Beyond Hashtags

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In January 2011, TWiB!’s Elon James White introduced a segment on the Blacking It Up! podcast by saying, “I’m gonna call someone that I think is responsible and very smart. I’m calling my good friend Dr. Blair Lynn Murphy Kelley. I’m calling the historian.” To which co-host Aaron Rand Freeman responded, “Wooooow. That’s like calling the police. That’s awesome.” This call to the “history police” was prompted by a segment on Tea Party–media personality Glenn Beck’s show. A few days prior, Beck had defended then Congresswoman Michelle Bachmann’s assertions that the founding fathers of the United States actively tried to eliminate slavery. Beck claimed Frederick Douglass’s writings supported Bachmann’s assertion, quoting Douglass as saying, “I defy the presentation of a single pro-slavery clause in the Constitution.” Beck chided Bachmann’s critics, “Why do you hate Frederick Douglass so much? Why do you hate Black people so much?” Kelley, who was in her car driving when White called, contextualized Douglass’s words, undermining Beck’s claim. She explained, “Indeed, Frederick Douglass did say, if strictly construed, according to its reading, the Constitution is not a pro-slavery instrument.” She then pointed out that the quotation Beck used is part of a larger statement.

But, Douglass continued, “I now hold, as I’ve ever done, that the original intent and meaning of the Constitution, the one given to it by the men who framed it and those who adopted, and the one given to it by the Supreme Court of the United States, makes it a pro-slavery instrument. . . . one that I cannot bring myself to vote under or swear to support.”

In her discussion, Kelley referred to Douglass as “one of the most important African Americans to live”—which, White highlighted, was exactly
the reason Beck had invoked him: “That’s why Glenn Beck is pulling him out there. ’Cause if he can somehow be on the side of Frederick Douglass, he feels like he’s bulletproof. That’s why he’s makin’ that argument.”

This seventeen-minute segment on *Blacking It Up!* exemplifies several common themes. Beck demonstrates two key issues around racial uses of history. First, the past is frequently marshaled to obscure the significance of US racism, prioritizing the preservation of contemporary notions of the country’s fundamental goodness and justness. Second, Black American historical figures are deployed to claim moral high ground and deflect criticism, particularly criticism coming from Black people. *Blacking It Up!* and its on-call historian worked against these goals to simultaneously make visible and undermine the strategies used to achieve them.

Remembering is site of contention where the discourse of colorblindness can be reified or undermined. Dominant discourses of the US past construct structural racism as a historic, rather than contemporary, phenomenon, acknowledging past wrongdoings while rendering the present blameless. This casts racism as a nonissue for the twenty-first century United States and provides the foundation upon which colorblindness rests. Participants in the network at the center of this project are acutely aware that understandings of the past deeply shape our interpretation of the present. Digital networks and platforms provide resources with which to challenge the strategic amnesia of dominant US cultural memory in ways that destabilize colorblindness and undermine the racial status quo.

Participants utilize their transplatform network to engage in memory work that undermines dominant accounts of history through a vernacular pedagogy. As in the situations discussed in the previous chapter, Twitter functions largely as a counter-public, creating a place to directly engage people outside the network, while podcasts facilitate the creation of a more insulated environment that enables nuanced discussion. Like other distributed discussions in the network, these conversations tend to be multimedia and move across platforms. Technological capabilities allow for dialogic engagement with discourses through the use of audio and video recordings and of retweet and tweet quoting functions. Finally, this memory work also makes use of the connection some par-
Participants, like White, Imani Gandy, Feminista Jones, and others, have to larger mainstream media outlets, to push counter-discourses out of the network and make them more visible to a larger public.

This chapter focuses on the kinds of discursive work that can be accomplished in this transplatform environment. I begin with an explanation of the function and importance of remembering and its relation to contemporary power structures and identities and demonstrate not only the ongoing importance of history to the network, but also how an understanding of the power of remembering runs through its content and interactions. I then focus specifically on how the Civil Rights Movement and Martin Luther King Jr., who serves as a contemporary avatar for the movement as a whole, are deployed in dominant discourses to obscure and silence assertions of contemporary racism. I explore how King is remembered in sanitized form, devoid of radicalism, and invoked to chastise and silence Black Americans and their critiques. I conclude with an examination of how the network strategically re-remembers King to turn his legacy into a critique against the very people who would claim King’s authority to silence them.

The Social Functions of Remembering

Scholarship of cultural memory and history is fraught with debate over the meaning and boundaries of memory and history. Pierre Nora, in his foundational work on lieux de mémoire (sites of memory) makes a stark distinction between memory and history, arguing that the former is traditional, premodern, and social, while the latter is “is how our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past.” Astrid Erll, on the other hand, advocates for the dissolution of the distinction that renders history rigid and memory “flexible and alive” and asserts history and memory are two intertwined modes of remembering. This approach is particularly warranted when discussing Black Americans’ engagement with the past because, as Melvin Dixon points out, distinctions such as the one made by Nora possess a strong Eurocentric bias.

Remembering is a potent strategy for resisting the racial discourses that undergird colorblind racism. Because race is a fundamentally socio-historical concept, its construction is deeply imbricated with processes
of remembering. Stuart Hall explicitly theorizes identities as positions or points of identification within historical narratives, making them deeply connected to our relationship with the past. A full understanding of racial politics must recognize the centrality of the past in defining race and racism and maintaining racial hierarchies.7

But the past is neither stable nor objectively knowable. Remembering is not a process of simple recall, but one of reconstructing and reshaping the past. Our individual and collective recollections of the past do not exist fully formed in our minds; rather, they are fragments, which must be transformed into memories through social processes that are continuously unfolding and changing.8 These contingent processes are deeply imbricated with present needs and concerns. Remembering the past occurs in the context of present discursive frameworks; it “colonizes the past by obliging it to conform to present configurations.”9 As Michael Schudson points out, “If every society’s symbols form a vast cultural system whose job is that of telling stories that represent and reproduce the existing society, then for good or ill . . . culture constrains how we tell the tale.”10

Further, it is through our understandings of the past that we then “perceive and comprehend current events”11 Our understanding of the past is both shaped by and shapes our understanding of the present. Debates about the nature of the past do not take place in a vacuum; they occur within a larger sociocultural framework. Thus, remembering is never an end in its own right, but a means of asserting power and legitimizing social relations. Both what is remembered and how it is remembered involve selection and perspective.12 Silences are “as important as inclusions in historical production.”13 Barbie Zelizer argues that any “effort to determine what is known and remembered about the past . . . is an effort to claim and exert power.”14 Appeals to the past can be seen as powerful strategies for validating political traditions. Groups draw on and create versions of the past, which, in turn, enable frameworks for self-interpretation that are legitimized by the past.15 However, the cohesion and stability one group may derive from the past often comes at the expense of marginalized groups. “One group's political glue becomes the unraveling of another. In studies of repression, for instance, memory silences the voices of those who seek to interpret the past in contradictory ways.”16
When it comes to race and racism, how one understands the past drastically impacts one's understanding of the present. Colorblindness depends on a belief that structural racism has ended and been replaced with an individualist meritocracy—thus on a belief grounded in extensive erasures. Strategic amnesia has allowed for structural racism to be relegated to the past and given the discourse of colorblindness traction in the dominant culture.

