riot in Los Angeles meant as an outcome of and direct historical line to the 1960s. According to the White House, the riots both marked the failure of the civil rights era and had nothing to do with civil rights at all.² This struggle emerges from the administration’s wish to preserve the civil rights movement as a rhetorical gesture while still blaming the social reform programs it fostered for the destruction in Los Angeles.

Bush’s conflicting response to the riots signals a desire to structure the present-day meaning of the civil rights movement, casting it as an empty symbol rather than a demand for programmatic change. His administration recognized that controlling the interpretation of the present is a means of containing the past. Just as the Gulf War became a site at which memories of the Vietnam War could be reconciled or inflamed, the LA Riots represented a historical moment at which memories of the civil rights era could be further confined or inspire reenactment. It is, as Walter Benjamin notes, “moments of danger”—the Rodney King beating, the LA Riots, Gulf War syndrome—from which arise the warring potentials for a “revolutionary chance” to redeem the past or for this past to become “a tool of the ruling classes” (255). The White House needed to settle and contain the images of Rodney King writhing in the road and South Central in flames because the state’s command of historical interpretation hung in the balance. Bush’s split reaction had its basis in a simultaneous desire to blame his ideological antagonists and at the same time to maintain his administration’s careful containment and co-optation of the civil rights movement and in particular the cultural memory of Martin Luther King Jr. Following Marita Sturken, I use the term “cultural memory” (7) here and throughout this essay to designate the permeable and social space between personal memory and historical discourse through which citizens and institutions contest the meaning of the past. In issues of racial conflict and protest in the United States, particular cultural representations of King are the standards against which a demonstration is judged. It is the strategic reenactment of his teachings that distinguishes “a revolutionary chance” for redemption from “the brutality of a mob, pure and simple.”

Neoliberal racialization and the cultural legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.

No figure is more central to the understanding of race in the United States than Martin Luther King Jr. And yet in the 1990s, despite his introduction to classrooms across the nation, the minister from Atlanta became further and further detached from the popular icon MLK, a pious integrationist standing at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial. In Sturken's words, "remembering is in itself a form of forgetting" (82). Johnson himself wonders if King's principles "still instruct us when liberals and conservatives alike, Democrats and Republicans, Louis Farrakhan and even pro-gun advocates in Washington State, cite his words to support their vastly differing political agendas" ("Left" 194). King today, he adds, suffers from the "curse of canonization," a symbolic ambiguity perpetuated through a careful disregarding of his career after 1965 and the sound-biting of his speeches into ambiguous aphorisms. During the 1990s, the 1963 March on Washington and his "I Have a Dream" speech came to stand for King in the public's understanding of his life. A public speaking career that included hundreds of addresses ranging in subject from the politics of the African American church to the Vietnam War to unionization gets compressed down into a single concept: that people should be judged according to their character, not their skin color.

King's hope for a future in which skin color does not restrict his children's aspirations, in the hands of the New Right in the 1980s and 1990s, became a tool for the promotion of neoliberal "colorblindness" *right now*. As Nikhil Singh clarifies, in discussing this co-optation of civil rights-era liberalism,

Basing resistance to black calls for social justice on a defense of market individualism and national unity, rather than on claims of black inferiority, conservatives changed the debate about race from an argument about how to best redress the economic and political injuries of racism to one that equates ending racism with eliminating racial reference within juridical discourse and public policy. (10)

Whereas the racial liberalism of the post-World War II era endorsed the defunct idea that racial injustice could be cured through the elimination of prejudices and the fostering of sentimental pathways in the minds of

white America, the Reagan and Bush administrations recast this notion as the need to eliminate racial reference altogether.³ Race itself became racism. This thinking relies on the fetishization of free trade and open markets that the emergent market-political rationale of neoliberalism managed to graph onto processes of racialization. But racial liberalism and racial neoliberalism nonetheless share in common an ideological grounding in US global ascendancy (Melamed, "Spirit" 3). In the post-World War II period of US hegemony and rapid decolonization, racial liberalism at home helped to justify Harry Truman's containment/integration policies abroad and the related acceleration of US transnational capital. In parallel, near the end of the Cold War, racial neoliberalism—manifest in a superficial multiculturalism or a blunt colorblindness—arose as a rationale for a fresh series of US transnational incursions, in oil-rich countries in particular. That is, as a process of racialization, neoliberalism is less distinct from liberalism than it is an acceleration and transposition of it.

Neoliberalism is a set of economic policies endorsing the deregulation of financial industries and the global integration of national markets as a means of spreading US-based multinational capital (and US liberal democracy) around the world. But it is also, as political philosopher Wendy Brown contends, a "form of political reasoning" (693). Neoliberalism is not, as it is sometimes argued, an economic model that seeps into social and political domains; it is in fact a market rationale imposed in full onto these domains. "Neoliberalism," Brown notes, "casts the political and social spheres both as appropriately dominated by market concerns and as themselves organized by market rationality" (694). Locating itself as both the cause-for and response-to political and social action, neoliberalism is able to naturalize its operation to the point that it is omnipresent and at the same time almost indiscernible. Although it is a market-political rationale that arose adjacent to globalization, it also replicates and furthers the contradictions of the liberal state: a promotion of the particularism of market liberalism, on one hand, and the universalism of political liberalism on the other. "For transnational capital," Lisa Lowe reminds us, "is 'parasitic' upon institutions and social relations of the modern nation-state, deploying its repressive and ideological apparatuses, manipulating the narratives of the liberal citizen-subject" (171). Hence, a consideration of neoliberalism does not designate an issue of the global rather than the national; instead, it necessitates an interrogation of the global-in-the-national and the national-in-the-global.

