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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/14395>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.14395

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Laura Visser-Maessen, "Getting To That Promised Land: Reclaiming Martin Luther King, Jr. and 21st Century Black Activism in the United States and western Europe", *European journal of American studies* [Online], 14-1 | 2019, Online since 29 March 2019, connection on 08 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/14395> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.14395>

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- 1 Among a host of symbolic representations in the video clip to “Formation” (2016)—including singer Beyoncé atop a police car sinking in post-Hurricane Katrina’s floodwaters and black women in Black Panther-inspired outfits dancing in lines forming an ‘X’—a black man holds up a fake newspaper. Paradoxically called *The Truth*, it features a picture of Martin Luther King. Its captions read “More Than A Dreamer,” followed by, “What is the real legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and why was a revolutionary recast as an acceptable Negro leader?”¹ While the King reference has received short shrift in clip analyses, its inclusion, which indiscriminately squares him with Malcolm X and the Black Panthers and all three into a blanket continuum with black protest today, provides a key insight into understanding the black activist avant-garde of the 21st century. Irrespective of her intentions², invoking the complex cultural memory of King’s legacy after his assassination on April 4, 1968, in this way goes beyond providing a corrective history lesson. It points to the heart of what this current movement for black rights aims to achieve and what obstacles and openings it sees in getting there.
- 2 For scholars and activists who have studied the black freedom struggle, it is a given that King’s legacy not only has been ‘whitewashed’ to neutralize its radical elements but also that this ‘sanitized’ version is used to undermine similar ones in today’s movement. Less attention, however, has been devoted to what current black activists do with this given in a positive sense. This article therefore documents some of the ways in which left-leaning black activists in the United States and western Europe and

their supporters use the ‘sanitization’ of King’s legacy to their advantage. Particularly the recent #ReclaimMLK campaigns in the US and black engagement with King legacy projects in Europe, evidenced here through the case studies of the United Kingdom and the Netherlands³, reveal how it can be used as a potent tool to justify present-day protests. The objective then is to contribute to the growing literature on today’s black movement, rather than to the King legacy itself, by analyzing some of its hitherto unrecorded activities⁴. Highlighting what elements of King’s legacy these activists seek to ‘reclaim’ provides a valuable window into the possible trajectory of the 21st century black freedom struggle. Moreover, doing so advances Brian Ward’s argument on how European King legacy projects can illuminate how “local history is always shaped by broader regional, national, and international trends and forces”—a necessary insight for understanding and ameliorating race relations today.⁵

1. The ‘Sanitization’ of King

- 3 Debates on the significance, representation, and politicization of King’s legacy are not new; the fierce battles in the 1980s to get January 15 accepted as a federal King holiday or surrounding the building of the King memorial on the Washington Mall stand as testimony.⁶ In the past decade, however, such debates have taken on new significance, as civil rights movement anniversaries and Barack Obama’s election reinforced the idea of a ‘post-racial’ society while actual conditions for America’s black and working class returned to pre-1968 levels.⁷ Black Lives Matter (BLM), the resurgence of mass protests in Ferguson and elsewhere, and the election of Donald Trump further contested such complacency. As explained elsewhere in this volume,⁸ to understand, resist, or justify today’s racial status quo, academics, commentators, and activists therefore increasingly look to the late 1960s.
- 4 The renewed negotiation of King’s legacy fits this larger trend. This is not strange considering the applicability of King’s analysis of America’s ‘triple evils’ of racism, poverty, and militarism to today. In his book *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (1967), King argued that only a radical restructuring of American society could upend the ways in which the nation’s political and economic elites utilized these intertwined forces to maintain power domestically and globally, as exemplified by the Vietnam War. By valuing power, profits, and western (white) chauvinism over morality and equality, he contended, the US and the world remain unstable. He therefore pressed the underprivileged of all backgrounds to unite and demand structural solutions through nonviolent civil disobedience and by challenging white moderate complacency following President Johnson’s welfare and civil rights reforms. Viewing these as highly inadequate, his solutions included a guaranteed income, quality housing and education, and demilitarization.⁹ But today, scholar Jermaine McDonald observed, little appears to have changed. America still counts 45 million poor, commits to questionable military enterprises and expenditures, and the 2008 “bailout of the financial sector rather than a bailout of the citizenry highlight[s] our continued commitment to a property-, profit-, and corporate-centered economy.”¹⁰ Moreover, King’s post-1965 efforts to expose the covert racism behind so-called ‘colorblind’ practices in the North resonate as they evolved into the alleged ‘post-racial’ society black activists are challenging today. Unsurprisingly, the book’s sales have spiked since Trump’s inauguration.¹¹

- 5 Yet it is noteworthy that in the last five to ten years, the negotiation of King's legacy *in itself* has increasingly become another tool to fight this status quo. Left-leaning scholars and activists perform a mutually reinforcing role in arguing that King's 'canonization' is holding back today's efforts for racial justice. At times calling it the "domestication," "sanitization" or "Santa Clausification" of King, they argue that his articulation of the 'triple evils,' criticism of white moderates, and confrontational methods have purposely been downplayed because America as a nation is unwilling to confront the righteousness of his analyses.¹² Instead, the overemphasis on the 'pre-1965,' Southern-based King rendered him "meek and dreamy, not angry, intrepid, and relentless, and thus not relevant or, even worse, at odds" with today's movement.¹³ This spurred the increased 'rediscovery' of his final years in scholarly and popular publications that foreground his post-1965 economic and human rights activism in the North; outline the relevancy of his analyses of race, class, and empire for 21st century activism; highlight King's unpopularity then to predict a similar redemptive future for current demonized groups like BLM; or flatten dichotomies between the pre- and post-1965 King and between him and black nationalism.¹⁴
- 6 While McDonald critiqued the 'sanitization' theory for assuming that "American collective memory of King lacks sophistication and depth, is rooted in a cultural amnesia, and is fixed," his analysis of left- and rightwing invocations of King after the Ferguson and Baltimore protests confirm that its *effects* are nonetheless real. They not only shape public discourse on BLM, but through distortions and selective co-optations of King's 1963 "Dream" speech also paradoxically advance color-blind racism, law-and-order policies, and the politics of respectability.¹⁵ It also turned King into "some Christ-like savior," Jamal Smith critiqued. "Such framing implies that we need a sole leader to guide us, and it helps actual enemies of his goals say that they, too, were with King" and "that unless a black civil rights activist behaves like the King that they've conjured in their selective memories, then that activist isn't truly pro-civil rights."¹⁶ Mike Huckabee's statement that King would be "appalled" by BLM or Steve Bannon's proclamation that King "would be proud of Donald Trump" are living proof.¹⁷ Left-wing politicians, too, regularly traded meaningful change for empty King tributes; even Obama hailed King as proof of "American exceptionalism" to declare "endemic" racism over.¹⁸ Some blacks from an older generation use King to chastise BLM for deviating from the movement's message of respectability and love, although anger was as much part of it¹⁹—something King recognized and often used as leverage²⁰. This makes collective memory of King so precarious, McDonald argued:
- What is at stake in the public discourse about [King and BLM] is the right way to form a community, the right way to challenge authority, the right way to express dissent about the social situation, and the right way to think about what it means to be black and what it means to be American today.²¹
- 7 This renders the *discussion* of King's legacy—as much as his actual one—a useful tool for challenging the status quo, especially because his 'canonization' has provided the infrastructure for doing so. That MLK Days or anniversaries of his death are simply 'there,' makes him a logical point of departure. "From kindergarten through college, almost all students in the United States celebrate the annual MLK holiday," Kevin Bruyneel noted. This means that "[t]heir sense of citizenship and its relationship to America's racial past and future is...produced and reproduced through the story of King's life and legacy, most often by means of the benign tropes of [his] haloed living myth."²² The media attention King legacy events generate accelerates their utility.