The dominant historical accounts of US history frame racism as a relic of the past and obscure contemporary racial injustice. These accounts are often characterized by the themes of reconciliation and the redemption of the United States from past wrongs, reinforcing the meta-narrative of US exceptionalism and the inevitability of its progress toward ever-greater freedom and justice. Perhaps no chapter of US history is more called upon to interpret the nation’s racial present than the Civil Rights Movement, which is cast as the final chapter in the struggle to rid the United States of structural racial oppression. Peniel Joseph argues that the dominant account of Civil Rights Movement history is focused primarily on the “heroic” period between Brown v. Board of Education (1954), the Supreme Court case that desegregated publicly funded schools, and the Voting Rights Act (1965), which ensured equal access to the polls. These legislative successes, along with the nonviolent direct action of Martin Luther King Jr. and his supporters, have become enshrined as the moments of national triumph over the forms of institutional and structural racism that have plagued the United States since its founding. Such a narrative allows Americans to declare structural racism a historic, rather than contemporary, phenomenon, preserving the United States’ national self-image as a bastion of liberty and equality, while simultaneously obscuring, and thereby protecting, the nation’s systems of race-based privilege and oppression.

By painting the heroic Civil Rights Movement era as the final chapter in structural and institutional racism, the dominant history effectively relegates such racism to the past, thereby neutralizing it as a contemporary political issue. In US culture, historicizing an event often serves to depoliticize it and allows for the creation of the “illusion of consensus.” The themes of reconciliation and redemption that characterize the dominant Civil Rights Movement history combine with the historicization of
racism to preserve the turbulence and injustice of the racial past while rendering it “ideologically safe.” This strategy allows for a narrative that maximizes temporal distance between the present and the racism of the past and encourages Americans to believe that systemic racism has ended in the mid-twentieth century and that the US nation-state was ultimately on the moral right side of the struggle.

Within this context, counter-histories can make visible contemporary systemic racial oppression. Manning Marable argues that narratives we construct about the past “have the potential capacity to reshape contemporary civic outcomes.” Central to the efforts to achieve greater justice is “the contestation of the ‘master narrative,’ and the construction of an alternative history.” For this reason, Marable advocates active engagement with the past in ways that “obliterate the boundaries that appear to divide the past from the present, and from the future.” By undermining historic amnesia, counter-histories can reduce the temporal distance between the pre- and post–Civil Rights era in United States, suturing past and present together to highlight a continuum of injustice. By making visible that which was erased, such histories unsettle the illusion of consensus created by the “master narrative.”

“Old Takes” and the Vernacular Pedagogy of Historical Blackness

The network at the center of this project has always placed importance on remembering the past. This is particularly true of TWiB!. In the first full year of its existence, Blacking It Up! had many episodes engaging directly with history. TWiB! has an annual MLK Day show that discussed King’s legacy, the first of which, on January 17, 2011, began with King’s Drum Major speech in its entirety and then featured White’s mother, known a “Mama White” to the TWiB! audience, as a guest to talk about King’s legacy, the Civil Rights Movement, and her own experiences with racism as a child. Additionally, the Blacking It Up! hosts and their audience read Manning Marable’s biography of Malcolm X when it was released and had the historian Blair L. M. Kelley on the show to discuss the book. History is of such importance to TWiB!, that in early 2014, it began a new podcast, Historical Blackness, which was hosted by Kelley and ran for twenty-six episodes. The show was part of the freemium service, the TWiBUlarity, meaning that
it was available for free when it streamed at scheduled times and for
download with a subscription to TWiB’s premium content.

Kelley is Associate Professor of History and Assistant Dean of In-
terdisciplinary Studies and International Programs at North Carolina
State University. Throughout her career she has produced both deep in-
terventions into established Black American histories and a wide range
of public-facing scholarship, both of which are reflected in her work on
and African American Citizenship in the Era of Plessy v. Ferguson (2010)*,
won the Letitia Woods Brown Best Book Award from the Association of
Black Women Historians and is a critical corrective to well-established
historiography of the Black Freedom Struggle at the turn of the twen-
tieth century. Kelley demonstrates that this period, which canonical
academic histories have deemed accommodationist, was rife with re-
sistance. Exploring the complicated tensions between gender, class, and
colorism, Kelley also highlights the vital importance of Black women in
this period of protest. Further, Kelley has engaged extensively in public
scholarship, including writing for the *New York Times*, the *Washington
Post*, the *Root*, the *Grio*, and *Ebony*, and often draws on historical con-
texts to explicate contemporary events. *Historical Blackness*, an iteration
of this investment in public historical pedagogy, was groundbreaking,
anticipating the popularity of history podcasts that emerged in the years
following.

*Historical Blackness* served a multilayered pedagogical function. First, Kelley demonstrated the need for deeper historical knowledge,
persuading listeners of the necessity of a historical perspective. Second,
she provided historical education, exposing erasures and elisions in the
dominant accounts of the past. Finally, she demonstrated how, once ob-
tained, complex historical accounts can be used to produce alternative
interpretations of present events. Predicated on a recognition that the
US educational system limits most people’s historical knowledge, the
podcast offered lesser-known and more complex accounts of history. It
highlighted how discourses and practices of race and racism from the
past are still operative today. This resists the rupture between past and
present that undergirds colorblind discourse and instead recontextual-
izes contemporary events as the most recent iterations in an unbroken
continuum of white supremacy, which began with chattel slavery.
Kelley explicated how dominant historical narratives, as taught and perpetuated by US institutions such as the public school system, are reductive in ways that limit our understanding of the past. In one episode Freeman commented on today’s media culture, saying, “Everyone’s got the hottest take” on recent events. To which Kelley replied, “My take is gonna be old, an old take. And it’s going to be a history take.” She explained her belief in the value of history, speaking of the “misshapen way that most of us learn history from the very beginning.” She went on to explain the deficiencies of contemporary understandings of history that have resulted from the priorities of the US educational system, which she argued does not convey the “messy background” of history:

Most of what we get is the sense that there were extraordinary men who guided our past and thank goodness that we had them there to guide our paths and to lead when times were tough. So, the way we learn [and] teach US history is centered around US presidents as exceptional people who were about to achieve great things, who marched us on toward progress through the years. That’s really how most of us see our history. . . . And so you’re not really gettin’ a sort of a social history sense. Right? Looking at the way people interrelated with one another and thinking that everyday lives are important.

She identified the deficit in the dominant historical narrative, pointing to patterns of what is remembered and what is erased. *Historical Blackness* filled the gaps left by accounts of these “extraordinary men” and created more complicated contextualized accounts of the past.

Kelley’s show reduced the temporal distance between past and present that is necessary to sustain neoliberal colorblindness, suturing past and present together through a number of strategies. She often spoke of the historical “residue” in which we live our lives. For example, after recounting the origins of blackface minstrelsy, Kelley noted that

minstrel shows became popular as music. And so, the sheet music of minstrelsy was sold all over the country. They became the most popular songs of the day, and many of those songs are still with us as children songs and folk songs. And many people don’t even know that the, you know, “Camptown Races,” “Someone’s in the Kitchen with Dinah,” “Di-
xie,” “Carry me Back to Old Virginy,” all of these were “coon songs” that were part of minstrelsy.  