Colorblindness, then, is racialization according to the logic of neoliberalism. Though it might appear to suggest a total dissolution of difference, colorblindness functions to rationalize the interaction of infinite dissimilarities. It articulates itself as a meritocracy. In ignoring the past and present of racial oppression, colorblindness articulates destitution as a product of that particular individual's failure to compete in the "open" market. Neoliberal colorblindness produces economic imbalance and then authorizes itself as the solution to this imbalance. It cannot fail according to its own logic. The economic successes of nonwhite Americans represent proof of the equalizing effect of neoliberal colorblindness—ignoring their skin color facilitated this success—and the destitution of others is blamed on the intrusion of state-run social programs. Thus neoliberal colorblindness justifies global capitalism as the cure for oppression, rather than its cause, and it holds up select success stories of African American, Asian American, and Latino/a capitalists—models of an elite, multicultural global citizenship—that obfuscate the impoverishment of millions. In response to the emergence of this new racism signaled in 1992 Los Angeles, Johnson presents an intersectional consideration of race and the market through the lens of 1966 Chicago, reconstituting King's career and the civil rights movement in the process. Looking beyond the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that defines his career, Johnson's King becomes less a tool to defend neoliberal policy work than the center of a social movement poised to defend against it.

Fictionalizing King to remember the movement

Johnson is of course not alone in addressing the LA Riots through fiction. Analyzing literature and film of the 1990s, Min Song theorizes the riots as a moment that ushered in an era of pessimism and anxiety in American culture. This realization, structured by the thought of neocons such as Charles Murray, morphed into a fear of the "strange," the presence of immigrants and racialized bodies—figures such as the insular Korean American and the criminal African American man—who became the targets of scapegoating but also represented a materiality resistant to the mythos of the nation (Song 17-19). The LA Riots, according to Song, introduced a space for reflection on an unfamiliar future that authors and filmmakers mined during the 1990s to rethink racialization, nationalism, and the specter of social decline. The strange presents an aesthetic chal-

lenge; it demands experimentation because it operates outside the familiar tropes of the nation. Johnson likewise considers the implications of the LA Riots and the presence of the strange, but he does so through historical means, reflecting on the continuities that mark it not as an aberrant moment but as part of what Benjamin calls “a single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage” (257). He imagines the 1960s, rather than a “strange future,” to mine the effects of 1992 on our cultural memories of the past—memories that then inform our orientation to the future. In this frame, the riots, in opposition to Bush’s claim, are in fact “about the great cause of equality,” and it is a cause that reaches far into the nation’s past and transforms it.

Although there is no explicit reference to the LA Riots in *Dreamer*, the text establishes its 1990s origin in the opening page. In sermon-like prose, it begins in a Chicago that would not sound unfamiliar to a resident of South Central or Koreatown, Los Angeles, in the spring of 1992:

Chicago in the hundred-degree summer heat of 1966 was the site for the special form of crisis his wing of the Movement produced: families divided, fathers at the throats of their sons, brothers spilling each other’s blood. . . . This was the battlefield, . . . where in the midst of a shooting war between Richard Daley’s police and black snipers on the West Side (two were dead, hundreds were in detention), he composed that electrifying speech, “A Knock at Midnight.” (13)

Despite its immediate grounding in a past historical moment, considering the publication date and the artistic genesis of the project, one cannot ignore the 1990s import of the imagery. Johnson represents the chaos of at once Chicago in 1966 and Los Angeles in 1992 in the bloodshed, the police-rioter hostilities, and the realization of the chasm separating the poor, urban neighborhoods from the affluent, suburban ones.⁴ Just as Bush militarized the riots in Los Angeles—sending in the National Guard, Army, and Marines, and threatening further use of “force”—the text describes Chicago in the language of combat. The South Side is not characterized as a community or city but as a “battlefield” and a “shooting war.”

It is a description that upsets the cultural memory of the civil rights movement in Johnson’s present. The civil rights movement taught in schools and referenced on January 15 and during Black History Month, tends to begin with *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 and conclude with

the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Hall 1237). In this telling—centering on African American college students in their Sunday best, Rosa Parks, King, and, as antagonist, unambiguous white Southern racists—the state is the hero and access to full citizenship its solution to injustice. This is what historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall refers to as the “classical phase” or “short civil rights movement,” a story circulated by the New Right that brackets off and dehistoricizes the larger contexts of the movement (1234).⁵ But *Dreamer* does not open with a peaceful sit-in, and, set in 1966, it emphasizes all that the legislation of the preceding months did not settle. Johnson depicts not a black-and-white conflict but an image of turmoil in which “*brothers [are] spilling each other’s blood.*”⁶ It is a picture that calls for a reconsideration of racialization itself as not something correctable through the practice of “colorblindness” but as a process tied up in the misdistribution of capital. It demands what Grace Hong, in her work on women of color feminism, calls an “intersectional analysis” (xix). It is in the intersections and entanglements of different axes of gender, racial, and socioeconomic identities that one is able to bring out the contradictions inherent in capital and its relationship to the state. *Dreamer* offers just such an analysis of the civil rights movement, opening it up to an unnostalgic consideration that exceeds and troubles one according to single-axis identity politics.⁷