Already in the 1960s activists exploited King's fame even if they resented it behind-the-scenes.²³ His 'canonization' over time has only worsened this. "King," McDonald summarized, "has become the moral arbiter and symbol of racial justice in America."²⁴ And that is *exactly* what makes reviving King's admission before he died that America is fundamentally racist over others who made similar points so essential.

- 8 Besides inspiration, correcting King's story offers the psychological benefits of ownership over the telling of history and racial pride by returning him to the black community. This does not mean that all who engage in such efforts relate to King's message and tactics or agree on their applicability for today in equal measure; like many who used nonviolence in the sixties, some use the 'reclaim' banner because it is strategic or popular. That it is fashionable largely results from the genius of the #ReclaimMLK campaigns. These originated in 2015 when the Ferguson Action Group proposed to use MLK Day for nationwide protests under the hashtag #ReclaimMLK, but it is now a catch-all phrase for any initiative that uses him to justify civil disobedience and/or advances a 'radical' social agenda linking racism to economics and state power at home and abroad.²⁵ Even organizations not rooted in black activism per se jump on the 'reclaim' bandwagon. For instance, Aaron Handelsman used a 2015 King Day Symposium to promote the multicultural Detroit People's Platform by linking the organization's goals to King's 'triple evils,' while Christians, particularly southern ones, use the banner to end churches' isolation from today's social battles.²⁶ Some groups do so even if their goals are not fully compatible with BLM or King. A 2018 article in *The Socialist Worker* titled "Reclaim MLK the Radical" for instance urged its readers to "answer King's question about what kind of society could replace capitalism by arguing and fighting for the alternative—socialism."²⁷

2. Reclaiming King in the USA

- 9 American 'ReclaimMLK' campaigns capture a complex paradox that illuminates the inherent difficulties in contemporary left-leaning black activists' path forward. On the one hand, many reject King's charismatic leadership model, reliance on the Church, and outdated ideas on women and the family.²⁸ This resentment reflects the broad-based constituency of the new movement, which largely operates under the generic label Movement for Black Lives (MBL) to stress its multi-organizational and grassroots leadership base. On the other, King's 'post-1965' message resonates with their own solutions, as visible from MBL's Platform of policy demands²⁹. Many also already worked in organizations for social and economic justice prior to joining MBL and #ReclaimMLK campaigns.³⁰ Their views further align with today's broader move towards progressivism through the Occupy and Trump resistance movements. In these, people of color, women in particular, play notable roles as well. Scholar-activist Barbara Ransby accordingly characterized MBL as "a multi-issue, Black-led mass struggle" rooted in an older tradition of "Black feminist politics" that "rejected the hierarchical hetero-patriarchal politics of respectability."³¹ Its best-known organization BLM, known for its decentralized structure and female and queer leadership, largely helped define the new movement as such. Yet King's outsized 'canonization' and contemporary black activists' own regular demonization³² then ensures that despite their resentment of one-man shows, King remains a vital tool in getting their message accepted.

- 10 Their interaction with King is therefore often selective or framed to suit contemporary purposes. #ReclaimMLK campaigns for instance de-emphasize or ignore King's controversial behavior towards the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), Ella Baker, Bayard Rustin, or the "assertive women" of the National Welfare Rights Organization during his 1968 Poor People's Campaign.³³ When these figures are mentioned, it is often to stress how their presence 'pushed' King towards his 'post-1965' radical message³⁴—a line of thinking that simultaneously validates their own activist outlook and keeping King center-stage. But it occasionally means stretching his radical propensity. BLM's Hawk Newsome called King "a father of intersectionality" for embracing broad-based coalitions³⁵—a simplification that divorces the theory from the black feminist thought from which it came and King's pragmatics as a church and national civil rights leader. "They wouldn't have killed him if he was a good Negro," Anti Police-Terror Project co-founder Cat Brooks gushed in another example. "They let the good Negroes go on and...be up in the White House. He wasn't a good Negro—he was a warrior and a revolutionary."³⁶ This description ignores that until 1967, King was regularly invited to the White House *because* he was seen as a voice of 'reason' and 'middle-class values,' while the members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)—whose ideals and practices BLM mirrors most—were snubbed.³⁷
- 11 Such instances may support McDonald's critique that advocates "of the domestication thesis seek to retrieve a radical King that borders on hagiographic."³⁸ Some genuine criticisms of King for instance by SNCC are dismissed as naivety or malevolence.³⁹ The need for meaningful engagement with the conventional wisdom that King's later years were his least successful is often discounted in favor of the more urgent objective of showcasing the continued relevancy of his analyses. Although the activists behind the #ReclaimMLK campaigns often point to specific acts or policy demands of King's, their success in fact hinges on such flexibility in engaging with his legacy. Theirs is a movement that, as explained elsewhere⁴⁰, thrives on deliberately resisting and embracing their predecessors. Doing so aids their sense of self-importance while enabling access to past activist networks and traditions on which they can build. Such flexibility additionally facilitates encompassing the diverging goals of MBL's broad-based membership and enticing their target audiences, who often have flawed or incomplete understandings of King and American racism. Carefully balancing between reviving concrete solutions King proposed and exploiting the vagueness that defines his legacy among movement insiders and outsiders alike are thus crucial to #ReclaimMLK's success.
- 12 Moreover, their need to turn an inconvenient hero into a convenient one can be seen as a creative response to the larger power mechanisms in which they are caught. #ReclaimMLK's objective was using the holiday to draw attention not to the man, but to the marginalized *obscured* by King's 'canonization,' that is, the people whom groups like BLM aim to foreground in their leadership, like the poor, queer, and transgender. "Our movement draws a direct line from the [sanitized] legacy of Dr. King," the Ferguson Action Group stated, "We resist efforts to reduce a long history marred with the blood of countless women and men into iconic images of men in suits behind pulpits."⁴¹ Such proclamations also reflect the influence on black millennial activists of Black Studies, which has gravitated towards bottom-up activism and ideas of a 'long' civil rights movement in which black nationalism and the late 1960s are no longer automatically viewed as a tragic end to a heroic tale.⁴² Many simply view their use of King as part of

an evolutionary process; they focus on the aspects they *can* use—like King the ‘radical’ or ‘the internationalist’—to ‘reimagine the dream’ according to their context and objectives, and improve and update it where necessary, for instance with phenomena like climate change and gentrification.⁴³

- 13 ‘Reclaim’ activists especially revere King ‘the provocateur’ by copying his ‘disruptive’ methods, like direct action. King neither invented civil obedience nor automatically embraced it without reservations.⁴⁴ But, as Charlene Carruthers of the Black Youth Project 100 (BYP100) underlined, reminding the public of how much agitation defined his work is imperative.⁴⁵ Atlanta’s mayor and BLM opponents in Oakland for instance chastised BLM for shutting down the Bay Bridge and an Atlanta freeway in 2016 by falsely claiming King had done neither.⁴⁶ Moreover, since “many ask us to ‘wait and see’ and ‘respect’ politicians aimed at hurting us,” an MBL statement reads, that “call is even more urgent.”⁴⁷

