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2017

# How Selective Amnesia Brought Us the First Black Socialist President of the United States

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Hoerl, Kristen, "How Selective Amnesia Brought Us the First Black Socialist President of the United States" (2017). *Papers in Communication Studies*. 219.

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Published as chapter 9 in Robert E. Terrill, ed., *Reconsidering Obama: Reflections on Rhetoric*, Frontiers in Political Communication, book 34 (New York: Peter Lang, 2017), pp. 137–152.  
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## How Selective Amnesia Brought Us the First Black Socialist President of the United States

Kristen Hoerl

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When I was a child, my grandmother loved to repeat the proverb, “history is written by the victors.” She usually said this in response to televised news coverage of a national election or the conclusion of a foreign conflict. Listening to her at the dinner table with the nightly news in the background might explain why my scholarship has consistently drawn attention to what is excluded from the narratives of national belonging and identification. I decided to pursue graduate school after I learned that the United States government helped to overthrow democratically elected officials in Guatemala, Brazil, and Chile because their leftist policies were considered a threat to U.S. business interests. My unfamiliarity with this history until college revealed the ideological implications of my public school education. The contradiction between rhetorics of democracy featured in my civics textbooks and the U.S. policies that structure inequality is the foundation for my ongoing research, which explores how radical dissent has contributed to democratic culture and how popular culture has limited our resources for understanding the influence of radicalism on politics and society. I view popular culture as a site of public memory in which publicly available expressions about past events provide resources for shared knowledge and meaning. Since public memories are created in the present, they are activated by current issues and concerns. Thus, they are sites of struggle over contemporary politics.<sup>1</sup>

My interest in public memory explains why news coverage leading up to President Obama’s inauguration rankled me. The endless news cycle kept repeating trite statements that announced that the civil rights struggle had ended. Reports quoted public officials and former civil rights activists who described Obama’s election as the “fulfillment,” “embodiment,” “culmination,” and “validation” of Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream.<sup>2</sup> The inauguration took place the day after Martin Luther King Day, and Obama delivered a pre-

inauguration address in front of the Lincoln Memorial, the same location where King delivered his 1963 speech. Given the context, reporters' references to King's speech were not entirely inappropriate. However, I was alarmed that the association between King and Obama was a prominent news frame during the inauguration celebration. Although his election was unprecedented, many forms of racial injustice that civil rights activists protested during the sixties persisted in 2008 and continue today. Furthermore, the news media's emphasis on King's 1963 speech ignored the deeper histories of struggle for racial justice. Just before his assassination, King had turned his attention to ending endemic poverty in the United States, a condition that has been exacerbated in recent decades.

This frustration prompted me to write an essay that highlighted how omitting racial justice activism that occurred after 1963 enabled journalists and pundits to construct a narrative about civil rights that concluded with Obama's election. My essay highlighted what I have termed *selective amnesia*, "the rhetorical processes by which public discourse routinely omits events that defy seamless narratives of national progress and unity."<sup>3</sup> Rather than think about amnesia as a loss or gap in memory, I consider selective amnesia as a formal structure that has rhetorical implications. That is, selective amnesia is constructed through the routine patterns of discourse that render movements for fundamental social change obsolete and irrelevant to contemporary public life. Through this process, people who have challenged systemic injustice in U.S. history are negated and silenced.

Certainly, I am not alone in my concern that mainstream public discourse disregards those who challenge prevailing social hierarchies. Rhetoric scholars including Dana Cloud, Raymie McKerrow, Robert Scott, and Philip Wander have provided important critical essays about the silencing and negation of marginalized communities in mainstream public address.<sup>4</sup> My essay put their concerns into a conversation with public memory scholars to foreground how memory practices are inevitably bound up in systems of oppression even when those practices are created to honor histories of dissent. Part of my interest in writing that essay was to respond to the frequently made observation that that processes of forgetting may be necessary for reconciliation in the wake of social conflicts. Although memories are inevitably partial and incomplete, certain forms of remembrance that routinely ignore dissident voices undermine prospects for social justice and collective empowerment.