She explains that these songs, laden with racist tropes, spread throughout the United States and served a pedagogical function for white Americans, particularly in the North, as “real stories about how you should treat free Black people.” Kelley offers the example of how these “coon songs” were instrumental in establishing and reinforcing the stereotype that Black people eat chicken. Prior to the popularity of minstrel songs, this stereotype did not exist. As White put it, “If you showed up in the seventeenth century and were like, ‘Man, Black people love fried chicken,’ everybody’d look around like ‘What? What are you talking about?’” To which Kelley responded, “Yes, but if you showed up in 1850 everybody’d be like ‘Yuuup, they’ll steal your chicken and cook it right up.’” She pointed to “Ain’t Nobody Here but Us Chickens,” saying, “You’ve heard that before, right? Coon song. ‘Cause it’s a . . . minstrel’s hidin’ in the chicken coop, getting’ ready to steal the chickens.” She explains how this stereotype, circulated in song, was a twisted understanding of the tactics enslaved people used to survive the brutality of slavery:

And that’s the joke about slavery, right? That the enslaved people, who were hungry, right? That they literally were given tiny rations, and they were hungry after working like eighteen-hour days. That they would steal food. So, that became the joke in minstrelsy, that you were a thief. As if you could steal from the person who stole your labor, who stole your children, who stole your family, literally, day after day by enslaving you. But that’s the joke.

She explained that a similar perversion of the behaviors of the enslaved spawned the stereotype that Black people were lazy because enslaved people found creative everyday ways to resist their enslavement:

Of course they would try to shirk outta work, or say they were sick, or burn down your barn. Sure they would. . . . But, now you’re lazy. And so, the very things you could do to resist your circumstances became the stereotypes that your children then had to carry forth into the world.
Thus, Kelley demonstrated that the racism of the past is still with us, not only through the continued presence of the music but also the continuation of the racist beliefs it carried. Further, she highlighted the ways Black people’s own tactics of resistance, grounded in humanity and offering some measure of control, were easily perverted to become ways to police and oppress.

Kelley also used history to contextualize contemporary events in ways that emphasize the continuum of racist oppression and violence in the United States. For example, in the second episode, Kelley used the history of lynching to discuss the shooting death of seventeen-year-old Jordan Davis, who was killed by a white man, Michael Dunn, at a gas station. Davis was sitting in the back seat of his friend’s parked car with music playing. Dunn demanded they turn the music down and after Davis and his friends refused to do so, opened fire on the car, later claiming he feared for his and his girlfriend’s safety. Kelley observed:

> It’s the logic of lynching, right? It’s the idea that you have to protect white womanhood from scary threatening Black manhood. And that it’s indiscernible; it’s a mass of people. They’re threatening no matter the circumstances unless they’re just sort of grinning and skinning and yessir bossin’. And that Black men just can’t be minding their own business or doing their own thing.34

Kelley draws a straight line from the lynchings of the past to the logic that resulted in Davis’s death. Contextualized within the dominant racial discourse, Davis’s murder is an anomaly, at worst the actions of an individual racist. However, recontextualized within a history of lynching, it becomes the most recent iteration in generations of racist violence and terror, undermining notions that such violence is a thing of the past.

Kelley also uses her historical expertise to contextualize contemporary efforts by Black Americans to resist oppression. For example, after Michael Eric Dyson wrote a critical essay about fellow Black academic Cornel West, many criticized him for having public conflict, or beef, at that time, citing it as damaging to the movement to battle police violence. Kelley pointed out that such conflicts are neither new nor do they mean the movements in which they occur will not be effective. She re-
counted the very public and intense conflict between W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington in the early twentieth century and concluded:

Beef’s not new. And see how that’s a terrible time period in American history, right? So, you know, this whole notion of like, “We’re goin’ through hard things, so get along.” That’s the height of lynching. That’s the height of the passage of segregation laws. It’s the height of disfranchisement, literacy tests, and poll taxes. Never is there a worse time than this time in which DuBois is battling Booker T. Washington.\(^3\)

Thus, not only do lionized figures of Black American history become humanized. The knowledge that this conflict between these figures did not derail the Black liberation movement reduces the urgency to suppress conflict.

Podcasts are ideal for the vernacular pedagogy of Historical Blackness. Their extended and nuanced discussion allowed Kelley to demonstrate the importance of history and call attention to nonhegemonic interpretations of the present. This undermines the discourse of colorblindness by destabilizing the historical narratives on which it is built. Kelley demonstrated that structural racism is not a relic of a past age; it is a present reality, somewhat obscured but little changed. She sutures together past and present and illustrates how different accounts of the past can be used to reinterpret the present through a color-conscious, rather than colorblind, lens.

Sanitizing the Civil Rights Movement and Martin Luther King Jr.

Perhaps no period of US history is more called upon by neoliberal colorblindness than the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights Movement. Strategic amnesia and the reliance on the “great man” trope are clearly visible in the dominant history of the Civil Rights Movement and the contemporary public image of Martin Luther King, Jr. The dominant narrative of the Civil Rights Movement positions it as the successful end of white supremacy in the United States and the beginning of a new era of equality. These accounts depict the movement as centered on tolerance and individual achievement. Any controversial or contradictory messages or accounts of the past are erased or marginalized. Further, the
dominant versions of the past allow Americans to distance themselves from racism by denying federal responsibility and structural support for racism and to focus instead on individual bigots and extremist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, which are portrayed as a regional problem confined to the South. Additionally, Civil Rights Movement remembrances focus predominantly on spectacular and violent forms of racism while ignoring its subtle and day-to-day manifestations. Defining racism as a localized and spectacularly overt problem enables the conflation of the \textit{de jure} eradication of Jim Crow laws and lynching with the eradication of racism itself. Evidence of ongoing racism, such as police brutality, is routinely excluded from Civil Rights Movement memorials, and controversial elements that might disrupt the narrative of reconciliation and redemption are routinely excluded from memorializing practices. For example, the site where Fred Hampton, Mark Clark, and other members of the Black Panther Party were killed, originally included in an early edition of the official Illinois African American heritage guidebook, was later omitted because it was deemed “too controversial.”

The dominant narrative celebrates the activities of the heroic Civil Rights era and asserts that a “decline” characterized by urban protests and rebellions ensued. Accordingly, the “good” movement is exemplified by Martin Luther King Jr.’s nonviolent direct action during the “heroic” period, whereas the “bad” expressions of the movement are represented by more rhetorically militant activists such as Malcolm X and the emergent Black Power Movement. As Jacquelyn Hall argues, “In the dominant narrative, the decline of the movement follows hard on the heels of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts, and the popular struggles of the 1970s become nothing more than identity politics, divisive squabbles that promoted tribalism, alienated white workers, and swelled the ranks of the New Right.”

This narrative obscures the post-1965 gains of the movement, such as desegregation of schools and the workplace and the establishment of equal hiring practices. The heroic Civil Rights Movement is confined to “the South, to bowdlerized heroes, to a single halcyon decade, and to limited, noneconomic objectives.” This enshrines it as a triumph, while casting it as no longer relevant. Thus, the dominant account of the Civil
Rights Movement obscures structural injustice in ways that are apparent in how its most lionized figure has come to be remembered.

Martin Luther King Jr., in particular, has become a central figure in the remembering of past racial justice movements. King’s legacy looms large in a “civic mythology of racial progress in late twentieth-century America.” Marable argues, “Few Americans will ever forget ‘I Have a Dream,’ uttered by Martin on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial that hot August afternoon in 1963. Stamped deeply on public memory, it is now central to our understanding of what American democracy should be.” Moreover, as Fred Powledge observes, “In the minds of untold numbers of Americans . . . the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was the civil rights movement. Thought it up, led it, produced its victories, became its sole martyr. Schoolchildren—including Black schoolchildren—are taught this.” Thus, King has come to embody the entirety of the moral authority and legitimacy of the movement itself. To claim King’s legacy is to claim the moral authority and legitimacy of the entire Civil Rights Movement.