- 14 ‘Reclaim’ activists therefore insist on turning MLK Day from a commercialized day of service into one of protest.⁴⁸ After all, one activist stated, “King was not killed because of his charity work. He was killed because of his challenge to the status quo.”⁴⁹ Subsequently, MLK Days in dozens of cities have increasingly witnessed marches, ‘die-ins,’ and other forms of direct action.⁵⁰ Oakland has seen annual “Reclaiming King’s Radical Legacy” marches since 2015. During one, two subway stations were shut down and the Bay Bridge during another to dramatize America’s long history of police brutality and black resistance. As one activist chained between cars proclaimed: “I’m out here for [police brutality victims] Tamir Rice, Rekia Boyd, for my mother, myself, for [abolitionist] Harriet Tubman.”⁵¹ Another was more blunt:

If your brunch is disrupted this Martin Luther King Day weekend, if you get caught in traffic because of a blockade...take that moment to acknowledge that those are the ways in which you can really celebrate the legacy of Dr. King. That moment of inconvenience is simply the turning of the wheels of progress, brought to you by those with the courage to stand up and say, ‘enough.’⁵²

- 15 Showing the same divisions within the black community as in the 1960s, some such protests co-exist with official celebratory marches of ‘hope.’ In 2017, Sacramento witnessed three marches that all laid claim to King’s legacy, but the ‘traditional’ one would make King “roll over in his grave,” one #ReclaimMLK activist clarified. “He hated capitalism, he stood up for justice against police, and these official events are hand-in-hand with corporate interests and corrupt institutions.” In their alternative march, activists blocked traffic to the Capitol, waving signs with “THIS WAS NOT THE DREAM,” while a third went through an underprivileged neighborhood.⁵³

- 16 Characterizing MLK Days as days of action also spur King’s proclamations on structural racism. Questioning charity work such as painting school walls, one Philadelphia activist explained, means prodding “why you have to paint that wall every year. What kind of public funds are not coming into the schools for education and maintaining our schools in a healthy condition?”⁵⁴ Explaining the continued relevance of King’s ‘triple evils’ analyses becomes easy then, although Carruthers nuanced that “[n]o one should own Dr. King’s legacy. At best, our work has the potential to help broaden the narrative about who he was and what he fought for—and more importantly, going forward, what other people should fight for.” Yet, she admitted, “[t]he ‘reclaiming’ is absolutely about moving people forward into his critique about capitalism and moving into a world without poverty.”⁵⁵ #ReclaimMLK campaigns accordingly combine issues of black unemployment, poverty, healthcare, environmental racism, education, housing, and

police brutality to underscore their interrelation. Over the years on MLK Day, Oakland activists for instance combined police brutality protests with a Jobs and Economy March for the People, resistance to the Trump agenda, and proposals for reallocating law enforcement funds to affordable housing and healthcare, using the slogan “healthcare not warfare” to question police treatment of blacks with mental health problems.⁵⁶

- 17 #ReclaimMLK campaigns thus deliberately mirror King’s 1967 calls for a just distribution of power and wealth by demanding investment in black communities through divestment in oppressive systems.⁵⁷ BYP100 Chicago used MLK Day to release its Agenda to Build Black Futures that among others championed reparations alongside divestment from the prison-industrial complex. “Chicago’s violence will end when we are able to create a more just and equitable society,” its BLM chapter agreed. This was to be done by picking “up the mantle that King provided us and demand fair housing, jobs, fully funded schools and equal redistribution of wealth. We must confront the triple evils that King highlighted by resisting despair and instead beginning to organize with the conviction that history is on our side.”⁵⁸ In words that rather echo SNCC or Black Power advocates, MBL’s national #ReclaimMLK program additionally calls for community control and building parallel institutions that “reflect the values of the world we want to live in.”⁵⁹ Solidarity with victims of oppression everywhere automatically derives from this. New York’s 2015 ‘Reclaim’ March therefore went from Harlem to the United Nations, while those in Oakland in past years have encompassed demands to drive ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) from the Bay Area and to safeguard indigenous land rights. They were supported by groups like the Arab Resource and Organizing Center and #Asians4BlackLives.⁶⁰ The director of the immigrant rights group Juntos justified joining Philadelphia’s 2018 MLK Day of Action by linking King’s views on militarization to “the war in this country about low wages for people of color, it’s the over-policing, it’s the [immigration] raids. When ICE goes into people’s homes and kicks down doors with guns pointed, there are children in the room.” As such, she believed, “[I]f King were alive today, he would stand with us.”⁶¹

18

To strengthen these points, ‘Reclaim’ campaigns deliberately invoke the centrality of King’s “I Have A Dream”-speech in the ‘sanitized’ telling of his narrative, and replace it with his ‘post-1965’ words, particularly on police brutality, urban uprisings, systemic racism, and economic justice. The hashtag #MLKAlsoSaid was introduced in 2015 for that purpose. As scholar-activist Ibram Kendi wrote, “We are reclaiming King from all those people who like to imagine that King had nothing else to say after 1963...who have buried the socialist MLK, the antiwar MLK, the MLK of Black power.”⁶² Especially King’s 1967 book, his “Beyond Vietnam” and “The Other America” speeches feature heavily in #ReclaimMLK campaigns. The only pre-1965 King text regularly cited is his 1963 Letter from a Birmingham Jail. After all, its ardent defense of civil disobedience and condemnation of white moderate allies, as one political commentator said, “reads like a rebuttal of BLM critics.”⁶³ When BLM interrupted campaign events of ‘progressive friends’ like Bernie Sanders, supporters therefore happily used the letter in defense. Activists have also used it as discussion material at MLK Days and used quotes in blogs, on social media and protest signs.⁶⁴ In 2017, black artist Daniel Rarela pasted quotes under pictures of King and contemporary activists to stress the timeliness and justification of their fights: “I wanted to shatter this false image of a Martin Luther King

who everyone loved, never got arrested, was universally popular and made zero privileged people feel uncomfortable or angry enough to want to kill him.”⁶⁵

- 19 Activists thus push King’s post-1965 words consciously, often abetted by scholars at panels and ‘teach ins’ at MLK events. To popularize the links between King’s final years and today, past Cornell University’s MLK Day Lectures have spotlighted BLM’s founders and scholar-activists like Russell Rickford, who explained how King’s legacy had been “tamed.” Western North Carolina University’s 2018 MLK Day festivities combined visits from BLM co-founder Patrisse Cullors and *New Jim Crow*-author Michelle Alexander with the local start of the ‘new’ Poor People’s Campaign (PPC), a forty day project of peaceful protests in thirty states modeled after King’s. Spurring connections between King and today’s activism is also done outside organized contexts; one teacher in Oakland simply used the holiday to let his students compare BLM’s guiding principles to their classroom charter.⁶⁶
- 20 But the focus on the ‘post-1965’ King just as often emerges organically from present-day concerns in the black community, especially when backed by vehicles like MLK Days. In 2017, two of MBL’s three Days of Action for the holiday were set aside to commemorate his “Beyond Vietnam” speech. Nonetheless, local groups could set their own priorities,⁶⁷ which often translated into a focus on King’s 1966-1968 economic agenda. In Chicago, activists used it for “centering the hood” through discussing King’s economic activism in Chicago with North Lawndale residents.⁶⁸ Racial minorities in New York, united in a citywide alliance, attacked liberal politicians like Mayor de Blasio for using MLK Day “as a fig leaf for their own racist policies.” Protesting how the administration’s housing policies disproportionately harmed their communities, they reclaimed King in their defense: “Would Martin Luther King Jr. support so-called ‘progressive’ politicians who are perpetuating racism and displacing communities of color? No. He would stand with people fighting against those policies.”⁶⁹
- 21 Anniversaries of King’s assassination are equally suitable for popularizing ‘ReclaimMLK.’ After all, to explain King’s presence in Memphis—where he was shot when he had come to support a sanitation workers’ strike—acknowledging his thoughts on class and racial struggles is essential. This can then again be used to counter ‘sanitized’ versions of King’s legacy to further contemporary activism. In 2018 marches “to keep the Dream going” were organized nationwide, with protesters in Portland copying the “I am a Man” signs of the 1968 sanitation strikers and King’s son Martin and others in Memphis reminding Americans of the work on poverty still left undone. In preparation for a general May Day strike and joint “Fight Racism, Raise Pay” demonstrations with Fight for 15, Chicago activists used the 2017 anniversary for teach-ins on King’s and labor’s commonalities.⁷⁰ Unions also exploit the anniversary to profile their present-day organizing work. The AFSCME (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees), whose workers organized the 1968 sanitation strike, organized an “I Am 2018” campaign that intended to “spark a nationwide movement to organize workers and poor people in the fight for racial and economic justice.”⁷¹ When doing so, union activists regularly cite King’s connections with labor, while glossing over labor’s history of internal racism or King’s controversial siding with union leaders like Walter Reuther at the 1964 Democratic National Convention despite their open disdain for the MFDP’s uneducated blacks.⁷² In fact, in 1968 King was not even universally embraced in the Memphis black community as the sanitation workers’ spokesman.⁷³ Yet if ‘ReclaimMLK’ efforts help in fostering connections between worker