In depicting the Chicago riots as a “battlefield,” Johnson casts a line not just from Chicago to Los Angeles but also from Chicago to the Soviet Union and Vietnam, a point emphasized in his reference to King’s “A Knock at Midnight.” In the speech, King criticizes the church for condoning the ongoing Cold War arms race and for its catering to the “privileged classes,” reluctant to answer the “knock” of the Christian poor (62–63). His denunciation of the church as a “tool” of the state and the rich, in the context of racial injustices, speaks to the extranational and economic complexities of the civil rights era. Singh, among others, points to the importance of domestic race relations to US global ascendancy after World War II and in particular the nation’s Cold War struggles to suppress the Soviet Union and communism (135–36).⁸ In order to rationalize the international spread of American capitalism as a benign influence, as bringing freedom and equality to the decolonizing nations in Asia and Africa, and in order to legitimize its position as an emerging global force, the nation needed to attend to its “Negro problem.” King’s speech and Johnson’s reference to it together allude to the dangers of this state

rationale. Racialization in the United States cannot be considered apart from the nation's interests abroad or the economics so integral to its operation. Whereas "official interpretations" of King's career tend to disregard the global outlook of his later years, *Dreamer* signals them from the start, evoking the transnational "battlefield" of the Cold War.

Although Johnson read numerous biographies, transcripts, and news clippings in order to better capture Martin Luther King Jr.'s mannerisms and the details of his personal life ("Left" 198), *Dreamer* is just as much about a pair of fictional characters as it is about King. Johnson's narrator, Matthew Bishop, is a former college philosophy student and an SCLC volunteer. He tells both a first-hand account of the Northern campaign and a third-person account that channels King's perception of the campaign and his life's work, the latter in italics and biblical prose. In describing his writings, Bishop notes, "At the SCLC part of my job description was recording the Revolution, preserving its secrets for posterity—particularly what took place in the interstices. Naturally, this is where the stories of all doubles occur" (102). Bishop operates as the historian of Johnson's project, reclaiming King by simultaneously witnessing his actions and imagining his perceptions. Although he represents himself as "preserving" the past of the SCLC, Bishop's split account—one part third-person epic and one part first-person realism—underscores the limitations of historical discourse. The incongruence in form and perception between his SCLC logbook and his own first-person account of King and the Poor People's Campaign alludes to the inescapable effect of narrative on cultural memory. As Jenny Edkins notes, "'What happened' changes as different meanings are attributed to an event" (37). Although the text presents both accounts and thus denies uncomplicated knowledge of the civil rights era, it also points to the ease of assimilating a single, familiar account—King at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial—as opposed to a series of contrasting ones. *Dreamer*, through Bishop's two-part narration, evokes the civil rights movement at the same time that it gestures to the necessary impossibility of this project. The cultural memory of Martin Luther King Jr. cannot be reclaimed per se, but it can be problematized and reintroduced through more critical forms of reflection and remembrance; it can entail more than the misinterpretation of a single speech. This clear-eyed cultural remembering can detach King from the colorblindness his name is used to endorse and instead emphasize the unfinished nature of his life's work.

Bishop's storytelling embodies this undertaking, and it is from his interstitial recordings that a double does in fact emerge. Chaym Smith, whom Johnson himself refers to as the protagonist of *Dreamer* ("Lessons"), is a poor African American Chicagoan and King's uncanny other. Although he appears identical to the minister—so much so that SCLC hires him as a stand-in for the civil rights leader—he is King's opposite in both character and fortune. Smith is poor, skeptical, suffers from self-doubt, and resents King for his successes. He is a veteran of the Korean War, and he abhors the contrast between his treatment as a soldier in Korea and his treatment as a citizen at home. Nonetheless, Smith is not so much apart from King as a part of him and the civil rights movement. It is Smith who comes to stand for the forgotten aspects of King's career and the irresolution of the civil rights era that extends into the 1990s.

It is through Smith that Johnson's King is made conscious of the profound challenges facing his Poor People's Campaign, challenges that reflect a presentist concern for the neoliberal racialization of the 1990s.⁹ When Bishop first introduces King to Smith, the civil rights leader is set off balance and thrust back into his personal past, considering the born-into class position that made possible his education and later successes in the church and as a public figure:

He might have been peering into a mirror, one in which his history was turned upside down, beginning not in his father's commodious, two-story Queen Anne-style home in Atlanta but instead across the street in one of the wretched shotgun shacks crammed with the black poor. Certainly in every darkened, musty pool hall, on every street corner, in every cramped prison cell he'd passed through, the minister had seen men like Chaym Smith—but never quite like this. (32-33)

In Smith, King faces the failings of an antiracist campaign built on abstract notions of assimilation and egalitarianism. Suggesting that King could be Smith and that Smith could be King, the text underscores the extent to which socioeconomic pressures propel a subject's life in a particular direction. If Martin Luther King Jr. was born not into a middle-class family but in a "wretched shotgun shack," the text asks, what might his life look like? Would it look like Smith's? The implication is that race and class intersect and, moreover, obscure one another. The text calls attention to this intersection by implying that if King had not been born

into a middle-class family but rather among Chicago's black poor his life achievements might more resemble those of his body double. Smith's resemblance to the civil rights leader is, Roland Murray underscores, "doubly uncanny" (15): he is foreign but familiar in body and as a figure of the "repressed" class politics of the movement. And yet this uncanny other also invokes the LA Riots and thereby the long history of racialized class inequality in the United States. Smith, the text reminds us, is foregrounded due to his familiar face, but he is one of many "men like Chaym Smith" in the 1960s as in the 1990s.