### **Post-Racial Amnesia during President Obama's 2008 Inauguration**

The essay that I wrote soon after President Obama's inauguration explains that selective amnesia of the civil rights movement was crafted intertextually across myriad reports about Obama's inauguration. Rather than focus on one exemplary text, my analysis describes how routine patterns across fragmented texts of commercial news media gave meaning to both civil rights and Obama's election. By looking at recurring messages, including those that seem trivial when considered individually, this method of rhetorical analysis illuminates the processes by which popular media constructs a structured symbolic environment that circumscribes our shared resources for deliberation. In other words, repeated messages across a variety of sources in political discourse and popular media work together to make particular ideas seem like common sense. Consequently, con-

trasting ideas may be regarded as unworthy of serious consideration. The method of studying recurring, seemingly mundane messages in popular culture draws support from Kenneth Burke's observation that rhetoric comprises a "general *body of identifications* that owe their convincingness much more to trivial repetition and dull daily reinforcement than to exceptional rhetorical skill."<sup>5</sup> Nuanced discussions about the implications of Obama's election for U.S. race relations were drowned out by a sea of reports that reduced the meaning of Obama's election to the realization of King's dream. In my essay, I discuss how patterns across 45 different print and broadcast news reports covering the inauguration narrowly defined the meaning of the election and the scope of the civil rights movement.

Both left- and right-leaning news outlets characterized Obama's election as the conclusion to the civil rights struggle. Former Arkansas Governor and Fox News Network host Mike Huckabee observed that Obama's election proved that King's "dream is, in fact, coming true."<sup>6</sup> The previous evening, former civil rights activist Walter Fauntroy told reporters on NBC's *Dateline*: "Martin Luther King's dream stated 40 years ago we, as a people, are going to get to the promised land. . . . That dream came true on November 4th, 2008."<sup>7</sup> These and many other reports characterizing Obama's election as the realization of King's dream were supplemented by coverage that provided a post-racial understanding of Obama's success. Post-racial arguments assert that black communities no longer face obstacles to financial and career success regardless of persistent racial disparities in income and education. A variety of reaction quotes and political commentary extended this post-racial argument. Speaking to *Chicago Sun-Times* reporter Mary Mitchell, Ben Carson stated that "there are no more excuses for anybody. . . . No matter who you are in this nation . . . you can rise up to the top of whatever it is that you do and you don't have to feel limited."<sup>8</sup> Carson's statement ignores the realities of individual and institutional racism in the United States. Problematically, post-racial rhetoric legitimizes the rolling back of civil rights legislation. It has also been used to justify the elimination of affirmative action programs with the premise that, since racism no longer hinders people of color, policies favoring them are inherently racist.<sup>9</sup> Thus, post-racial rhetoric surrounding Obama's election served to bolster the arguments that race-based considerations no longer belong in U.S. public policy.

Several reports amplified post-racial interpretations of King's memory by simplifying his 1963 speech to the vision of a "color-blind" society. For instance, CN quoted former Secretary of State Colin Powell, who remarked that the election was a "tribute to the spirit of Dr. Martin Luther King." Powell summarized King's speech to suggest that "people should be judged on the content of their character, and not the color of their skin." Powell referenced a popular passage of King's speech in which King stated that he hoped his children would "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."<sup>10</sup> By focusing on this particular passage, Powell reduced the complexity of King's speech, which also includes an incisive critique of the U.S. government's failure to uphold the rights of African American citizens. Thus, Powell provided a one-dimensional interpretation of King's own politics. Frequent and terse references to King's dream ignore his more controversial stances, including his leadership in the Poor People's Campaign in 1968. This thin post-racial version of King's activism hol-

lowed out the radical potential of civil rights memory. Press coverage amplified this reductionist memory of King's career to create an equally reductionist narrative of civil rights that concluded with Obama's election.

By suturing this simplified memory of King's leadership to Obama's public image, mainstream news media created a narrative of racial transcendence in which Obama's election overcame traumatic memories of racial injustice. Kenneth Burke defines transcendence as a rhetorical process of overcoming social violence. As Steven Goldzwig explains, transcendence advances "a 'purified perspective' on events and circumstances in a direct effort to overcome symbolically perceived negative manifestations."<sup>11</sup> The routine depiction of Obama's election as the realization of King's dream constructs Obama as a purifying agent who negates the legacy of physical violation and loss incurred by black people before and during the civil rights era.