and anti-racist platforms, MBL's Richard Wallace argued, this can help redefine 'labor issues' to include ones that disproportionately affect people of color, like legislation banning citation of criminal records on job applications.⁷⁴

- 22 The fiftieth anniversary memorial of King's death in Washington, D.C., also realigned explicitly with the 'post-1965' King. It featured an interfaith 'rally2endracism,' geared at analyzing connections between King's 'triple evils' analyses and today. BLM's DeRay McKesson emphasized King's message of "moral courage and systemic change" as a model for churches to enter social justice struggles, while Reverend William Barber II, co-organizer of the new PPC, invoked King's mythmaking to boost activism: "We cannot be those who merely love the tombs of the prophets...We find the place they fell; we reach down in the blood; we pick up the baton and carry it forward." Others emphasized King as a would-be supporter of BLM and immigration reform and used the occasion for networking and practical organizing for today's fights, like training participants in lobbying Congress.⁷⁵
- 23 Similar sentiments were expressed at the week-long 2018 King memorial events in Memphis. Unsurprising, given that Memphis is still the poorest metropole in the US and protesters consistently encounter city-sponsored resistance, such as during BLM's and Fight for 15's efforts to organize McDonalds' workers.⁷⁶ Over time, using the anniversary to advocate structural change has become a natural technique for local activists, like through the recent "Poverty Report: Memphis Since MLK" that the National Civil Rights Museum—located at the motel where King died—commissioned. Black activist Wendi Thomas even bought the 'MLK50' internet domain to cover local counter-voices to prevent the anniversary from becoming "a cover-up. King's legacy has been ground down [and] stuffed into a casing of respectability by city officials and civic leaders. Among the corporate sponsors of the museum's MLK50 events are global corporations that don't pay their workers a living wage."⁷⁷
- 24 Aware of such reporting, the city government recognizes the anniversary's political usages. It reluctantly acquiesced to 'Take'EmDown901' activists' calls to remove the city's Confederate monuments by April 4, supported a(n aborted) 'reverse march' that traced the February 1968 march of the sanitation strikers, and initiated commemoration events like a free flower planting campaign. Local activists interpreted these gestures as diverting from meaningful change.⁷⁸ After meeting with local BLM activists, black CNN political commentator Angela Rye attacked Mayor Jim Strickland at one MLK50 event. "[I]s this the Memphis that Dr. King would have seen in the promised land when the right to protest is met with the black listing, literally, of activists?," she asked bluntly, "Are you proud of this Memphis—that Memphis that sounds entirely too familiar to the Memphis that rejected Dr. King in 1968?" Rather than organizing "empty commemorations," she urged the city to "work woke" by supporting BLM's anti-poverty policies like the \$15 minimum wage. Afterwards, Strickland dismissed Rye as an 'outside agitator.' This prompted a local black reverend in an open letter to underscore the irony of the 'outsider agitator' claim that was hurdled on King himself in Memphis. Honoring King, he wrote, meant listening to BLM's structural critiques. After all, he concluded in a line that captured the heart of #ReclaimMLK: "What Memphis needs as we remember this anniversary of King's crucifixion isn't a public relations campaign but a resurrection."⁷⁹

3. Reclaiming King in Europe

- 25 While less focused on a full-fledged ‘resurrection,’ black European activists and their supporters have found benefit in similarly using the ‘later’ King and criticism of his ‘sanitization.’ This is both logical and paradoxical, reflecting their position in (western) European society and complex relation with the US-based black freedom struggle.
- 26 What Afro-European anti-racist movements share with the ‘post-1965’ King and MBL is the belief that they are fighting a society that refuses to accept that race is a problem. Anthropologist Gloria Wekker for example explained the “dominant way in which the Dutch think of themselves, as being a small, but just, ethical nation; color-blind, thus free of racism.”⁸⁰ Such ideas were forged in complex, often imagined, long-standing notions of national identity, like the Dutch view of itself as a tolerant nation that emerged in its 17th century sea faring days or France’s self-identification through its Republican founding principles. But they were reinforced in the post-colonial era, when Europeans faced the psychological, socio-economic, and demographic changes that came with the loss of empire.⁸¹ For instance, when King visited Newcastle in 1967 amidst fierce battles over Britain’s post-colonial immigration waves, Brian Ward recorded how most balked at the idea of British identity as “an elusive, decidedly mongrel and multicultural affair.”⁸² Integration had to mean *assimilation*—a notion that similarly drove multicultural societies elsewhere in Europe.⁸³
- 27 Europeans’ tendency to discuss racism through prisms of culture, class, and ethnicity, their emphasis on Nazi crimes, and the rise of the welfare state strengthened Europe’s color-blind myth. This, scholars Sara Salem and Vanessa Thompson argued, was facilitated by the “absence of a European discourse that clearly articulates racism as a social phenomenon embedded in the relational matrix of domination comprised of intersetting structures such as capitalism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, etc.”⁸⁴ Most European black communities were too small and lacked a strong black press to counterbalance this, even as Europeans unmistakably ruled their colonies through oppressive racist structures⁸⁵. The limited presence of black academics and educational institutions’ marginal attention to colonial history further enable colonial amnesia.⁸⁶ Black challenges to national narratives of race, empire, memory, and identity also regularly face intense criticism—as Wekker has for her book *White Innocence*,⁸⁷ especially from right-leaning figures in academic circles and public life—that, intentionally or not, upholds the status quo. “In contexts such as the Netherlands, France, and Germany,” Salem and Thompson therefore concluded, overall “racism is always something that happens over there, or that happened back then.”⁸⁸
- 28 American race relations especially enhance the myth of European ‘colorblindness.’ Black Americans are partly to blame too: to discredit American racism, black artists, soldiers, intellectuals and activists—from Frederick Douglass to Ta-Nehisi Coates—often described European countries as “racial havens.”⁸⁹ Because such characterizations were designed to comment on American racial practices rather than European ones, this unintentionally strengthened ideas of European exceptionalism. While American blacks, particularly well-known ones, often were treated better in Europe, their descriptions often excluded—or strategically ignored—instances of similar racist European behavior in the colonies or the experiences of black Europeans, with whom they had little contact.⁹⁰ Malcolm X’s shock at being turned away from France in 1965

despite his well-developed global views on race for instance testifies to the depth and complexity of Europe's 'colorblind' myth.⁹¹