In the process King has been sanitized, purged of his radicalness, and reconstructed in an image that serves to mute contemporary racial turmoil. The man who is memorialized with monuments and street names and celebrated with public holidays is representative of “good” Civil Rights Movement and associated with nonviolent direct action. This memory of King obscures the radical and revolutionary aspects of King’s beliefs and actions. Representations of the man who praised Malcolm X on the occasion of his death, who took his antiracist efforts to Chicago in 1966 and asserted that he found the “worst racism” he had ever experienced there, who called the United States the “greatest purveyor of violence in the world” when condemning the Vietnam War in 1967, and who argued that capitalism was the root cause of inequality as he organized a Poor People’s Campaign in 1968, has largely disappeared from media retrospectives and mainstream historical accounts.

Instead, the image of King has been fixed at the moment of his 1963 speech. As Vince Harding put it, “Brother Martin spent a fair amount of time in jail, but his worst imprisonment may be how his own nation has frozen him in that moment in 1963.” Through public memory and annual MLK Day celebrations, King’s legacy was brought in line with
dominant racial discourses. By the end of the 1980s, “King had been sufficiently domesticated,” and the “racial conflict” surrounding him had been “subsumed in the broader dream of national harmony—something that can presumably be achieved if we are ‘all our best.’”

Beginning in the 1970s, the Right began reconfiguring King’s legacy to strategically support an agenda of deregulation and an emphasis on individual rather than collective racism. “The Right reworked the discourse of colorblindness,” redefining it as the erasure of racial distinctions. It recast the policies intended to remedy racism as the source of inequalities and refocused efforts on the impact of individual acts of discrimination, ignoring historical and institutionalized injustice oppressing Black Americans as a group.

Despite Reagan’s opposition to both the 1965 Voting Rights Act and the institution of the MLK holiday, Reagan regularly invoked King in his speeches. He used King’s words to imply equality had been achieved and that individuals “now had to take responsibility for any additional progress that was needed.” Reagan once argued, “The Voting Rights Act of 1965 had made certain that from then on black Americans would get to vote. But most important, there was not just a change of law; there was a change of heart. The conscience of America had been touched. Across the land, people had begun to treat each other not as blacks and whites, but as fellow Americans.” This shift of conscience presumably negated the necessity of any further legal protections. The Right has made much of King’s dream that “children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” To Reagan “equality” meant that people should be treated solely as individuals with no regard to the advantages or disadvantages suffered by a particular group. Appealing to the discourse of colorblindness, Reagan supported dismantling of Federal Civil Rights Law, asserting it was inconsistent with King’s beliefs. Reagan’s attorney general, Edwin Meese, argued that the administration’s opposition to affirmative action was “very consistent with what Dr. King had in mind” when he envisioned a “colorblind society.” By the mid-1980s, King began making regular appearances in speeches to justify the Reagan administration’s opposition to affirmative action laws. And by the twenty-first century, King’s legacy had been so profoundly recrafted that it could be claimed to support almost any political position.
In the contemporary moment, King’s legacy is often called upon to bolster the racial status quo. Between 2010 and early 2016, King was frequently invoked to silence Black Americans’ attempts to highlight and critique racism, and his public image was often marshaled to support a wide array of sometimes contradictory political positions. In response, participants in the network have engaged in discussions that both interpret invocations of King and create counter-discourses that contest such rememberings. The struggle over King’s public image intensified after the emergence of the Movement for Black Lives, as King was persistently deployed by the movement’s critics.

**MLK Fan Fic: Re-Remembering King**

King’s legacy is frequently invoked to criticize Black Americans and to provide cover for any number of positions across the political spectrum. King has been used by the Tea Party to justify their policy positions and delegitimize accusations of racism and by the Right more generally to condemn unions and labor protests. Liberals and progressives have made appeals to King’s legacy to counter criticism for their handling of racial issues and legitimize political positions. Regardless of politics or topic, King is often deployed to further two related goals. The first is to bolster one’s argument or position by aligning it with King and thereby claiming his moral authority. The second is to police Black people’s behaviors and to deflect criticism, a move White has dubbed “throwing your Negro shields up,” by positioning them in opposition to King. The network at the center of this project has long addressed and challenged such appropriations of King.

The sanitized colorblind individualist King whom Reagan had constructed was used to support the discourses and policy agendas of the Tea Party. The Tea Party, a movement often criticized for its tolerance for the racist language of some of its proponents, positioned itself as the inheritors of King’s legacy while placing the vast majority of Black Americans who were opposed to the Tea Party’s political agenda as betrayers of that legacy. For example, when right-wing commentator Glenn Beck held his “Restoring Honor” rally at the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 2010, the forty-second anniversary of the March on Washington, he described members of the Tea Party as “people of the Civil Rights Move-
ment. We are the ones that must stand for civil and equal rights, justice, equal justice. Not special justice, not social justice. We are the inheritors and protectors of the Civil Rights Movement. They are perverting it.  

Similarly, after the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) voted for a resolution that called upon the Tea Party to denounce racism and those bringing racist signs to Tea Party rallies, the Tea Party Patriots, an umbrella organization for thousands of local groups across the country, posted a petition on its website demanding that the NAACP revoke the resolution. The petition claimed, “It is nothing less than ‘hate speech’ for the N.A.A.C.P. to be smearing us as ‘racists’ and ‘bigots,’” adding that “we believe, like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in a colorblind, postracial society. And we believe that when an organization lies and resorts to desperate tactics of racial division and hatred, they should be publicly called on it.” Additionally, Alveda King has become a frequent guest on right-wing media and at Tea Party rallies, often proclaiming her uncle would support Tea Party politics and policies. Of Alveda King’s role in Beck’s rally, conservative blogger Kathleen McKinley once asserted, “Don’t u love it? Even the left can’t bear to criticize MLK’s niece. She’s bulletproof.”

From the recreation of King’s most iconic moment (with Beck symbolically and physically substituting himself for King), to the use of Civil Rights–era rhetoric, to the exploitation of King’s family relations, the Tea Party laid claim to King and his legacy. 

TWiB! often took aim at such assertions by right-wing figures using less-known and more complex accounts of King to undermine their shallow, reductive version of him. For example, on an early episode of Blacking It Up!, White, co-host Bassey Ikpi, and guest Kriss, from the Movie Trailer Reviews (MTR) Network, discussed the ways the Right and the labor movement were struggling over the legacy of King in the midst of the 2011 labor protests in Wisconsin in response to proposed state laws that would damage collective bargaining rights. With the focus on labor rights and unions at the center of national attention, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) organized rallies across the United States under the moniker “We Are One” on the forty-third anniversary of King’s assassination. The AFL-CIO noted that King often connected the rights of Black Americans to labor rights and that at the time of his death in Memphis,
he was standing with Black sanitation workers who were demanding recognition of their union. Beck, on both his radio program and on his Fox News show, rejected and derided this image of King, arguing that the association of King with labor rights was “absurd.” He echoed the colorblind framing of King’s legacy, asserting that he “gave his life fighting for civil rights, the right for all men to be judged by the content of their character, not the color of the skin or their union label.”

Blacking It Up! addressed the connection of King to unions and Beck’s claims to the contrary by playing a clip of from Beck’s radio show in which Beck said derisively, “Wait, wait, hold it, just a second. Dr. King lost his life for collective bargaining for the public unions, really? Did you know that? ’Cause—that—we have to update our history books, because I didn’t know that. Did you know that?” In response, Ipki turned the tables on Beck:

Yes, we fucking do need to adjust our history books because what’s in there is a lie. Lies My Teacher Told Me, clearly. Martin Luther King didn’t become an enemy of the state until he started backing unions and telling people they needed to fight for their rights and he started going after big name corporations. That’s why he got killed. Not because he had a dream.