Part of what makes the latter decade's neoliberal racialization so appealing is that it presents racial inequality as an uncomplicated and long-resolved problem. The notion that skin color itself is the culprit, and not the legacies of material oppression intrinsic to the function of the state and market, is far more legible to the nation than one that implicates it in larger and ongoing structures of subjugation. Jodi Melamed's definition of racialization is insightful:

Racialization does not function . . . only at the level of ideology, attaching positive or negative meanings or narratives to preexisting forms of humanity. Rather, racial knowledges are materially produced discourses that both constitute and are determined by the historically specific material circumstances and geohistorical conditions for which they offer comprehension and sense making. (*Represent* 12)

Racialization is the process through which human categories of difference are produced. But racialization also proceeds according to the material conditions that it, racialization, produced in the first place. It is the cause and the effect. Racialization is an ideological product, but it is one that is produced through and reproduces material realities. Though white supremacist ideologies do still operate in the present, after the racial break, Melamed argues, racialization depends less on phenotypic reference and more on the stigmatization of particular economic and cultural categories. The result is that racialization does not align with state-recognized racial categories. An African American man, for instance, can inhabit one or the other side of what Melamed calls the "privilege/stigma divide" of this new racism. Hence, colorblindness reinforces a phenotypic understanding of racialization—racialization runs no deeper than benign categories of difference—and so disguises the insidious ef-

fects of neoliberalism. This moment of realization for Johnson's King, "in which his history was turned upside down," foregrounds his late-career class politics later censored by neoliberals and thereby contests their claims to his legacy.

It is in the meeting of King and Smith that Johnson's fiction brings to the surface the material circumstances of racialization that colorblindness masks and generates in the author's present. This is one way in which, as Rudolph Byrd notes, Smith emerges as King's doppelganger and thereby acts as a harbinger of death and the "condition of the outsider" (153).¹⁰ In presenting Smith as King's uncanny other, the text is able to isolate the socioeconomic aspect of racialization from the phenotypic aspect upon which colorblindness relies for its coherence. Questioning whether or not Martin Luther King Jr. would be Martin Luther King Jr. without the benefits of a middle-class childhood and access to higher education is not to discount his great accomplishments. Rather, it offers an illustration of Melamed's contention that racialization in the post-World War II period is not bound to skin color or lineage but that it produces differential relations of human value through the superimposition of class and cultural domains.¹¹ Martin Luther King Jr. is the ideal subject through which to make this point. His appeal to proponents of neoliberal colorblindness is in part his personal success. King's words are not just contorted into an endorsement of colorblind practices; he is used as a model against which poor African Americans are compared. If King could be one of the most successful leaders of the twentieth century, the contemporary logic goes, a destitute African American man in 1992 must be so because he did not work hard enough to reap the benefits of US selfhood—not because of ideological, economic, and cultural stigmas that differentiated him from birth. The introduction of Smith refutes this thinking. The life of Martin Luther King Jr. too, the text suggests, is the product of particular material conditions and circumstances. When read as a presentist consideration of race and economic policy, *Dreamer* foregrounds and criticizes the logic of colorblindness in the 1990s. The novel might be set in 1966 Chicago, but it speaks to the racial and urban politics of early-1990s Los Angeles.

Of course, someone like Smith does not appear in the New Right's narration of the civil rights era, nor in fact did he appear in the movement's account of itself. Upon introducing Smith to King, Bishop notes, Smith was "the kind of Negro the Movement had for years kept away from the world's cameras: sullen, ill-kept, the very embodiment of the

blues" (33). Smith appears in contrast to cultural memories of the civil rights era: he is a Northerner; he is not a college student dressed in a suit and tie; he is poor and financial success is inaccessible; and his abject status appears altogether unchanged by the legislation of 1964 and 1965. Smith brings to light the misremembering of the civil rights movement in the 1980s and 1990s. But he also represents the censoring that the movement itself carried out.¹² Whereas neoliberals would later mobilize the "model minority" myth to argue that poverty is not systemic but an outcome of personal failings, the civil rights movement's professional-class leaders advanced their cause by keeping this poverty out of sight. In order to combat white supremacist ideologies built on the notion of superior and inferior races, these leaders kept poorer African Americans, like Smith, away from the press. One unintended outcome of this is a disproportionate emphasis on one basic tenet of racial liberalism: that race is a social construct. Emphasizing the social constructedness of race conceals the material processes that underpin and maintain racial oppression. *Dreamer* seeks to reclaim the movement's material antiracism in imagining King's Poor People's Campaign in which the civil rights leader did attend to race as an economic and class issue. It also points to what a disremembering of the civil rights era produces in the 1990s: a dematerialization of race, colorblindness, that justifies itself as the realization of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "dream." One can see in *Dreamer* the way in which the movement's self-censoring would later enable the colorblind policy work of the 1980s and 1990s.