- 29 Europeans in turn used American race relations either as "a cautionary tale or as a guide" for racial conflicts at home.⁹² As British artist-activist Akala put it, "We didn't have a domestic form of apartheid, we don't have police who shoot 12-year-old kids—it's as if we think, if you're not as sick as America, then you're a well country."⁹³ Consequently, Salem and Thompson assert, "European forms of racism remain uncovered and unchecked, allowing European states and actors to unknowingly deflect attention from local racist practices."⁹⁴ Moreover, post-World War II hegemony of (an albeit commercialized) African American culture overshadowed local black identities.⁹⁵ Akala lamented how British Caribbean barbershops often display pictures of King, Malcolm X, and Marcus Garvey, which show "that, until recently, black British people haven't had the same respect for black history made in Britain."⁹⁶ But this is also the result of deliberate intent: many educational institutions prefer the teaching of the American movement over local resistance movements to curb homegrown racial tension. As Stephen Tuck observed, "while remembering Martin Luther King Jr. and his dream may help young Britons to consider the question of racial justice, it can be used to forget about the British dimensions of that question, too."⁹⁷
- 30 Indeed, countless European actors today (mis)use King's legacy for their own purposes. His popularity ratings echo US patterns; in Britain, King's 'Dream'-speech is better-known than it was in 1963.⁹⁸ Many King-invocations betray how universal his 'sanitized' legacy has become, similarly allowing it to be used for practices that oppose his ideology. Dutch right-wing populist Geert Wilders, on trial for inciting hatred and discrimination, used King to defend his promise at a 2014 campaign rally to reduce the Dutch Moroccan population. Labeling it freedom of speech, he vowed, like King did in a 1957 speech, to go to prison in the name of freedom—never mind the speech's actual call for racial equality, as Dutch critics swiftly pointed out.⁹⁹ Moreover, as in the US, Europeans (ab)use King to undermine local black activism. Already in the 1960s European conservatives used their American counterparts' warnings of race riots and Black Power to pass anti-immigrant legislation, with British ones even hailing "King as a nonviolent role model for immigrants who were threatening to fight for their rights."¹⁰⁰ Although left-leaning European outlets such as *The Guardian* and *Paris Review* are increasingly publishing American leftists' arguments regarding King's 'radical' legacy, this still happens, even by movement allies. British activist Reni Eddo-Lodge regularly has moderate white well-wishers using King against her, "to prove to me that my work is misguided, that I am doing it wrong."¹⁰¹
- 31 Although American anti-racism movements continue to inform European activism—through local BLM chapters, the copying of discourse, and cultural influences like Beyoncé¹⁰²—black European movements are increasingly asserting their own voice. In Britain, Eddo-Lodge even detected a true "renaissance of black critical thought and culture."¹⁰³ Global capitalist excesses and the (often related) rise of right-wing populism¹⁰⁴ throughout the western hemisphere in recent years have fueled European anti-racism movements. Like their American counterparts, these highlight systemic racism, economic inequality, and black invisibility. Racial and ethnic minorities increasingly voice experiences of everyday racism and 'double consciousness,' as visible from the #MeTwo movement,¹⁰⁵ while left-leaning activists and scholars foreground local racial histories to counter what Ward termed "contemporary appeals to a

reactionary kind of white racial, ethnic and religious chauvinism that celebrates a mythical, idealized, racially pure and uniformly Christian British” and European past.

¹⁰⁶ Moreover, the sympathy European progressives bequeath American victims of police brutality has not translated to support for racial justice movements at home. This has raised black Europeans’ interest in developing ‘pan-Afro-European’ identities through newly-found initiatives like the European Network Against Racism. After all, British journalist-activist Rob Berkeley argued, “there is a greater chance of being able to shape, influence and be influenced by the discussion among fellow Black Europeans than to intervene in the exceptional American story.”¹⁰⁷

- 32 Yet King paradoxically remains a useful tool for gaining that black European independent voice. Already in the 1960s European activists used King for their own advantage. In 1963, Jamaican immigrants marched in London on the day of the March on Washington to protest racism in Britain, while British civil and immigrant rights campaigns exploited his and other American movement leaders’ visits. Newcastle University presented King an honorary doctorate in 1967 explicitly to “realise the parallel between Dr. King’s present concerns in America and the situation in Britain,” including passage of a British Race Relations Bill. Black British activists borrowed heavily from Malcolm X and Black Power advocates as well, although these comparisons did not always apply.¹⁰⁸
- 33 Black and white European activists—influenced by multiple sources and protest traditions of their own—thus used the US movement as they saw fit. As Tuck noted, “American styling was a strategic choice by British activists. They were well aware that British discrimination was not Mr. James Crow esq., but they chose to portray it as such.”¹⁰⁹ When King visited Berlin in 1964, West German activists, like Italian ones, mostly embraced King as a political activist fighting for democracy. But East German ones emphasized his theological doctrines to safeguard the Protestant church’s existence by portraying King’s God-inspired capitalist critiques as compatible with communism. Dutch Baptists invited King to the European Baptist Federation Convention in Amsterdam that year to convince American Baptists to spur their Church’s involvement in social justice struggles. European activists in the environmentalist, anti-imperialism, and anti-nuclear proliferation movements and those fighting the Soviet regime have used King’s emphasis on democracy and pacifism. Prior to and in the revolutionary year 1989, Germany saw a remarkable number of King commemorations, King-inspired peace seminars, and nonviolent training institutes. Protestant church leaders, particularly in East Germany, and non-religious dissident groups spurred such gatherings, at times aided by American movement activists. In them, King’s nonviolent resistance tradition was emphasized as a model through testimonials, artwork, and exhibitions, ‘peace prayers’ featuring King citations, and singing movement songs like ‘We Shall Overcome.’¹¹⁰
- 34 This not only underscores how historical movements and processes can overlap, but also how activists worldwide utilize King to help fuel their own activist needs that emerge organically from their grassroots contexts. Today, many black European activists follow their American counterparts in selectively tying King legacy projects to his final years and his ‘sanitization’ because this advances their needs best. To argue that Europe has a race problem (and thus justify their existence), it makes sense to use the most famous black activist their countrymen (think they) know and love—King—in absence of similarly revered local blacks. This allows black and white citizens to

consider activists' causes and investigate their own instances of 'whitewashing' black history. This can bolster activism from finding new members and allies to renewed inspiration. Moreover, King's post-1965 priorities align the best with their goals, that is, demonstrating that racism is real, systemic rather than individual, intrinsically tied to class and global power structures, and that fighting it requires black self-awareness and representation, confrontational strategies like direct action, and targeting moderate allies rather than white supremacists. In this, King is mostly claimed as a democratic socialist rather than a priest, with King commemorations used as vehicles to uncover like-minded figures and patterns in the individual European contexts. Current black activism in Britain and the Netherlands is a case in point.