In the same segment, White, Ipki, and Kriss expanded their criticism to address the Tea Party more generally and its ongoing attempts to claim King. They played audio of commentary from Tea Party activist Lisa Fritsch, who said on Fox News that the comparison between labor rights and King’s work was an “ugly comparison” that was “completely invalid” and outright “immoral.” White pointed to the irony of a Tea Party member criticizing the corruption of King’s legacy when they have specifically been corrupting Martin Luther King’s ideas, talking about how they’re fighting for quote-unquote civil rights as well. . . . They continue to talk all this bullshit about how Martin Luther King wasn’t fighting for unions and things like that. . . . But then all of a sudden you start to hear things like, quote, “Negroes are almost entirely a working people. They are pitifully few Negro millionaires and few Negro employers. Our needs are identical with labor’s needs. Decent wages, fair
working conditions, livable housing, old age security, health and welfare measures, conditions in which families can grow . . . That is why Negroes support labor’s demands and fight laws that curb labor. That is why labor-hater and labor-baiter is virtually always a twin headed creature spewing anti-Negro epithets from one mouth and anti-labor propaganda from another mouth.” Martin. Luther. King.⁶⁹

In addition to being coopted by the Right for their political aims, King is also often deployed by liberals and progressives, particularly as a “shield” against Black critique. This was exemplified by an exchange between White and Salon’s David Sirota. White had challenged Sirota’s attempts to use the acquittal of George Zimmerman to bring attention to US military drone strikes in the Middle East. White asserted that doing so hindered important discussion about US racial oppression by diverting attention away from the specific ways oppression functions in Black American lives and communities. Many criticized Sirota for the timing of his critique and for what were perceived as his attempts to use the visability of Martin’s death to highlight his own political priorities. Sirota responded by tweeting Martin Luther King Jr. quotations at White, Gandy, and many of his other critics with his added commentary, including “tell that to Dr. King,” and “Dr. King disagrees with you.”⁷⁰ White used Twitter to express his dismay at Sirota’s attempts to shift the discourse, and Sirota responded that White was suffering from “willful ignorance.”⁷¹ When White continued to challenge him, Sirota retweeted an earlier tweet of his that said, “ICYMI: Dr. King’s rejoinder to those who say fight for civ rights at home has nothing to do w/military policy abroad” and included a screen capture of the following remark by King:

Over the past two years, as I have moved to break the betrayal of my own silences and to speak from the burnings of my own heart, as I have called for radical departures from the destruction of Vietnam, many persons have questioned me about the wisdom of my path. At the heart of their concerns this query has often loomed large and loud: “Why are you speaking about the war, Dr. King?” “Why are you joining the voices of dissent?” “Peace and civil rights don’t mix,” they say. “Aren’t you hurting the cause of your people?” they ask. And when I hear them, though I often understand the source of their concern, I am nevertheless greatly sad-
dened, for such questions mean that the inquirers have not really known me, my commitment or my calling. Indeed, their questions suggest that they do not know the world in which they live.\textsuperscript{72}

To this, Sirota added a message addressed directly to White: “@elonjames you sound like the kind of critic Dr. King decried.”\textsuperscript{73} Sirota had tweeted this King quote out to a number of critics that day on Twitter. White responded, saying,

The idea that in the midst of an issue concerning civil rights @davidsirota, that you would throw an MLK quote at me? To deflect? Really?

My critique was with your methods sir. @davidsirota To speak against injustice is fine—to misappropriate and then condescend is assholic.

And the idea that all you have to do is post an MLK quote and then hit your #BBoystance is ridiculous. Answer the critique. @davidsirota.\textsuperscript{74}

When others within the network responded to Sirota by suggesting he had gone too far in his instance of claiming King, Sirota responded with tweets like, “agreed—it is outta hand to ignore Dr. King,” adding the link to the same quotation again.\textsuperscript{75} The exchange between White, Sirota, and other members of the network continued for almost three hours, during which Sirota repeatedly deployed King to meet criticism directed at him.

After the network’s encounter with Sirota on Twitter, White, Gandy, and Freeman used a \textit{TWiB! Prime} podcast to unpack and interpret Sirota’s tactics at length. White and Gandy outlined Sirota’s position, affirmed their opposition to drone strikes, and proceeded to explain their issue with Sirota’s framing. White read the exchange he had with Sirota on Twitter, interjecting commentary and discussion as he went, in much the same way as they do with video and audio clips. While he initially highlighted on Twitter why sending the quote was problematic, White went more in depth on the podcast:

At first when he sent me the quote, my response was, “This mutherfucker did not just quote Martin Luther King at me!” That was my response out
loud. I was like, “What? Wait. What?” Because there has been a lot of discussion about spaces within progressivism, the progressive movement, using Martin Luther King and conservatives, in all honesty, using Martin Luther King to fit their own needs at that moment when they want to make an argument. Especially, to quell Black voices. It’s like, “Oh, look. Martin Luther King said this. What? b-boy stance.” And you’re supposed to all of a sudden calm to hell out.76

Gandy noted, “It’s a silencing tactic.” She went on to point out that the practice of quoting King to defend against critique is “a logical fallacy that instead of answering to critique you throw out other people who agree with you, that’s an appeal to authority. That doesn’t end the argument. That doesn’t mean you win. It actually means that you know that you’ve lost because you can’t answer the critique. You cannot make an argument to defend your position.”77

A similar appeal to authority was made by some Bernie Sanders supporters to rebut critiques of him by the Movement for Black Lives and others during his 2016 primary run. This tactic was particularly visible in the wake of the disruption of the presidential town hall meeting at Netroots Nation in 2015, when protestors demanded that Sanders address the deaths of Black women in police custody. When Gandy tweeted a post by Eclecta Blog, a progressive blog site, titled “White progressives get a taste of anger and frustration as #BlackLivesMatter activists upstage Bernie Sanders,”78 she received responses such as “Bernie marched with MLK and was arrested fighting for civil rts. What has she done except ‘Look at me.’ Pathetic.”79 Gandy was not the only target of such tweets. White, the Media Director of Netroots Nation at the time, was directly blamed by some for staging the protest.80 As he took to Twitter to defend the protest and assert that all candidates should be pushed on the issues, he received tweets informing him that “Bernie Sanders had participated in the historic March on Washington in 1963”81 and arguing that “Bernie is the ONLY one who has supported black lives for 50 years. . . . disrupt foes not friends!!!!”82 These tweets were not isolated events. Iterations of Sanders’s civil rights bona fides featuring King proliferated in the discussion online. When Civic Action Executive Director of MoveOn.org, Ann Galland, tweeted, “The presidential candidates need to do better,” with a link to
the official MoveOn response, she received replies like “Bernie Sanders has been fighting for civil rights for decades & marched w/ MLK. I don’t think he needs to be lectured.”

Writer and poet Hanif Abdurraqib, who works with *MTV News* and *Muzzle Magazine*, summed up his exasperation, tweeting, “You tweet out one joke about Bernie Sanders, and the Bernie Sanders supporters summon MLK within literal minutes. Sheeeeeesh.”