Inauguration coverage that recalled the brutality of the segregation era of the southern United States expanded on this transcendent narrative. Speaking on NBC's *Nightly News* broadcast, Congressperson John Lewis described his memories of segregated busing that prompted him to participate in the Freedom Rides of 1961. He recalled the violence of segregated busing, and concluded "It was worth the pain, the suffering, the beatings, the jailing. I just wish some people like Martin Luther King, Jr., Robert Kennedy . . . and many other people that started on this journey and never made it, I wish they were here to bear witness."<sup>12</sup> As it was quoted by NBC, Lewis's anecdote reinforced post-racial assumptions that the horrors of racism had been left in the past. By framing the Freedom Rides as an event that propelled Obama's success, NBC positioned Obama's election as the final achievement in the civil rights struggle. Ostensibly, discrimination and state-sanctioned violence against black people has been relegated to history.

Lewis's recollection of segregation also served as a foil for the image of race relations harmonized by Obama's election. Rather than view Lewis's earlier activism as part of a longer history of civil rights organizing, the interview constructs Obama's election as the reward for Lewis's efforts. Consequently, NBC's coverage invited audiences to associate civil rights activism with a former period in U.S. history rather than to understand racial justice movements as evolving sets of discourses and practices. As the Black Lives Matter movement illustrates, activists have continued to respond to changing social conditions and structures of exploitation.

This narrative of racial transcendence necessarily excludes discussions of civil rights and Black Power activism that occurred after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1965. Recollections of these more contentious events would have ruptured the narrative's close association between King and the newly elected president. During his lifetime, mainstream political figures regarded King as a radical. His call for economic justice and an end to America's imperialist interventions abroad would not find easy resolution in a president who campaigned on a platform of committing additional troops to Afghanistan and working with mainstream capitalist enterprises that King sought to transform. But how could they? After all, the job of an activist is to push against the political moderation demanded of national political figures. Comments connecting King's 1963 speech to Obama's election contributed to this transcendent narrative precisely because it negated the ideals and strategies that distinguished the civil rights leader from the politician seeking national office.

Black militancy nurtured and reinforced King's own activism and continued the struggle for racial justice in the years after King's assassination. Likewise, the Black Power movement developed in response to black communities' deep-seated frustration with enduring forms of structural racism that continued after the passage of civil rights legislation. Important racial justice figures including Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Huey Newton, and Fannie Lou Hamer argued forcefully on behalf of the black majority who did not reap rewards from early civil rights initiatives. Their criticisms of disparate treatment by law enforcement and discrimination against black people in housing and education could also be applied to the conditions facing many black communities when Obama was sworn into office. The selective amnesia crafted in coverage of Obama's inauguration smoothed over these contradictions by ignoring the movement's broader goals for economic justice, prison reform/abolition, and an end to wars driven by Western imperialism.

### **Capitalist Amnesia during the Obama Presidency**

Since Obama's election, a series of events have prompted me to expand upon and reconsider my argument about the omnipresence of selective amnesia in American political discourse. The events in Ferguson, Missouri, have tragically highlighted the violence that attends racial stratification and prejudice in the United States. Responding to those events, Black Lives Matter protests have revived interest in the memory of black resistance to endemic racism. Beyonce's contentious Super Bowl performance foregrounded the memory of black power dissent when she led dancers wearing black military style jackets and berets in a dance that honored the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Black Panther Party. The performance was a clear critique of police brutality, which outraged some political figures such as former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani, who described it as an attack on law enforcement.<sup>13</sup> The controversy over Beyonce's performance reveals that the memory of black power continues to offer resources for envisioning collective organizing against racial injustice. Popular enthusiasm for Beyonce's performance illustrates George Lipsitz's point that popular culture provides some spaces for resistance "as long as individuals perceive their interests as unfilled."<sup>14</sup>

While Beyonce's performance demonstrates that amnesia regarding contentious dissent is never complete, conservative political rhetoric about Obama's presidency has also revealed deeper foundations of selective amnesia in U.S. public memory. Throughout Barack Obama's presidency, right-leaning critics have characterized him as a socialist. The prevalence of this characterization of Obama's administration in contemporary conservative rhetoric reveals how contemporary American public address is underwritten by selective, if not wholesale, amnesia regarding the history of struggle to transform the U.S. economic system. It also silences radical voices for racial justice and facilitates coded racism to undermine efforts to alleviate the nation's trenchant wealth inequality.