- 35 The current British black 'renaissance' indeed cannot be separated from what Rob Berkeley called "the liberal social model," which spurred Britain's own "rush to a 'post-racial' world view." White backlash to recent Eastern European and Muslim immigrant arrivals, however, exposed its limitations and largely fueled the 2016 Brexit campaign. The latter caused a massive spike in violent incidents and overt racial hostility, generating a wake-up call for many black Britons.¹¹¹ Eddo-Lodge likewise attributed her quest for recovering local black history to 21st century immigrant hatred: "I needed to know why, when people waved Union Jacks and shouted 'we want our country back', it felt like the chant was aimed at people like me. What history had I inherited that left me an alien in my place of birth?"¹¹² The continued systemic racism minorities experience in housing, employment, education, and policing, combined with the decline of progressive institutions like unions, furthered such quests. Incidents like the 2017 fire in London's Grenfell Tower underscored the institutionalized nature of racism, tying it unmistakably to class. Despite differing regional experiences, many black Britons reached similar conclusions. This sparked bestselling books, like Eddo-Lodge's *Why I'm No Longer Talking To White People About Race* (2017), David Olusoga's *Black and British* (2017), Afua Hirsch's *Brit(ish)* (2018), and Akala's *Natives* (2018), and demands for increased black British representation in among others the fashion and film industry and even on banknotes. Eddo-Lodge therefore concluded that her views were "considered wildly radical back in 2012. But by 2017, the politics of the western world had changed drastically. People were looking for answers—a balm to soothe, or an antidote to fight back."¹¹³
- 36 Utilizing King legacy projects provide one such means. The fiftieth anniversary of King's death, for instance, prompted *The Guardian* to invite eleven well-known black Britons' thoughts on King. All confirmed his continued relevancy for fighting contemporary race relations in the US and Britain, impressing, in screenwriter Bola Agbaje's words, how "now more than ever it's important for us to be reminded of people who fought for justice and equality." Many highlighted the impact of the 'strong' and confrontational King, particularly the 'post-1965' one, on their work and worldview. In this, a remarkable number addressed King's 'sanitization,' and implicitly or explicitly noted how challenging this could help the contemporary British movement in upending the nation's 'post-racial' myth. Actor Lennie James chastised "the way that Martin's legacy has been usurped to make his message more comfortable. He was frightening to white America, and to white Europe too." Akala agreed, citing King's anti-capitalist and 'Black Power' stances and the need to acknowledge his doubts on how "realistic his dream was," particularly since nowadays "black liberals and people who are desirous of acceptance want to remember him as the safe, 'can't we all get along?' Martin of 1963." Eddo-Lodge directly linked the 'whitewashed' version of

King she was taught in school to her activism. King, she recounted, was presented as a “benign hero” for local blacks to emulate while little was taught “about what he was struggling against, or the movement he came from.” But like her American counterparts, she found a weapon in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail to justify “disrupting the order of things...I think the world needs to be careful about how they memorialise him, and not make what he was saying more palatable to a white audience who don’t wish to feel challenged on race.”¹¹⁴ In another publication, she therefore used the fiftieth anniversary of his death as an entrance for telling the forgotten story of the King-inspired 1965 Bristol bus boycott to contest Britain’s erasure of local black history. “To assume that there was no civil rights movement in the UK is not just untrue,” she charged, “it does a disservice to our black history, leaving gaping holes where the story of progress should be. Black Britain deserves a context.” Recovering more local black history could then serve as a direct remedy against the systemic racism Brexit exposed: “[L]ooking at our history shows racism does not erupt from nothing, rather it is embedded in British society. It’s in the very core of how the state is set up.”¹¹⁵

- 37 The *Guardian*-interviews further underscore the significance of King commemoration events in black Britons’ racial awareness, most notably of his visit to Newcastle. There King stressed the applicability of his analyses on the ‘triple evils’ and ‘complicity of silence’ to Britain, whose de facto segregation made it similar to the seeming color-blind “position that the northern cities of America have passed through.”¹¹⁶ However, “[e]verything that Martin Luther King had to say on 13 November 1967 sounds eerily contemporary,” novelist Jackie Kay observed—a realization that prompted her and Carolyn Forché to publish an anthology of poems (2017) by black poets from the trans-Atlantic region reflecting on King’s ‘post-1965’ analyses for today. Playwright Robert Williams said he listened to the speech for his participation in the 2017 Freedom on the Tyne project, which consisted of numerous cultural, educational, and community activities held in Newcastle to commemorate its fiftieth anniversary. He called the speech “powerful, inspiring, emotive—such a great antidote to Trump’s America.”¹¹⁷
- 38 The project itself, also known as Freedom City 2017, was likewise shaped by contemporary events: the pro- and anti-immigration battles that characterized Newcastle in 1967 were replicated by pro- and anti-Trump and Pegida rallies in 2017. And as King was invited to support local pro-immigration advocates, so Freedom City was founded to “reaffirm his call to progressive social activism.” Utilizing the anniversary became not only logical but imperative, Brian Ward noted: “In the midst of this changing, and for many, increasingly alarming and fractured world, King’s message assumed ever greater significance and appeal.” But unlike in 1967, when King’s visit was largely a university event, now local minority groups, activists, and artists joined national and international ones to make it a “truly civic” affair that underscored King’s message. Although the program was set largely by organizations and institutions that in their leadership not necessarily reflected the diversity they sought to celebrate, local minority groups’ participation created some space to shape the commemoration by linking their objectives to King’s. Chi Onwurah, a local MP of biracial descent, for instance, promoted the event in the House of Commons with a heartfelt plea to eradicate contemporary injustice and wealth disparity:

I want every child in Newcastle and beyond to know not only that Martin Luther King came to Newcastle, but that he came for them...Those three themes of poverty,

racism and war not only speak to them but are to be answered by them—by every child and every adult in Newcastle and throughout the country.¹¹⁸

- 39 Black activism in the Netherlands has likewise become more visible in the past decade, initiated largely by black activist millennials in the urban west and amidst a similar backlash against the multicultural society following the arrival of immigrants and refugees since World War II. Occasionally these ‘old’ and ‘new’ communities of color form precarious alliances, as is visible in the new political party DENK or after the alleged police brutality death of Aruban-born Mitch Henriquez in 2015¹¹⁹. But recent debates over the integration of Muslims also reinforce the subordinate position of the Afro- and Caribbean Dutch, as they confirm the idea of racism as a ‘new’ phenomenon that exists (if at all) predominantly in relation to these newcomers. This is enhanced by the near erasure of the Dutch colonial past (and black resistance to it) in school curricula and withdrawal of governmental support for institutions that safeguard such history, like the NiNsee (Dutch Institute for the Study of Dutch Slavery and its Legacy) in 2012.¹²⁰
- 40 Contemporary black activism therefore centers on the denial of systemic racism—despite multiple records confirming its existence in employment, education, and policing—and black representation, particularly by increasing national awareness of Dutch black history and countering racial stereotypes. This includes efforts to ‘decolonize’ museums and school curricula; the removal of references in public places celebrating the Dutch colonial past; and ending the tradition of Black Pete (Zwarte Piet). Black Pete is the caricature black helper of Saint Nicholas (the Dutch version of Santa Claus). Whites annually dress up as him, complete with blackface. Protests against Black Pete have intensified in the past decade, with black activists using the annual parade that commences the festivities for nonviolent protests. These have regularly resulted in (false) arrests and violent incidents; local authorities even cancelled the 2017 protest after whites blocked the buses carrying the activists to the parade on the freeway. In 2018, protesters were again greeted with violence.¹²¹
- 41 Dutch King legacy projects are well-suited to foist attention to these issues. A good example is the King Lecture Series at Amsterdam’s Vrije Universiteit, held regularly on the anniversary of King’s death since 2008. The University, which presented King an honorary degree in 1964, launched the series to inspire “the contemporary *Zeitgeist*.”¹²² But Dutch black activists critique that in its speaker selection, the series perpetuated the idea that racism is not a Dutch problem and that its organizers, and white institutions in general, therefore need to facilitate Dutch black representation. Artist and activist Quinsy Gario noted in a blog entitled “The Ghettoization of Martin Luther King’s Legacy” that the Series featured either white speakers with questionable backgrounds in racial areas and blacks in an entertainment role. Or black speakers from abroad, like Jesse Jackson, who are inadequately informed to address racism in the Netherlands. Its 2017 edition headlined a Dutch-Moroccan actor and Dutch-Turkish anthropologist, but, Gario argued, this only further sidelined the “grassroots marginalized black bodies” that resemble King’s and remind the Dutch population of its slavery past. In true #ReclaimMLK-fashion, he then connected the Series’ speaking practices to the Wilders-incident, arguing that Geert Wilders would not have been able to abuse King if his work had not been deliberately removed from his lived experience. Both incidents, Gario then argued, justify demands for more black representation in the nation’s white institutions to advance them from within. Whether or not the

scrutiny on the Series speaking practices facilitated it, the 2018 Series did feature four black Dutch speakers who explicitly addressed their own lived experiences.¹²³