The use of King as a means of silencing or undermining Black voices has become so prevalent that participants in the network have developed terminology to discuss the phenomenon. In January 2013, Freeman coined the term “MLK fan fiction” to describe how so many people, of virtually any political stripe, seem to claim King would have supported their position if he were alive today. At the time, White, Freeman, and then-co-host Dacia Mitchell were on *TWiB! Prime* discussing an article that Barbara Arnwine, the Executive Director of the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, had written, arguing that King would have opposed allowing the nation to go over the “fiscal cliff,” the term that was being used to describe the combination of the expiration of the Bush Tax cuts and the automatic implementation of draconian spending cuts through budget sequestration. Arnwine was emphasizing King’s focus on economic inequality and used this to ground her argument that the fiscal cliff would have had a disproportionate impact on Black Americans. As Mitchell introduced the story, White interjected, “Stop, stop, stop. Stop. Stop. I don’t care about this story. And here’s why. I am getting sick and tired of people telling me what MLK would think of something or what MLK would do with something.” To which Freeman responded, “You mean you don’t like MLK fan fiction?” White asserted. “MLK fan fiction is possibly one of the most annoying types of fan fiction in the world. Because, guess what? We have no clue what MLK would have done if he did not get shot.”

The network has also created two different metaphors to describe the way people often invoke King—the Big Joker and Pokémon. The former is a reference to the game Spades, in which the Big Joker trumps, or beats, all other cards. It emerged in the aftermath of the Zimmerman acquittal in 2013, when Rod from TBGWT called in to *TWiB! Radio* as it was live-streaming. Observing that many white Americans were responding to the event by delegitimizing Black critique and pain, Rod
also referred to White’s conflict with Sirota, which had occurred the previous evening:

I think when it comes to Black commentary, it’s just like Spades, . . . and, of course, Martin Luther King is the Big Joker. . . . White people are playin’ Spades. White people are playin’ Spades with our commentary. And that’s why, last night, you lost, man. . . . He pulled out Martin Luther King, and we all know there’s no recourse for the Big Joker in Spades. So, you have to back down. That’s the rule.  

The second metaphor describes King and his frequent rhetorical function by way of the popular Japanese franchise Pokémon (a contraction of the Japanese words for “pocket monster”). In the cartoon series based on these creatures, the Pokémon are captured in “Poké Balls,” about the size of a baseball, after which they become the property of their “trainer” and must obey the trainer’s commands. The Poké Balls are deployed in battle, as the trainer throws the ball while yelling “[name of the Pokémon], I choose you!” The Pokémon then emerges and fights on behalf of its trainer. King as Pokémon frames King as an on-call easily deployable fictitious figure that is thrown out to fight one’s battle.

Rod and Karen used both analogies—Big Joker and Pokémon—in their interrogation of legacy media during the 2015 uprising in Baltimore following the death of Freddie Gray. Gray was a twenty-five-year-old Black man who suffered fatal injuries to his spinal cord while being arrested and then transported alone in the back of a police van. The officers involved were accused of excessive use of force, and the ensuing protests resulted in property damage. During the unrest, activist Deray McKesson, who rose to prominence during the 2014 protests in Ferguson, appeared on Wolf Blitzer’s CNN show to talk about the events in Baltimore. Blitzer repeatedly asked McKesson questions attempting to lead him to condemn the property damage caused by the unrest and to legitimize “peaceful protest.” In reply, McKesson distinguished between “violence,” which he asserted had been perpetrated by the police on the bodies of citizens, and property damage, refusing to fit his comments in the narrative offered by Blitzer. After a few moments, Blitzer said, “I just want to hear you say that there should be peaceful protest, not violent
protest, in the tradition of Dr. Martin Luther King." When TBGWT played the audio from this interview on its podcast, Rod observed,

He played the Martin Luther King Big Joker. White people’s go-to card. Favorite card in the deck. The Martin Luther King Big Joker ain’t even got no print left on it form all d’ thumb grease that has been used on that muthafucka. . . . You can only tell it’s the Martin Luther King Big Joker now because it’s still got the bullet holes in it form when they killed that muthafucker.

He continued by making reference to Picachu, one of the most popular Pokémon in the franchise, and playing with the fact that Pokémon only say their own names. “But, they keep playin it. Like it’s the Pokémon in the deck. It’s Picachu. It’s like ‘MLK! MLK!’” Karen asked, “That the only muthafuckin’ card you got? Know there’s some other cards in the deck, right?” To which Rod replied, “Not to mention he got other quotes. But, but we gonna keep goin’ to the same, you know, non-violence shit. Oh, we gotta pull out the MLK Pokémon. ‘MLK, I choose you!’” Blitzer’s interview with McKesson not only demonstrates the use of King as Big Joker and/or Pokémon, it also illustrates how the dominant public image of King has been used to delegitimize the protest and political strategies of the Movement for Black Lives.

*The Movement for Black Lives and the Struggle to Reclaim King*

While King has long been deployed as a means of disciplining Black resistance, this strategy intensified with the emergence of the Movement for Black Lives in 2014. Its critics called upon the dominant sanitized construction of King to condemn the movement as wholly un-Kinglike and therefore illegitimate. Accordingly, the Movement for Black Lives was situated in the lineage of unruly and dangerous Black movements and the narrative of declension that frames the post–Civil Rights era. In response, the network at the center of this project has become an arena in which to disrupt such dominant constructions of King and work to rearticulate his vision and reclaim his legacy, thereby legitimizing the work of contemporary activists and protestors.
Because King functions as a symbol for the entirety of the Civil Rights Movement in the dominant historical narrative, claims to King are claims the romanticized and venerated movement writ large. Marable argues that the movement for Black liberation, beginning from the Great Migration of the early twentieth century, has become a template for resistance to oppression, not just in the United States, but worldwide. As such, it has become the yardstick against which all movements for liberation are measured, but especially those by Black Americans.89 Thus, claims to King function as claims to the correct and proper way to protest and produce change. Critics of the Movement for Black Lives invoke King as a means of distancing the movement from this “appropriate” form of protest, framing it as illegitimate and even dangerous.

King’s memory is often mobilized to condemn the contemporary movement, particularly its use of disruptive tactics such as blocking intersections and interstate highways to impede the flow of traffic. In January 2015, McKesson tweeted a Vine of one such protest.90 In response, conservative blogger Kathleen McKinley tweeted, “I mean seriously, this isn’t the protests of MLK. He would hate this.”91 When criticized because she was a white woman using King to chastise Black people for how they chose to fight injustice, McKinley replied, “What does it matter what color I am. MLK never used profanities or screaming & insisted everyone stay dignified.”92 McKinley has frequently been playing the MLK “Big Joker” since she first joined Twitter in 2008. A prolific author of 140-character MLK fanfic, McKinley has deployed King to condemn a range of Black individuals and their behaviors—chastising protestors for property destruction during protests, admonishing Roland Martin that “MLK wouldn’t like [him] bragging about” fund raising, bemoaning the “entitlement” in the “inner city” that “was NOT MLK’s dream” but rather his “nightmare,” and claiming that “no doubt MLK would be embarrassed [sic] by [Jesse] Jackson and [Al] Sharpton today.”93

In early 2016, former member of the House of Representatives, Joe Walsh, fired off the following series of tweets invoking King to condemn the Movement for Black Lives.

MLK Jr was all about “the content of our character, not the color of our skin.” #BLM is only about skin color.
If MLK were w us 2day he’d say: “Quit whining. We’ve made amazing racial process. You’ll never know the racism that I knew. Celebrate that!”

MLK Jr would tell young blacks today to quit blaming racism for every-thing. He’d tell em they are in charge of their own lives & futures.94

Again, just like McKinley, Walsh has a long history of MLK fanfic, with posts about King coinciding with moments of high-profile racial tension and protests. In August 2013, on the anniversary of the March on Washington and shortly after the acquittal of Zimmerman, Walsh posted a series of tweets beginning with King’s famous, “I have a dream” and completed with statements that represent Walsh’s own views, such as “I have a dream that young black men will stop shooting other young black men” and “I have a dream that black America will take responsibility for improving their own lives.”95 Walsh put forth an image of King mirroring the one pioneered by Reagan. Walsh’s King is an ardent individualist who believes Black Americans should pull themselves up by their bootstraps—which, coincidentally, are the same political views held by Walsh.