The correspondence between 1966 Chicago and 1992 Los Angeles is evident as the scene shifts from the South Side to the middle-class suburb of Evanston. When Smith is sent to receive an award for King at Calvary AME, he is struck by the disparity between this neighborhood—the location of Northwestern University and Johnson's hometown—and his own South Side housing project. Amy, another SCLC volunteer and Bishop's romantic interest, tells the multigenerational story of African American upward mobility in Evanston, culminating in one man, Bob Jackson, establishing a construction company and using it to build affordable houses, apartment buildings, and churches for the African American community. She tells Bishop and Smith,

With many black Evanstonians [Jackson] shared the belief that life was getting better, . . . and with legal segregation struck

down he counseled his platoon of grand-nephews and -nieces (spared the devastating discrimination he'd known) that if they were genuinely concerned about the economic inequalities they saw in the world, "The best thing you children can do for the poor is not be one of them." (129)

Racialization is not bound to state-recognized racial categories; Jackson is not racialized in the same way as Smith. Though his life is an inspiring one, Jackson and his bootstraps story can operate to obstruct the less fortunate realities of the poor African Americans just ten miles south of Evanston in "urban islands of poverty" (Song 6). The notion that the best solution to the destitution of the African American lower class is to choose not to be a part of it implies that poor people, as neoliberals tend to suggest, choose destitution—or at least fail to compete in a market free of de jure segregation. Jackson's belief that his grandnephews and -nieces, not facing the discrimination he did prior to the racial break, are capable of choosing economic success reflects and becomes a justification for the perpetuation of colorblindness in the 1990s. However unintentionally, Jackson effaces the African American poor, like Smith, and he disregards the institutional racism and de facto segregation that are the legacies of racial oppression in the United States.

It is not surprising that King's/Smith's photo op takes place at Calvary AME and not among the South Side housing projects (the latter being his focus in 1966). Upon arriving at the church, Smith tells Bishop and Amy, "Everything here seems so . . . *finished*. God loves these Negroes. What do I *say* to them?" (130). Smith's observation that Evanston appears "finished" speaks to the impression in 1966 common among the middle and upper classes and perpetuated through media outlets that the struggle for civil rights had concluded and succeeded. Evanston is finished; the South Side remains a "battlefield." The text thus comments on the careful narration of the civil rights era. Smith is "kept away from the world's cameras," just as the success stories of Bob Jackson and other middle-class African Americans are circulated as the actualization of racial equality. It is telling then that King arrives at Calvary AME in time to speak, rather than allowing Smith to accept the award for him. Smith remains the spoken-for of the civil rights movement. Effacement is an undeniable part of representation, and Smith is the absence to King's recognition.

Yet colorblindness and the recruitment of stories like Jackson's to support it do little more than mask the circular relationship of the market to processes of racialization. In describing the Calvary AME congregation to Smith, Amy states, "People like Mr. Jackson's kin, Dr. Hale, and Leroy Young. He rewired the bookstore, Great Expectations, over near the university" (129-30). Like Dickens's Pip, the African American community of Evanston has great expectations that are not as simple as choice; personal and historical legacies linger and inhibit. Not unlike Smith, Jackson and his relations face a market that racializes according to stigmatized/privileged economic and cultural categories at the same time that it endorses a colorblind egalitarianism. In 1966, Northwestern University enrolled fewer than fifty African American students, a statistic that would lead to a Bursar's Office sit-in the following year (Pridmore 217). Even the African American middle class of Evanston, a community Smith suggests, "God loves," is still in some sense on the outside looking in, rewiring a bookstore for affluent, white Northwestern students.

Representations of Martin Luther King Jr. in the United States are seldom put to use outside or in opposition to a national framework. "Erased altogether," Hall notes, "is the King who opposed the Vietnam War and linked racism at home to militarism and imperialism abroad. Gone is King the democratic socialist who advocated unionization, planned the Poor People's Campaign, and was assassinated in 1968 while supporting a sanitation workers' strike" (1234). It is of course this "erased" King on which Johnson focuses, and it is through the fictionalization of this King that the text speaks back to the neoliberalism of the 1990s. In the (fictional) speech at Calvary AME, during which Bishop begins to think King is in fact Smith, the minister states,

No, the segregationists lost before they even began. Nothing stands alone. You know, not one member of the White Citizens' Council can finish breakfast in the morning without relying on the rest of the world. That sponge "Bull" Connor bathes with came from the Pacific Islands. His towel was spun in Turkey. The coffee Orval Faubus drinks traveled all the way from South America, the tea from China, the cocoa from West Africa. . . . After a time, I tell you, a man comes to see only a We, this precious moment as a tissue holding past, future, and present. (140)