- 42 Other examples support the value of using MLK legacy events to contest issues of black representation and commemorating local black history. In 2018, black American and Dutch activists, artists, and scholars united in Amsterdam for MLK Day to discuss Dutch race relations, using *Where Do We Go from Here?* as a starting point.¹²⁴ Airco Caravan, a white artist and human rights activist, used the fiftieth anniversary of King's death for her Monument for Martin Luther King project. She presented fifty statues of King to black individuals, organizations, and places that advance the black freedom struggle in the US and the Netherlands, with the goal of connecting these fights across time and space, and thus "keep King's dream alive." American recipients included John Lewis, the Obamas, and the Riverside Church where King gave his Vietnam speech. Dutch ones included Quinsy Gario, Gloria Wekker, and organizations and places connected to the Dutch colonial past, such as the NiNsee and the statue of Surinamese freedom fighter Anton de Kom. One King statue appeared at Kattenburgereiland, where the slave ship *De Leusden* was built. It was shipwrecked near Surinam in 1737. With 600 dead slaves, it is the biggest shipping disaster in Dutch history, yet generally unknown to its citizens. The project, Caravan admitted, therefore explicitly challenged white-centered renditions of Dutch history.¹²⁵
- 43 Another recipient was the Black Archives, founded in 2015 by the Dutch Afro-Caribbean social enterprise New Urban Collective (NUC) that fosters the socio-economic advancement of Dutch people of color. The Archives house 5,000 books and archives on race and colonial history predominantly by Dutch black activists and writers who have received short shrift in Dutch educational institutions. It also organizes exhibitions and other activities that advance "Black and other perspectives that are often overlooked elsewhere." While the Archives emerged from organic grassroots black activism, it considers itself part of the global black freedom struggle. Besides its Afro-Caribbean roots, it touts international guests like Angela Davis as a badge of legitimacy. NUC's logo is based on the two clasped hands symbol of SNCC, and the idea of the Archives was inspired by the role black educational institutions played in sustaining the American movement and co-founder Mitchell Esajas' experiences with the King archive at Morehouse College.¹²⁶
- 44 Esajas, an anthropologist-turned-activist of Surinamese-African descent, showcases how the American movement can be key in black identity formation worldwide without this taking away grassroots movement ownership and agency. His activism was born from his lived experience as a black man in the Netherlands. Yet he always considered King a role model, having been taught about his marches and 'Dream' speech. His understanding of King, however, developed when he earned a John Lewis Fellowship in Atlanta in 2016, where he was exposed to King's post-1965 legacy, its 'sanitization,' and ideas of the 'long civil rights movement.' This spurred his thinking, while joining local BLM marches against police brutality transformed him emotionally. He now felt the Dutch movement had to move beyond single issues like Black Pete, and, like the American ones, invest time in education and seeking international allies to "develop a comprehensive vision and agenda focused on the root causes of the problem."¹²⁷
- 45 Reading *Where Do We Go From Here?*, Esajas explained when addressing the 2018 MLK Day in Amsterdam, advanced his thinking on King's continued global relevancy. Esajas' speech perfectly illustrates how much the American-based movements and scholarship

on them shaped his outlook and lexicon, but also how Dutch King Legacy projects are perfect tools for the own activism. The setting of the King Day facilitated this of course, as did his inclusion of another Dutch King Legacy project, the “We Have a Dream” exhibition on King, Nelson Mandela, and Mahatma Gandhi that the Nieuwe Kerk (New Church) in Amsterdam hosted that month.¹²⁸ In the speech, Esajas consciously or subconsciously followed the American #ReclaimMLK playbook. After drawing on his audience’s knowledge of the ‘pre-1965’ King, he related how his legacy had been ‘sanitized’—borrowing Cornel West’s phrase “the Santa Clausification of King”—to obscure his ‘post-1965’ message. This was also the King the Nieuwe Kerk exhibition emphasized. The simplified ideas of racism emerging from this ‘sanitized’ characterization of King—defined as Jim Crow-style segregation and KKK violence while ignoring the covert racism King encountered in the North—thereby harm *all* anti-racism movements, he argued, as it allowed the exhibition to disconnect the battles of King, Mandela, and Gandhi from Dutch anti-racist struggles and thus to move racism outside the Dutch realm. Using King’s condemnation of white moderates, he then rebuked Femke Halsema, now mayor of Amsterdam, for trying to silence them when she indeed told them that they could not use “the American concept of ‘white privilege,’” because

[i]n the Netherlands black people do not have to be in the back of the bus separately. You cannot just move a discourse from a country that has had systematic oppression to here, and say to the Dutch: you are doing the same thing... If you call everything racism, you cannot find the real racists anymore. (translation Esajas)

- 46 He countered this reasoning with reports demonstrating systemic racism in the Netherlands and the vilifying treatment of anti-Black Pete activists like himself, although their nonviolent protests resembled those by King that Dutch progressives celebrated at the exhibition. Extending the line between King’s tradition of resistance to that of forgotten Afro- and Caribbean Dutch activists, he concluded by stating how they all come together in the Black Archives and its goal of ending whites’ efforts of “appropriating, silencing, sanitizing and Santa Clausifying black history” in the Netherlands and worldwide.
- 47 While the Dutch remain slow in embracing local anti-racist struggles, these examples show that King and the American-based movement can be used effectively to force an opening for conversations on race and activism in the Dutch context. This does not mean that the strategy has no limitations; for example, calling activists’ journey to the Saint Nicholas parade a ‘Freedom Ride’ actually halted such conversations as many Dutch people considered the equation too offensive. Moreover, as many pan-Africanists discovered in the 1960s, just copying activist models and transplanting them to different locales will only get grassroots activists so far. Like their American counterparts and those who study them, black European activists should take Cha-Jua’s and Lang’s warnings against the “totalizing perspective” of a ‘long civil rights movement’ that flattens “chronological, conceptual, and geographic differences”¹²⁹ to heart when assessing its global application. Nonetheless, in the short run, it remains a useful instrument for forging an own identity that is both separate from and part of a larger struggle, and thereby spur that home-grown black renaissance.

Conclusion

48 The ‘reclaiming’ of King’s legacy by American and European left-leaning black activists and their supporters has become one effective tool among many to justify contemporary activism, precisely *because* of the existence of its ‘sanitized’ version. Besides speaking to black activists’ creativity and agency in exploiting the collective memory of King for their own benefit, the almost universal embrace of the ‘post-1965’ King in these efforts indicates that the black freedom struggle’s trajectory will increasingly pivot towards questions of structural racism, poverty, human rights, and state power. ‘Reclaim’ efforts also reveal what activists perceive as the biggest problems moving forward; historical comparisons are always more informative about the present than they are of the past. Hence, activists’ selective foregrounding of King’s criticism of white moderates and his ‘triple evils’ analyses rather underscore their own rocky relationship with white progressive allies and the tenacity of the ‘post-racial’ narrative in today’s unearthing of structural racism than that it speaks truthfully to King’s lived experience or unequivocally proves racism’s immutable force, unaffected by time and change. While King’s legacy will remain contested, the remarkably similar way in which American and European activists utilize it today suggests that 21st century local race relations indeed must be understood in a larger framework that incorporates the wider global and historical issues, forces, and trends shaped by what Ward termed the “entwined histories of the Black Atlantic and the Atlantic world.”¹³⁰ So it makes sense for today’s activists to see in King’s insistence on “a network of mutuality”¹³¹ both an enduring problem definition and a solution that may finally lead to that promised land.