In response to attempts to use King to delegitimize the Movement for Black Lives, efforts to reframe and reclaim him as radical are common in the both network and the movement, and they also serve to legitimize the Movement for Black Lives. One key component of this effort has been the #ReclaimMLK movement, which was started in December 2014, after the unrest in Ferguson and continues each year on the week-end of Martin Luther King Day. For activists, this holiday has become a day of action rather than a day of service, as it has traditionally been considered. As Ferguson Action website posted, “On MLK day, do as Martin Luther King would have done and resist the war on Black Lives with civil disobedience and direct action. Take the streets, shut it down, walk, march, and whatever you do, take action.”96

On the weekend of MLK Day 2015, activists across the country engaged in four days of action. The Coalition Against Police Violence (CAPV), consisting of individuals and organizations working together to “eradicate systemic injustice and state sanctioned violence” through the use of “relentless activism, economic sanctions, and pragmatic strat-
egies of reform,” organized the 4 Mile March, which included various forms of protest, in cities across the country, including San Diego, Salt Lake City, Atlanta, Charlotte, Philadelphia, Oakland, Chicago, Boston, Minneapolis, New York, St. Louis, and Washington, DC. Other actions were organized around the hashtag #ReclaimMLK. In Oakland, where activists undertook ninety-six hours of protest beginning on January 16, actions included shutting down transit stations and protesters from a variety of racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds chaining themselves to Oakland’s Ronald V. Dellums Federal Building holding signs reading “Third World for Black Power.” The San Mateo–Hayward Bridge was shut down on January 19 by protesters who physically blocked traffic in both lanes with their bodies. Protesters blocked streets in DC, Seattle, Cincinnati, Minneapolis, Atlanta, and many other cities. Protesters also went into Wal-Mart stores and placed “warning” labels on toy and pellet guns; these had an image of John Crawford, a twenty-two-year-old Black man who was shot and killed by police while holding a BB gun sold by Wal-Mart, and stated: “Persons of color picking up this object may be subject to serious injury or death at the hands of Wal-Mart and police,” accompanied by the hashtags #ReclaimMLK and #36seconds, a reference to the time between the officer entering the store and firing. Protesters in Oakland went to Mayor Libby Schaaf’s house and projected an image of King on her garage door with the quotation “A riot is the language of the unheard” and the hashtag #IfWeCantBreatheYouCantDream, a reference to the last words of Eric Garner, before dying as a New York police officer held him in a headlock.

Social media, particularly Twitter and Instagram, were central in circulating images of and information about the actions as they took place. Many of the actions were small, performed by only a handful of participants. But, when publicized by social media, these smaller actions filled people’s timelines, effectively creating a sense of a nationwide effort. The strategies of agitation and disruption, as expressed by the saying, “Shut shit down,” were performed and contextualized with the images of King the radical. As an activist going by the handle WyzeChef tweeted, “No justice, no peace. We are out here indefinitely. Get comfortable with being uncomfortable. #ReclaimMLK.”
Such activist efforts were discussed throughout the network, which interpreted the dominant discourse about King, deconstructed it, and offered a different vision. Just as Historical Blackness sutured together past and present to address the ongoing reality of structural racism, participants in the network re-remembered King as opposing the same injustice, sharing the same politics and tactics, and receiving much the same criticism as the Movement for Black Lives.

On the August 19, 2015, episode of TWiB! Prime, Freeman described the unrealistic way King is often remembered and highlighted the absurdity that this superhuman vision is proffered as a model for Black resistance:

Martin Luther King, from hearing people talk about it, he deflected punches and bullets. Not only was he nonviolent, but nothing actually affected him emotionally. He would walk into the river like a terminator and out the other side like a terminator. He actually felt nothing but compassion for everyone. Nothing. He didn’t eat. He didn’t drink. He didn’t sleep. It was all compassion, 100 percent of the time from Martin Luther King. So, why don’t Black people act like that?101

Participants in the network often acknowledge that this popular image of King—the nonviolent compassion-filled terminator—is made possible only through strategic amnesia that erases similarities between King and the contemporary movement. For example, on the fourth episode of the Ferguson Response Network podcast, Leslie Mac, who is active in the movement and also hosts podcast called Interracial Jawn with her white husband, discussed the upcoming MLK Day events with Ricky Hinds, of Americans United Again, and attorney, activist, and artist Esther Baldwin. Mac asserted, “There are so many parallels between the Civil Rights Movement and MLK and the work that he did and was trying to do at the time of his death and what we are all trying to accomplish now.”102 Baldwin further pointed out that

obviously, it is not convenient . . . to remember that he was the target of FBI investigations. That his message was often manipulated against him by the government, in the same way that they are trying to change the narrative about our movement. They’re trying to cast us as terrorists
when our movement has always been about non-violence. I think there are a lotta correlations to today’s movement.

They played clips of King’s speeches and read excerpts of “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” drawing parallels between King’s own words and the current movement.

After playing a clip from King’s 1967 sermon in which he denounced the Vietnam War and referred to the “triple evils of racism, economic exploitation, and militarism,” Mac noted that

he could have been making this speech today. . . . We need his legacy and his message. Badly, you know? You talk about the dead end that the country is leading on, and it ends on a street outside Canfield Apartments in Ferguson, Missouri. Militarization. Racism. Economic exploitation. This is everything that is going on and that this movement is fighting against still ’til today.

Here Mac made a direct connection between the sociopolitical issues being addressed by King and the contemporary issues at the heart of Movement for Black Lives. Canfield Apartments is the apartment complex where Mike Brown was shot and killed by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson, the event that set in motion the unrest in Ferguson in August 2014 and is largely considered to be the beginning of the Movement for Black Lives. Rather than asserting a historical break between past and present, she constructs a continuum that allows the Movement for Black Lives to position themselves as the inheritors of King’s struggle.

In addition to framing King as responding to similar oppressions, The Ferguson Response Network also pointed out that King employed tactics similar to those of the contemporary movement. In response to criticisms like those from McKinley about the movement’s disruption of traffic and people’s daily routines, something she maintained King would “hate,” Mac and her guests argued that King was nothing if not an agitator and that the concept of King’s nonviolent direct action “seems to have evolved into a passivity that really was not anything that MLK was about. . . . He was about confronting issues.” She read the excerpt from “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”: 
Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word “tension.” I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth.

Mac then added:

I love that piece because I think that is what we’re trying to do. And part of the sanitization of him is this idea, like, “Oh, he was this passive dude. He didn’t want to upset anybody. He wasn’t tryin’ to get in people’s face.” And it’s like, no. He was always in someone’s face. . . . That’s what he was calling everybody else to do.106

Much of the discursive work performed around King’s memory in the network focuses on the similarities between King’s public reception and that of the Movement for Black Lives. For example, White and Freeman discussed King’s 1960 appearance on Meet the Press on one episode of TWiB! Prime. White played part of the interview in which Lawrence Spivak criticized tactics such as lunch-counter sit-ins, and asked King if he thought those tactics were hurting the cause, and then White paused:

Let’s have that moment. They just asked Martin Luther King, . . . the man who gets quoted at us all the time, all the fuckin’ time—“If you were just like King, if you would just do things like King, if you just acted like King.” But then at the same time, when Martin Luther King was being, I don’t know, King, white folks were like “Listen, I feel like you’re hurting your cause. . . . What’s your problem, Negro?”