Before he was elected to his first term in the White House, Obama's Republican rival John McCain asserted that Obama's plans to "spread the wealth" reflected "one of the tenets of socialism." Later, McCain conceded that Obama was really a member of the "liberal left" who sought to raise taxes on middle-class people.<sup>15</sup> After the election, other conserva-

tive politicians and news pundits spoke more confidently about Obama's "socialist" record, describing his economic stimulus legislation, financial regulations, federal aid for the auto industry, and health care reforms as examples of a radical agenda that put overweening authority and decision-making power in the federal government. Many charges of Obama's socialism were provided with little substantive elaboration, such as Georgia House Representative Paul Braun's publicized tweet following the president's 2011 State of the Union Address that read, "Mr. President, you don't believe in the Constitution. You believe in socialism."<sup>16</sup> Former Texas Governor Rick Perry ran a 30-second ad during his brief presidential campaign run in 2011 that declared, "Obama's socialist policies are bankrupting America."<sup>17</sup>

Obama's socialist agenda was a major talking point during the mid-term election campaign season in 2010. That year, both former Republican Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich and Fox News program host Sean Hannity released books characterizing Obama's administration as a socialist dictatorship. Gingrich's book, *To Save America: Stopping Obama's Secular-Socialist Machine*, reached the number two spot on the *New York Times* bestsellers list of nonfiction titles that June.<sup>18</sup> To promote his book, Gingrich decried the president's "arrogance" to "decide how much people should earn . . . which companies to punish . . . which bureaucrats to empower." He concluded, "If the secular socialist machine wins, we are going to be in a country which no longer resembles America."<sup>19</sup>

Although most references to Obama's socialism appeared in brief sound bites, several Fox News programs provided opportunities for Obama's conservative critics to elaborate. Most of them foregrounded concerns that Obama sought to "redistribute wealth."<sup>20</sup> Their characterization of socialism provided imagery of nefarious bureaucrats stealing from private individuals. In 2009, Glenn Beck characterized Obama's proposed health care plan as "good old socialism . . . raping the pocketbooks of the rich to give to the poor."<sup>21</sup> Three years later, Sarah Palin concluded that Obama "believes in socialism, in redistributing wealth, in confiscating hard-earned dollars of our small businessmen and women."<sup>22</sup> Denunciations of Obama's "radical" record continued into his second term in office. In 2014, Bill O'Reilly focused an episode of his Fox News program on "Obamacare and Socialism." Echoing pundits' trite talking points during Obama's first administration, O'Reilly asserted that Obamacare was a "pure income redistribution play" that took money from "businesses and affluent Americans" to put "into the hands of the poor and less affluent."<sup>23</sup> The variety of brief, unexamined references to Obama's socialism illustrates how discussions about the president's domestic policies in conservative media culture were shaped by trivial repetition, devoid of a deeper discussion about the differences that separate classical liberalism from socialism.

Predictably, conservative denunciations of Obama's socialism were met with derision. In 2008, Obama responded to McCain's charge by quipping, "It's kind of hard to figure out how [business magnate] Warren Buffett endorsed me."<sup>24</sup> Liberal news pundits were quick to correct republicans' characterizations of Obama's domestic agenda, noting that corporate profits rose higher during Obama's first term in office than they had during his predecessor's administration.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, self-identified socialists took issue with the characterization of Obama, noting that he supported a free market economy, a position that sharply

departed from their own.<sup>26</sup> Writing for the *Socialist Worker*, historian Howard Zinn lamented that the president was "too ready to yield to corporations and the market" when fundamental changes in the U.S. economy were sorely needed.<sup>27</sup> *Monthly Review* blogger Michael Engel commented that Obama's policies were focused on avoiding a collapse of the capitalist system, not on transforming it.<sup>28</sup>