Johnson's King transforms the familiar talk of integration, casting it on a global scale and exercising it to oppose the presentist market-political rationale of neoliberalism. In beginning with segregationists and the White Citizen's Council, King brings to mind the struggles to desegregate schools and other public institutions, the efforts for which he is most recognized, in the late 1950s and early 1960s. But he reorients this assumption and instead points to a more capacious and long-standing global "integration." Emphasizing the contingent relationship of Bull Connor, Orval Faubus, Turkish textile manufacturers, and South American coffee farmers, the text points to a collapsing of self and other, the fear of which Amy Kaplan theorizes as the anarchy of empire. "If the fantasy of American imperialism aspires to a borderless world where it finds its own reflection everywhere," she writes, "then the fruition of this dream shatters the coherence of national identity, as the boundaries that distinguish it from the outside world promise to collapse" (16). The "anarchic" foundation of US empire is an unstable one; its total realization is also its total destruction. In no form is this more apparent than in its current manifestation: neoliberalism. To fully Americanize the world is to eliminate the binary oppositions—domestic and foreign, colonizer and colonized, central and peripheral—on which a belief in American exceptionalism relies. What this fictional King's speech touches on then is the paranoia of the post-Cold War United States, intensified in response to George H. W. Bush's "new world order," that the rise of globalization would integrate the other in opposition to which the nation had previously represented itself. There is an inherent contradiction, the text suggests, in the state's endorsement of transnational capitalism.

I do not in this mean to suggest that Johnson's King is speaking in support of the forcible "integration" of transnational capitalism. The immediate implications of his reference to white American elites and global labor is that the merging of national markets grants huge profits to the global North at a great cost to the global South. In the speech, King discusses "a universe of interrelatedness," contending, "Every man and woman is a speculum, our mirror. Our twin" (140). It is an idea integral to the historical King's concept of "beloved community," in which spontaneous agapic love is capable of a radical reforming of the oppressor's relationship to the oppressed. In highlighting the contradiction in the anarchic US empire—in accelerating the currents of transnational capitalism the state desires its own dissolution, the loss of its exceptionalism—King suggests

that there is a different anarchic potential that endures in latent form. It is the fact of interconnection and of the self being in part constituted through and in the other. Although speaking from a fictional 1966, it signals the contradictions of neoliberalism in the 1990s. Brown points out that neoliberalism, as a form of political reasoning, produces and measures citizens according to their capacity for “self-care” (694). The ideal citizen is one not in need of “aid” from the state. The neoliberal citizen is capable of obtaining his or her own financial support, protection, healthcare, and education. But Johnson’s King highlights neoliberalism’s creation of the opposite. Just as neoliberalism promotes a global merging of markets that brings people closer together in space and time, it figures its citizens as self-caring and independent. That is, neoliberalism endorses codependence and independence in the same breath. The former facilitates profit and the latter facilitates the strategic forgetting of its source. King emphasizes that segregation does nothing more than hide our contingencies and abuses, neoliberalism’s repressed other.¹³ Johnson’s King foregrounds this contradiction in underscoring the segregationists’ reliance “on the rest of the world.” To “see only a We” is to recognize the fault lines in the neoliberal ideal of self-care.

The conception of time King theorizes in his speech at Calvary AME offers a radical rethinking of progress and a critique of neoliberal colorblindness. According to Ekins, linear time, which is homogenous and progresses at a constant clip into the future, is the time of sovereign power. It legitimates the state, and it relies on forgetting to perpetuate the belief that it is permanent and stable, not “established by a *coup de force*” (229). It is through a disruption of linear time that one can challenge the state—which construes itself in market terms, disseminates neoliberal policies, and protects the interests of an elite global citizenry—and establish a position incapable of incorporation. When King imagines “this precious moment as a tissue holding past, future, and present,” he recounts a path to the real, in which one encircles a traumatic moment that is the past, future, and present, rather than attempting to assimilate and get past it. When politicians appeal to King in promoting colorblind practices—insisting on an abstract, dematerialized notion of race—it is in promotion of linear time and progress that effaces a past that endures into and *is* the present. In other words, colorblindness demands dehistoricizing the nation’s past. It forecloses on intersectional considerations and instead recommends free trade and open markets as the cure for oppression.

Johnson's King emphasizes, in contrast, a need to confront time as a single, continuous formation. He, like Benjamin's historical materialist, "approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past" (263). It is through a reorganization of time and a radical approach to historicism, the text suggests, that one is able to redeem the memory of Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement, challenging its containment by the state as "a tool of the ruling classes."

The fictional King's counterstatement to linear time at Calvary AME also speaks back to the "curse of canonization" to which Johnson refers in his nonfiction writings. If linear time is the time of the state, it is also the time of Christian messianism, a belief in the future second coming of Christ. Johnson himself admits to the teleological dimension of King's early thought. But he also suggests that this understanding of the civil rights leader is limited in light of his later career. In a 2005 essay, "The King We Need," he breaks King's intellectual life down into three stages: 1956-64, during which he advanced a "teleological love that recognizes everything as process"; 1964-65, a time in which he turned his focus to the global "beloved community"; and 1965-68, when he undertook his "last and greatest 'dream'" to reform capitalism. Though this "teleological love" of King's early years does lend itself to neoliberal misuse, Johnson emphasizes that this distortion relies on forgetting the second and third stages of the civil rights leader's career. In his final and "greatest" stage, he came to recognize that "hard-won spiritual and political triumphs can be lost in a single generation" ("Need"). Theorizing time as a "tissue holding past, future, and present," Johnson's King challenges a tenet of Christian theological time (and neoliberal "progress"): that the future is always distinct from and an improvement upon the past. It is by disremembering this King that politicians and policymakers are able to mobilize his memory in carrying out neoliberal reforms—thereby acting to corrode rather than continue his legacy.