49 **Proper Names:**

Bolo Agbaje, Airco Caravan, Michelle Alexander, Akala, Ella Baker, William Barber III, Rob Berkeley, Beyoncé, Bill de Blasio, Rekia Boyd, Cat Brooks, Charlene Carruthers, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Patrisse Cullors, Angela Davis, Frederick Douglass, Reni Eddo-Lodge, Mitchell Esajas, Mahatma Gandhi, Quinsy Gario, Marcus Garvey, Femke Halsema, Aaron Handelsman, Mitch Henriquez, Afu Hirsch, Jesse Jackson, Lennie James, Jackie Kay, Martin Luther King III, Martin Luther King, Jr., Anton de Kom, John Lewis, Nelson Mandela, DeRay McKesson, Hawk Newsome, Barack Obama, Chi Onwurah, Daniel Rarela, Walter Reuther, Tamir Rice, Russell Rickford, Bayard Rustin, Angela Rye, Bernie Sanders, Jim Strickland, Wendi C. Thomas, Donald Trump, Harriet Tubman, Richard Wallace, Gloria Wekker, Geert Wilders, Robert Williams, Malcolm X, Benjamin Zephaniah

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NOTES

1. Beyoncé, “Formation.” Filmed [2016]. YouTube video, 4:47. Posted 9 December 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WDZJPJV__bQ. King reference at 3:31.

2. This could be support of #ReclaimMLK, providing a black history lesson, provocation, or documentation of themes important to today's movement.
3. While more examples from European countries can be found, due to the limited scope of this article and language barriers, I have focused on Britain and my own native country the Netherlands.
4. Due to the limited academic research on these activities and to be as up-to-date as possible, this article is predominantly based on newspaper clippings, activists' blogs, and interviews. Online articles accessed August 1, 2018.
5. Brian Ward, *Martin Luther King in Newcastle Upon Tyne* (Newcastle: Tyne Bridge Publishing, 2017), 17.
6. Kevin Bruyneel, "The King's Body," *History and Memory* 26:1 (Spring/Summer 2014): 75-108; Jeanne Theoharis, *A More Beautiful and Terrible History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 3-5, 9-10; Clarence Lang, *Black America in the Shadow of the Sixties* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 10-11, 45, 74-75.
7. See Jorrit van den Berk and Laura Visser-Maessen, "Race Matters" in this volume of the *European Journal of American Studies*.
8. Ibid.
9. Martin Luther King, Jr. *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York and London: Bantam Books, 1967).
10. Jermaine M. McDonald, "Ferguson and Baltimore according to Dr. King," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 36:2 (Fall/Winter 2016): 153-154. See also Brandon Terry et al., eds., "Forum 5: Fifty Years Since MLK," *Boston Review* 43.1 (2018).
11. "Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'Where Do We Go From Here' Turns 50," Beacon Broadside, 20 June 2017, <http://www.beaconbroadside.com/broadside/2017/06/martin-luther-king-jrs-where-do-we-go-from-here-turns-50.html>.
12. Cornel West, ed., *The Radical King* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016); Lewis V. Baldwin and Rufus Burrow, Jr., eds., *The Domestication of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013); Jennifer J. Yanco, *Misremembering Dr. King* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014); Theoharis, *History*, xv, xix, 3-5, 18, 22-26, 208.
13. Ibid. Theoharis, 17.
14. See Lang, *Shadow*, 80; Gwendolyn Simmons, "Living it Out: Martin Luther King Jr. Revisited," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24:2 (Fall 2008), 189-213; Terry et al., "Fifty Years"; Russell Rickford, "It's Time to Reclaim the True Martin Luther King," *Washington Post*, 18 June 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2018/01/15/its-time-to-reclaim-the-true-martin-luther-king/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.35ea61d898d6; Thomas J. Sugrue, "Restoring King," *Jacobin*, n.d., <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/01/restoring-king/>; Michael K. Honey, "Martin Luther King Jr.," *Nation*, 3 April 2018, <https://www.thenation.com/article/martin-luther-king-jr-50-years-later/>; Jeanne Theoharis, "MLK Would Never Shut Down a Freeway," *Root*, 15 July 2016, <https://www.theroot.com/mlk-would-never-shut-down-a-freeway-and-6-other-myths-1790856033>; Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou, "Martin Luther King's Radical Legacy," *Dissent Magazine*, 15 January 2017, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/martin-luther-kings-radical-legacy-poor-peoples-campaign-black-lives-matter-socialist; Vincent Harding, *Martin Luther King* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2013); Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Mary Lou Finley et al., eds., *The Chicago Freedom Movement* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2018); Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007); Michael K. Honey, *To The Promised Land* (n.p.: W.W. Norton, 2018); Asafo Shaka Sekou, *The Radical Political Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Charleston: Createspace, 2015); Jason Sokol, *The Heavens Might Crack* (New York: Basic Books, 2018); Michael K. Honey, ed., *"All Labor Has Dignity"* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014);

Clayborne Carson, *Martin's Dream* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Michael Eric Dyson, *April 4, 1968* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2009).

15. McDonald, "Ferguson," 143-155. Quote on 151; Lang, *Shadow*, 45; Theoharis, *History*, xv, xix, 3-5, 18, 22-26, 208.

16. Jamil Smith, "Martin Luther King, Jr. Doesn't Belong To You," *New Republic*, 18 January 2016, <https://newrepublic.com/article/127879/martin-luther-king-jr-doesnt-belong>.

17. Theoharis, *History*, 4-5, 23; Shane Croucher, "Steve Bannon," *Newsweek*, 23 May 2018, <https://www.newsweek.com/steve-bannon-martin-luther-king-would-be-proud-donald-trump-940196>.

18. Smith, "Belong"; Theoharis, *History*, 8-10, 13, 15-17, 21, 26. Quotes on 13, 21.

19. Ibid. Theoharis, 22-26.

20. See his Birmingham jail letter.

21. McDonald, "Ferguson," 153.

22. Bruyneel, "Body," 102.

23. See the SNCC-SCLC rivalry.

24. McDonald, "Ferguson," 144.

25. Ibid., 151; David Iaconagelo, "How young activists are reclaiming a more radical version of Martin Luther King," *Christian Science Monitor*, 16 January 2017, <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/2017/0116/How-young-activists-are-reclaiming-a-more-radical-version-of-Martin-Luther-King-Jr>.

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ABSTRACTS

For those who have studied the black freedom struggle, it is a given that King's legacy has not only been 'whitewashed' to neutralize its radical elements but also that this 'sanitized' version is used to undermine similar ones in the current movement for racial equality. This article, however, zooms in on the ways in which today's left-leaning black activists use the existence of this 'sanitized' version of King's legacy to their advantage. Particularly the recent #ReclaimMLK campaigns in the USA and black engagement with King legacy projects in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands reveal how it can be used as a potent tool to justify contemporary protests. This provides valuable insights into the possible trajectory of 21st century black activism as well as the interrelation between the black freedom struggles on both continents.

INDEX

Keywords: 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., civil rights, collective memory, King legacy, Black Lives Matter, #ReclaimMLK, MLK Day, black freedom struggle, post-racial society, colorblind racism, Afro-European activism, Black Atlantic

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