The characterization of Obama as a socialist was able to persist in conservative media and the blogosphere, even though it was not shared across political parties, because such little public memory exists about socialism in the United States. The assertion that Obama is a socialist can make sense only if we evaluate the term of its historic uses and meanings and ignore struggles for economic justice during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the United States. The amnesia contained in conservative criticisms of Obama certainly overlooks the role that socialist activism has played in U.S. politics, including the vibrant presidential campaigns of socialists Eugene Debs and Norman Thomas. It also ignores the influence of socialist leaders in the civil rights movement, including A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, who were central participants and organizers of the 1963 March on Washington. Because of their affiliation with the Socialist Party of America, their contributions to civil rights have been largely written out of public memory. Homophobic responses to Rustin's identity as a gay man also contributed to his marginalized status in the leadership and public memory of the civil rights movement. The exclusion of Rustin from many popular discourses about civil rights activism is an example of selective amnesia that Charles Morris describes as a "long, queer mnemonicicide."<sup>29</sup> Lack of public knowledge about Rustin illustrates how the silence regarding nonnormative sexualities in American historical discourse has amplified the erasure of radicalism in U.S. public memory.<sup>30</sup>

Just as post-racial amnesia surrounding Obama's inauguration relied on a simplified memory of Martin Luther King's vision, amnesia regarding socialism involves an anemic awareness of King's career. Regardless of party leanings, journalistic memory that celebrates King and condemns socialist ideals of wealth redistribution can attain a level of coherence only by excluding references to King's economic vision. Speaking to a radical black audience in Chicago in 1967, King acknowledged that "the problems of racial and economic injustice cannot be solved without a radical redistribution of political and economic power. . . . Black people must develop programs that will aid in the transfer of power and wealth into the hands of residents of the ghetto, so that they may, in reality, control their destinies."<sup>31</sup> Counter-memories of socialist themes in the civil rights movement reveal that our most sacrosanct memories of struggle for racial justice point to events and figures who foregrounded economic transformation.

Without a memory of socialism's influence on U.S. politics and society, the term has become an empty vessel. Anticommunist rhetorics during the Cold War hollowed out the meaning of socialism by equating all movements for economic justice with Stalinism. During the fifties and sixties, liberals advanced a vision of American consensus free of class conflict that has continued to shape public discourse. By the eighties, and particularly after the fall of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Berlin Wall, socialism was no longer referenced to critique market-governed economies and ceased to have any positive connotations in the United States.<sup>32</sup>



The use of the word socialist to label one's opponents illuminates the political uses of selective amnesia as it has been deployed to startle audiences into a variety of affective responses to contemporary public matters. In the absence of widespread positive associations with the term, socialism has become—until very recently—a devil term. Kenneth Burke theorized that language attains a “devil-function” through “sloganeering repetition” that depicts one's opposition as a world menace; thus, memories of socialism and fascism become rhetorical scapegoats that redirect attention from more accurate sources of conflict.<sup>33</sup> Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal legislation was derided by conservatives at the time for instituting a socialist agenda. Yet, Social Security is now one of the most popular domestic programs in the country. The socialist label did not stick to it.

Conservative critics have now redeployed the term to solidify the Republican Party against Obama's domestic agenda and rally support for right-leaning candidates. During the seventies, eighties, and nineties, Republicans derided policies similar to Obama's as “tax and spend” liberalism. These critiques have been expanded upon with more fear-mongering language that characterizes “big government” entitlement programs as dangerous threats to American democracy. By equating Obama's agenda with socialism, conservative critics have attempted to position his social programs outside of what media scholar Dan Hallin refers as the “sphere of legitimate controversy.”<sup>34</sup> Hallin argues that the mainstream press in the U.S. typically adopts definitions of situations that affirm the perspectives of those groups already empowered, thus discrediting perspectives that lie outside of two-party politics. Although only Fox News broadcasters embraced the depiction of Obama as a socialist, conservative pundits featured on the network seized upon the mainstream assumption that appeals for fundamental transformation of the U.S. economy have no legitimate place in politics. Rather than focus on wealth inequality as a source of growing national division, conservatives positioned Obama's socialism as the central threat requiring containment.