The potential for Martin Luther King Jr. to become an instrument of the state and its neoliberal colorblind policies is a fear that haunts *Dreamer*. In their time working for the SCLC, Smith and Bishop are tracked by a pair of FBI agents, Groat and Withersby, a reference to J. Edgar Hoover's surveillance of Martin Luther King Jr. throughout the late 1950s and 1960s. When Groat and Withersby finally confront Smith

and Bishop, the agents attempt to persuade Smith to join the FBI as a puppet imposter for the state and, this being unsuccessful, blackmail him into doing so. Upon Smith's departure with Groat and Withersby, Bishop reflects, "What if the Wise Guys really had no use for him? No more than they did for King. What if their assignment was to eliminate or discredit the minster—wouldn't they want to eliminate as well the one capable of standing in during his absence?" (207). Bishop's confusion is clarified in the 1990s, as King became the state's most compelling image of achieved racial equality. The FBI's recruitment of Smith as a King imposter signals a presentist concern for the New Right's use of the civil rights leader in support of colorblindness. It gestures to the erasure of the King of "A Knock at Midnight" who challenged the state's actions during the Cold War and foregrounded the economic dimension of racial oppression.¹⁴ Of this King, Singh notes, he "rejected the view of racial justice now attributed to him: that all that was required was to cross the threshold in which domestic racial differences and divisions were apprehended as the commonalities of some great national abstraction" (14). Access to full citizenship, that is, is presented as the absolute solution to racism and racial subjugation.

The state does not desire to "eliminate" or "discredit" King, as Bishop suggests, but instead to retain and in fact proliferate his image as a post-hoc founding father. He becomes a representation of the attainment of equality in the United States through the progress of the state and deracialization. Johnson's *Dreamer* does not just offer a counterstatement to the co-optation of King; it charts the process of containment itself. Smith acknowledges this danger, telling Bishop, "As soon as you squeeze experience into a sentence—or a story—it's suspect. A lot sweeter, or uglier, than things actually were. Words are just webs. Memory is mostly imagination. If you want to be free, you best go beyond all that" (92). Smith's statement forms a thesis to Johnson's project. His recommendation to Bishop to "go beyond all that" speaks to a need for a material antiracism, one that does not abstract race to the realm of attitude and sentiment but attends to its material production. He calls for direct action. Telling stories has its limits. Narrativizing histories and traumas is not detrimental in and of itself—it is after all precisely what Johnson does—but stories can also reduce and mask a past that lingers in and structures the present moment.¹⁵ If "memory is mostly imagination," then we must attend to the past, present, and future that is being imagined.

Conclusion: canonizing King, forgetting Los Angeles

April 29, 2012, the twenty-year anniversary of the Rodney King beating, passed with little reflection on what the LA Riots meant and mean for a nation still struggling to confront the chasm separating its highest earners from the rest, its persistent neglect of struggling urban communities, the racial structure of its practices of imprisonment and associated legislation, and, in its treatment of Muslim Americans after 9/11, a restored fear of the “strange.” Martin Luther King Jr. has, in contrast, been enshrined on the Washington Mall in a monument themed after his “I Have a Dream” speech and assigned the address 1964 Independence Avenue in recognition of the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Fixing King in this year (the end of the “short civil rights movement”) enables the forgetting of his later career, years committed to confronting economic inequality and urban poverty. The LA Riots are incommensurable as a legacy of the civil rights movement in light of this periodization. If 1964 is the end date of King’s career in our cultural memory—an argument made in white granite on Capitol Hill—then the riots can represent no more than “the brutality of a mob, pure and simple.” The maintenance of this logic relies on and is the product of neoliberalism and its form of racialization, colorblindness. Johnson’s *Dreamer* points to a particular abuse of the nation’s past and emphasizes the need to reflect on and encircle this past in the interest of the present. The disremembering of the civil rights era and King does not take place in isolation but establishes “official interpretations” that foreclose on more radical forms of action and structures of knowledge. Remembering the civil rights movement does not mean getting it right or more accurate. Instead, it is a project that opens the movement to genuine engagement—to considering its relationship to the LA Riots and the material wake of its cultural memory.

§

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Notes

1. Most journalists distinguished the LA Riots from the Watts Riots as less “black and white” due to a “vast inflow of Hispanic and Asian immigrants” to South Central (Barringer). Indeed, of the more than 5,000 arrestees, 51% were Latino, and of this group almost 80% were recent immigrants (Lieberman; Valle 47). Of the properties damaged, Korean American merchants suffered the greatest financial losses, totaling an estimated 359 million dollars (Ong 12). Nonetheless, this common assertion also effaces the racial complexities of the 1960s riots.

2. Bush's threat to use “whatever force is necessary to restore order” also carries militaristic undertones. In declaring an end to Vietnam syndrome, Bush implied a readiness to engage the US military in both foreign and domestic conflicts. In fact, considering the immigrant groups populating South Central, Bush's speech also implies a reconfiguring of borders: racialized urban communities are cast as domestic foreigners.