Freeman summarized the argument, “They asked Martin Luther King if he could sit less aggressively. . . . ‘You’re making us uncomfortable.'” White then continued, “That is what just happened. With all of the bullshit that people talk about the movement, about how things work
and all that stuff. Literally, Dr. King had the exact same things being said to him as the movement had said about them. But, we should act like King. Literally, that’s what they’re saying.”

King’s position as agitator has often been emphasized by the circulation of images of King being arrested and of his mugshot. For example, a few days prior to the 2015 #ReclaimMLK actions, one user tweeted, “What is your position? #blacklivesmatter #reclaimthefuture #reclaimmlk,” accompanied by the image of MLK in a suit and hat being arrested at a lunch counter with the text, “There comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe nor politic, nor popular, but he must take it because conscience tells him it is right.—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.” Participants in the network often point out that King was considered a dangerous radical when alive. As White put it, white people “have been throwing MLK in our faces for yrs but when MLK was saying that real shit they called him a Nigger.”

In addition to foregrounding the controversy surrounding King in his day, the network drew a parallel between the “white moderates” criticized by King and the twenty-first century “allies” of the Movement for Black Lives who object to its tactics or politics. On Twitter, while mentions of problematic white moderates as obstacles to justice go back to at least 2010, they became more commonplace after the uprisings in Ferguson and Baltimore. The following passage from King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” along with an image of King, circulated widely:

I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: “I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action.” . . . Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.
This passage has appeared in various social media incarnations in response to the criticisms levied at Black activists and protestors for failing to advocate for change in more acceptable and less “aggressive” ways.

In August 2015, Gandy published an essay titled, “Dr. King and the White Progressive™,” which aggregates and summarizes much of the discourse that had been circulating in the network regarding the shortcoming of white supporters of racial justice, specifically those who evoke King. In it she reads contemporary events through King’s criticisms of white moderates in the 1960s. Gandy’s use of the “TM” in her title reflects a rhetorical move employed to mark generalizations that apply to a critical mass, but not the entirety of, a particular group. As she once explained on **TWiB! Prime**, “It’s about the brand. It’s not about individual people. . . . [If] it doesn’t apply to you, then it doesn’t apply to you. Don’t worry about it.” To which White added, “If you are not actively part of the brand, then it’s not really a critique on you.”

Though its exact origin is uncertain, the users and content creators at the center of this project have appropriated the language of the trademark to demarcate between the discursive formations and individual white people. It has been applied to a variety of categories—White People™, White Progressives™, White Feminism™—to indicate that the speaker was referring to a configuration of hegemonic discourses that produce each category and the power relations involved in their formation. The intent was to ameliorate conflict that might arise from the impression that critiques of whiteness are attacks on individual white people.

Gandy tweeted a link to the post of her article with the message “I wrote this for ppl who use MLK as their Pokémon.” In the article itself she argued,

In the wake of the white progressive think pieces decrying the Black Lives Matter activists as rude, stupid, immature, idiots, bullies, participating in a circular firing squad, or alienating allies—as well as similar sentiments expressed on Facebook, Twitter, and in the comments of my previous articles . . . the parallels between the white moderates whom Dr. Martin Luther King criticized in 1963 and certain white progressives whom many Black activists are criticizing in 2015 are clear.
She set up this parallel by outlining criticisms of King by white moderates and progressives of his day as well as King’s response to these critiques. To do so, she cited an open letter titled “A Call for Unity,” written by a group of white clergy in the wake of King’s arrest during nonviolent protests in Birmingham in April 1963, who suggested that King was too confrontational. Noting that while the protests themselves were nonviolent, they incited hate and violence, the authors of the letter called the protests “unwise and untimely” and suggested that matters of racial justice are best pursued in the courts. To illustrate King’s response to these criticisms, Gandy offered quotes from King’s famous “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” in which he argued that freedom would come only if demanded by the oppressed and criticized white moderates for prioritizing order over justice and then went on to quote King further:

Actually, we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with.

After setting up the historic conflict, Gandy went on to argue that the critiques of King by the white moderates of his day are mirrored in those of contemporary white progressives in response of the Movement for Black Lives. She pointed to Marissa Johnson and Mara Williford, the two women who were accused of being outside agitators after they disrupted a Bernie Sanders rally in Seattle in summer of 2015, and the progressives who said that such protests were poorly timed because it was an election season. Pointing out that “white progressives who are behaving more like the white clergymen who opposed King than the white allies who supported King are the first to criticize the Black Lives Matter activists for not being more like King,” Gandy argued that their vision of King erased the reality that he was a disruptor and lawbreaker who “was not beholden to protesting the right thing, at the right time, in the right space according to white moderates’ timetable.”

Finally, in the dominant narrative of King was often deployed, as it was by Blitzer, as a means of condemning property damage that occurred during periods of unrest. In response, participants in the network often relied on King’s words, “Riots are the language of the unheard” not to condone such behavior, but to position it as a symptom of the larger
problem. That is how L. Joy Williams, co-host of *TWiB! in the Morn-ing* at the time, framed the disturbance that occurred during a vigil for sixteen-year-old Kimani Gray, who had been killed by police in Brooklyn in March 2013:

I don’t think that people ever plan to riot. . . . I don’t know very many riots that were planned. It was, you know, an immediate response that, you know, boiled over. . . . When you have a community that has pent up anger and already feels mistreated, you are going to have sometimes unreasonable responses.\(^{115}\)

White, who had seen reports of the unrest on social media and went down to the vigil to report, interviewed Jumaane Williams, a New York City Council member who was on the scene and who also invoked King:

It was a peaceful vigil for the young man Kimani Gray, Kiki, who was shot and killed. By the time I got to the vigil, a group of people had broken off. . . . Dr. Martin Luther King said, “Riots are the language of the unheard,” and I think this community has been unheard for quite some time.\(^{116}\)

The gravitas of King’s words is used to reframe the situation—to understand the unrest as an expression of pain and anger, rather than an unruly outburst of criminality. Here King’s status as a Civil Rights icon is used to humanize the individuals who destroyed property, framing them within a history of oppression.

**Conclusion**

Remembering the past has always been of importance in the network at the center of this project. Because how we understand the past has such impact on interpretation of the present, historical accounts become key sites of struggle. Dominant racial ideologies, which construct the present moment as free from structural and systemic racism, rely on an account of the twentieth century in which the Civil Rights Movement stands as the final chapter in the struggle for racial justice. Thus, to make contemporary racism visible as more than individual bad behaviors,
the network often challenges the dominant and most widely circulated accounts of the era.

Martin Luther King Jr., in particular, has become a locus of contention in this struggle. Idolized and sanitized of his radicalism, King has come to stand as the avatar for the entire mid-twentieth century movement. In this way King has also become a means of delegitimizing efforts to address racial politics outside of the paradigm of colorblindness. King’s image as a proponent of nonviolent direct action and his famous speech at the 1963 March on Washington are frequently used to silence Black critiques of contemporary racism. King’s legacy has been used to justify everything from dismantling affirmative action laws to condemning modern-day activists.

The struggle over the past, and particularly King’s legacy, has intensified since the emergence of the Movement for Black Lives. Just as King was presented as the “good” Civil Rights leader in juxtaposition to the “bad” and dangerous radicals of the Black Power Movement, King is used as a contrast to the contemporary movement in order to delegitimize it. Simultaneously, the Movement for Black Lives and those aligned with them politically have begun to reclaim King and his legacy, challenging assertions that he would condemn their tactics and, instead, reviving King as a radical very much in line with their movement.