Alternatively, Bernie Sanders's recent presidential campaign has revived an affirmative sense of socialism. His campaign might have drawn motivation from a 2011 Pew research poll that found that young adults have a more favorable view of socialism than of capitalism.<sup>35</sup> As his policies are more accurately aligned with European-style policies that mediate capitalism via taxes and regulation, Sanders identifies himself as a democratic socialist. However, news headlines during his campaign frequently referred to him more simply as a socialist, and coverage hardly acknowledged distinctions between different socialist platforms. The unqualified label provided for dramatic headlines given the word's negative connotations in U.S. public discourse; thus, amnesia about socialism invited sensationalized media coverage of Sanders's campaign. During a 2015 interview with the *Des Moines Register*, Sanders defended the socialist label by linking it to his concerns regarding low wages and wealth inequality in the United States.<sup>36</sup> Later, he told an audience at Georgetown University that a variety of popular government programs during Roosevelt's and Johnson's presidential administration were also once labeled as socialist.<sup>37</sup> By collapsing the distinctions between democratic programs and socialism, Sanders's defense diluted socialism's radical meanings and history, including socialism's fundamental critique of workplace exploitation and Western imperialism as the products of global capitalism.

Paradoxically, the former presidential candidate resurrected the word by hollowing out its meaning even further.

The political uses of public amnesia regarding socialism have several troubling implications. Discourse labeling Obama a socialist in order to defeat his moderate political agenda draws from a repressive history of red baiting in which public figures who have advocated alternatives to capitalism were closely monitored by the FBI and often faced severe political repression. Such language necessarily forgets what happened to people accused of supporting communism and socialism during the Cold War because the history of the Red Scare is a particularly ugly and undemocratic chapter in recent U.S. history. Paradoxically, the red baiting of Obama relies upon similar antidemocratic tendencies that strive to silence and negate anyone who would advocate against capitalism. Even moderate reforms to address the most devastating consequences of neoliberal economics are now being tarred with a red brush.

Red baiting has had particularly devastating consequences for social movement activists. During and after the Second Red Scare, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover used his illegal Counterintelligence Programs (COINTELPRO) to target a variety of subversive organizations including the Communist Party USA, the Socialist Workers Party, and the student New Left. FBI field agents engineered conflicts among activists, discouraged nonmembers from supporting radicals, and prevented dissidents from accessing resources. In several instances, FBI agents convinced employers to fire workers affiliated with targeted groups. Civil rights and black power activists faced the most severe consequences when they were suspected of having socialist ties. Organizations including the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Black Panther Party were the most heavily targeted and brutally repressed. For instance, the FBI fomented a conflict between the Panthers and the Black Nationalist US Organization that resulted in the murder of four Panthers.<sup>38</sup> Hoover insisted that such intense repression was necessary, not due to any actual communist organizing within the racial justice movement, but because he believed that they were susceptible to the influence of communism.<sup>39</sup> The history of COINTELPRO reminds us that red baiting serves as both a warning to those who might sympathize with socialist ideals and a threat to those who do.

Although the consequences may be less severe now, red baiting has provided ideological cover for racist assumptions underlying many attacks on Obama's administration. Characterizations of Obama as a radical socialist sound an alarm that Obama's policies serve black communities' claims for redistributive justice. Newt Gingrich's vituperative remarks about Obama's "arrogance" illustrate how attacks on the president's socialist agenda involve coded language of racial prejudice and white privilege. Gingrich's condemnation of Obama for using his authority to do the work expected of his office makes little sense unless it is put in the context of historic racism in the United States. "Arrogant" is a synonym for uppity, a description that has been used against black people to contain their political and economic agency during the Jim Crow era. Thus, condemnations of Obama's arrogance resonate with historic, racist expectations for black men to show deference to figures of white authority or face recriminations if they fail to do so. Thus, attacks on Obama's "socialist" agenda are part of a leveling strategy designed to constrain the influence of the first non-white U.S. president.

Complementing the post-racial amnesia surrounding King's advocacy, amnesia regarding socialism inhibits broader conversations about the causes of structural inequity in the United States and strategies for reducing it. This amnesia has also constrained liberal policy making. Although most people in the United States do not believe Obama is a socialist, the label has provided justification for the Republican-controlled legislature to consistently block the president's legislative agenda. Selective amnesia regarding socialism and the use of "radicalism" itself as a dirty word in public discourse impoverishes our resources for public deliberation and dulls our political landscape. A more vibrant public culture demands that we bring richer depth and positive connotations to socialism, recognizing its historic affiliations with movements for civil rights and social justice.