3. To cite just one example, in a 1986 address, President Ronald Reagan, in the course of arguing for the end of hiring quotas, states, “We are committed to a society in which all men and women have equal opportunities to succeed, and so we oppose the use of quotas. We want a color-blind society. A society that, in the words of Dr. King, judges people not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character” (qtd. in Schafer). In this statement, Reagan is able to manipulate King's words so as to make him an apparent enthusiast of deregulation and colorblindness in the name of “freedom” at the same time that he characterizes himself as a champion of King's message.

4. This anachronistic style also comes through in Johnson's earlier fiction. Speaking to Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* (1982) and National Book Award-winning *Middle Passage* (1990), William Nash suggests, “he uses anachronism to break down the chronological barriers of the novels' settings,” which becomes a “tool for creating unity” (42) and breaking down the imposed organization of life according to historical time.

5. Hall theorizes what she calls the “long civil rights movement” (1239). More than periodization, her theory challenges historians and cultural critics to consider the story of the civil rights era that goes beyond the South, engages class and labor politics, black women's freedom struggles, and the long prehistory of the so-called white backlash led by big business and neocons. Hall's work in this way builds upon the thinking of Charles Hamilton who once characterized the twentieth-century struggle for civil rights in terms of phases, “Civil Rights I” being the movement to end de jure segregation and “Civil Rights II” being the ongoing struggle against de facto segregation and discrimination

afterward (97). Hamilton furthermore defined this first phase as a demand for individual “rights” and the latter as a demand for group “resources” (116). It is clear in this account of the civil rights era why neoliberals would work to freeze King at the end of the former “classical phase.”

6. Many Johnson scholars emphasize the novel’s complex reference to and reworking of the Cain and Abel story (Conner 152–54; Whalen–Bridge 505; Byrd 176–81). This allusion is clearest in the relationship between King and his double, Chaym Smith. But it also comes through in these early pages, as Marc Conner contends: “*Dreamer* conjures the Cain and Abel story in order to portray a world given over to murder, hatred, and violence” (154). Conner’s argument comes through in this riot scene, in which “*brothers [are] spilling each other’s blood*” (13), foreshadowing the later entrance of Smith.

7. Although *Dreamer* undertakes an intersectional analysis of race and class politics, it does not, as Sharon Monteith points out, consider gender as it relates to the civil rights movement. Despite accessing King’s legacy in “interrogative and imaginative ways,” she writes, “when [Johnson] imagines an alter ego for Martin Luther King . . . he does not imagine a woman” (222). Contemporary novelists continue to characterize black leadership as the exclusive domain of charismatic men, what Manning Marable once called the “messiah complex” (Monteith 232–34). See also Edwards.

8. See also Melamed, “Spirit” 3; Von Eschen 2–4.

9. Although not considering, as this essay does, neoliberalism or cultural memory, Linda Selzer also grounds her analysis of *Dreamer* in the political and cultural moment of the 1990s. She argues that Johnson works to reclaim King as a “transformed nonconformist” (213), a critical understanding of civic duty he suggests is missing at the end of the twentieth century. Johnson’s transformed nonconformist King is able to combine “inner transformation to outer engagement” (252) through which one remains critical of political authority while nonetheless nurturing community through civic action.

10. Johnson makes use of the trope of the doppelgänger, in Byrd’s analysis, in order to “reveal the points of convergence and divergence between King and Smith” (152). In my reading, I consider their socioeconomic difference to be the chief “divergence” through which the text carries out an intersectional analysis of the late civil rights movement and its legacy in the neoliberal 1990s.

11. Melamed’s theory underscores the way in which racialization is masked through the dialectic interplay between the idea of race as a construct and the material outcomes of racial logics. Racial knowledges, she argues, are at once “productive and symptomatic of the total value making . . . that secures specific historical configurations of personhood” (*Represent* 12).

12. Jeanne Theoharis's biography of Rosa Parks emphasizes the way in which early civil rights organizations tended to block working-class activists from the movement's leadership (30, 44-45). The Montgomery branch of the NAACP, for example, aimed to cast the working-class Parks as a "simple heroine," rather than a "seasoned political strategist" (26). This would change in the 1990s, though, when Parks would become "the right kind of black person to be honoring," in contrast to the "angry black activists and nihilistic black youths" in urban areas like South Central, Los Angeles (239).

13. Selzer, Byrd, and Murray all emphasize the analogous tension that exists between Smith and King, the "points of convergence and divergence," as Byrd puts it (Selzer 248; Byrd 152; Murray 16). Murray for one underscores the significance of Smith's ultimate divergence: "the novel can never fully overcome Smith's abject status, his breached condition" (16). Capitalism and the class system are too entrenched.

14. Murray refers to Smith as "the repressed other of the movement's bourgeois managerial class" (15). In this regard, he characterizes *Dreamer* as one of a handful of contemporary African American novels that, in opposition to Georg Lukács's criticism of modern fiction, is not complicit with the logic of the bourgeoisie or capital itself. Johnson, Murray contends, criticizes the solipsistic character of the middle class at the same time that he represents and foregrounds the underclass.

15. Calling storytelling "suspect," Smith also speaks to a larger struggle for the cultural memory of the civil rights movement. Hall emphasizes that reclaiming the long and ongoing history of the civil rights era necessitates "novel forms of storytelling [that] can convey what it means to have lived through an undefeated but unfinished revolution" (1263).

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