### **Academic Amnesia and the Political Economy of Scholarship**

My brief critical analysis of the political discourse that has articulated Obama's agenda with socialism illustrates how the post-racial amnesia that characterized Obama as the realization of Martin Luther King's dream is but one aspect of a deeper rhetoric of amnesia regarding struggles for fundamental economic transformation in the United States. In writing this essay, I now realize that the red-baiting discourses about Barack Obama were already present during the 2008 presidential election campaign. This realization suggests that the concept of selective amnesia might be intimately connected to efforts to repress socialist organizing in the United States. Thus, amnesia regarding radical black dissent during the late sixties is but one example of the longer processes of forgetting movements to fundamentally transform the U.S. economy and politics.

If my grandmother had been available to discuss my analysis of the election coverage of Barack Obama, I am sure she would have offered some grandmotherly praise followed by a reminder about what I had left out of my own interpretation. As the granddaughter of farmers, truck drivers, and home builders, my grandmother had regarded my soft hands and advanced college degrees as a sign that I was now among "the victors." She would have urged me to think more critically about my own analysis, reminding me that it too is rooted in a position of relative privilege. Certainly, the memory of socialism and class antagonism would have been at the forefront of her mind. In addition to reminding me that history was written by those in positions of privilege, my grandmother was fond of telling me that she once sat on Norman Thomas's lap during one of his campaign stops in Illinois. Although she never identified herself as a socialist, she passed the memory of my family's socialist sympathies on to me, and these memories are also resources for my own interpretive practices. This memory must have factored into my decision to seek mentorship from Dana Cloud while I was a graduate student at the University of Texas; I knew Professor Cloud would be open to radical perspectives on rhetoric.

So, why had I excluded a broader discussion about the amnesias of socialism in my essay about media coverage about President Obama's inauguration? To some extent, I think I had overlooked the intractability of the underlying amnesias about socialism because selective amnesia does its magic even within academic scholarship. As an untenured professor striving to establish my reputation among a community of scholars, I reasoned that a much larger community of scholars was interested in memories of civil rights and

racial justice than were interested in socialism. Given my own commitments to racial justice, I had followed the previous work on civil rights rhetoric with enthusiasm, and my early publications focused on cinematic memories of civil rights and Black Power activism. I could envision how my insights about the election coverage would contribute to recent conversations in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. I assumed that a critical intervention in the public memory of the civil rights movement would have broader appeal to my intellectual community than research on socialism, a term itself that is still regarded with suspicion among some scholars and university administrators. Academic writing about socialism can be risky for junior scholars. Thus, the political economy of higher education may have worked in tandem with selective amnesias in popular culture to cultivate and encourage my publication of critical observations about civil rights in public memory over memories of socialism.

While I am eager to turn the omissions of my own scholarship into deeper academic insights, I should also acknowledge how my approach to my career has shaped my criticism. I am interested in controversial ideas, but I dread the thought of being a subject of controversy. Thus, I steered toward subjects that I can imagine would reach a receptive audience. Perhaps senior colleagues and journal editors would have welcomed scholarship about socialism. Certainly, I have benefited from a great number of mentors and editors from several different institutions who have championed my ideas and helped me to improve my writing. I do not really know what would have happened had I submitted an essay that foregrounded public amnesia of socialism eight years ago.

I am convinced that present circumstances make it easier for me to do so now. Tenure is not an iron-clad guarantee of job security, but as a tenured professor, I can take more risks with my scholarship without the fear that it will factor into impending decisions about my job status or my next paycheck. The current political climate has also provided a more welcoming environment for scholarship about socialism. Occupy Wall Street protests renewed public concern about the nation's burgeoning wealth inequality. Likewise, Bernie Sanders's campaign brought positive associations of socialism back into public discourse, giving some legitimacy to the study of socialism in higher education. Each of these factors make the prospect of writing about the legacy of socialism less risky now than at least I perceived it to be eight years ago. The discourses of politics, popular media, and higher education all shift in response to changing exigencies. Social movements evolve and transform as well. By attending to selective amnesia, rhetorical critics may highlight how our institutional and personal memories enable and constrain our resources for understanding these changes.

## Notes

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