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Keeping the "Dream" a dream: Otherization on the
Oakland University campus as framed by Jeff Johnson's keynote address at
the 2019 Keeper of the Dream awards ceremony

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Studying at the university level in the United States is a challenging time for many students, and this is particularly true for students located outside the dominant culture. For example, Oakland University's current student population demographics show a marked enrollment disparity between White and non-White students. According to the OU website, the school's total combined non-White student population (African-American, Asian, Hispanic, etc.) stands at 25.5% ("Fast Facts", 2017). More tellingly, however, these minority groups fall under generalized naming conventions that appear to suppress the rich diversity contained within these racially-identified categories. Therefore, I believe these "fast facts" effectively differentiates these marginalized Others against the backdrop of a prominently White school culture. In fact, there is even an "Other" category listed within this particular population demographics.

This is not to suggest OU is ignorant of its own crucial demographics. In fact, OU celebrates diversity in myriad ways, not the least of which is the annual Keeper of the Dream Scholarship Awards Celebration, which "recognizes students that fight to establish community standards that acknowledge differences" (Valley, 7th para., 2019). This year's ceremony, the 27th such event, continued its tradition of honoring student-activists with visible public recognition – here nine total awardees also received a \$5,000 scholarship (see Valley, 2019). Award-winning journalist and strategic communication specialist Jeff Johnson delivered a powerful, highly-critical keynote speech that forms the crux of this event paper. Therefore, I will briefly describe the ceremony and Johnson's key points as a basis for personal interpretation. This interpretation ultimately forms my overall evaluation as to the annual event's efficacy.

This year's ceremony had the honor of taking place in the ballroom of the recently-expanded Oakland Center. The turnout was certainly noteworthy and lively. Though I can't with certainty say Blacks composed the audience majority, this observation may have been the

case. Three large screens formed the stage's *mis-en-scene*, on which a continuous loop of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech played. In terms of racial and cultural identities, all nine awardees appear to be situated outside the dominant culture. For example, five awardees are Black, one is Iraqi, and three are Hispanic. Each awardee also had either a corporate or nonprofit sponsor. Master of Ceremony Omar Brown-El, senior director of the Center for Multicultural Initiatives, introduced OU President Dr. Ora Pescovitz, who then proceeded to touch on Dr. King's legacy and "I Have a Dream" speech, her own Jewish-American heritage, and the relationships between these contexts. The presentation ceremony then followed and each awardee was introduced in turn by a self-narrated video montage. Mr. Brown-El and Dr. Pescovitz handed out each student's award as they were accompanied to the stage by their sponsor. The reception was cheerful, loud, and well-deserved.

The ceremony takes a remarkably critical turn after Mr. Brown-El introduced Jeff Johnson for his keynote speech. Passionate, serious, and possessing commanding presence, Mr. Johnson held his listeners with an oratory that, even now, I'm not sure was much to OU leadership's expectations. For example, a variety of points clearly stand out in my memory. First, Mr. Johnson remarked that every time he heard schoolchildren recite Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech, he wants to "blow my head off." Though Mr. Johnson's inflection was situated as a sardonic jest — he's even careful to turn his attention to the OU leaders off-stage momentarily to assure them his speech was not an indictment of the event — this point brings to bear the tendency for (White) schools to essentialize Dr. King's cultural and mediated identity within the constraints of one particular speech given at one particular time. Here Mr. Johnson provides a chronological statistics demonstrating Dr. King's decline in popularity beginning with the speech up to the time of his assassination; this decrease in popularity correlated with Dr.

King's discursive political shift toward the rights of the poor and disadvantaged. Mr. Johnson, in fact, remarked Dr. King's dream has now become an inveterate nightmare. Second, Mr. Johnson was not shy in promulgating the "zoo-like" quality behind the advertising of student diversity within college communities. Mr. Johnson likened university websites' tendency to proudly proclaim non-White student statistics, loosely quoted, "as if these students are animals in a zoo." This remark generated laughter, but it was an ironic laughter embedded within a disconcerting self-evaluation. Third, and what I believe to be Mr. Johnson's most poignant comment, is his lamentation of a historical family tree that does not describe heritage, but a systemic catalog of human bondage. In this sense, Mr. Johnson has no motherland since he does not even know where this land might be located, other than that it exists somewhere in the vastness of western Africa. Following more notes, Mr. Brown-El closed Mr. Johnson's speech with the quip: "Well...thanks for coming." Again, ironic laughter rustled throughout the ballroom.

I believe Mr. Johnson was just crass and brave enough not to have slipped into a more scathing indictment. I believe his speech *was* an indictment in spite of his reassurance. I had to wonder what went through Dr. Pescovitz's mind when Mr. Johnson bemoaned the idiocy of sacralizing Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech to the point of convenient redundancy. I certainly laughed after Mr. Johnson's "blow my head off" remark, as it was well-timed and well-said, and I laughed more so at the truth of his observation (and because I'm cynical). Mr. Johnson's snappy remark was refreshing and new, not recycled rhetoric designed to cast a sugar-coated rosy hue on the march of so-called racial progress. This essentializing of "I Have a Dream" highlights the continual policing of Dr. King's image by a dominant public memory (see Drzewiecka, 2010; Hasian, 2010) that renders Dr. King as not so much an advocate for the poor, but a nice man who once went to Washington and said something nice about "the content of

character.” “How dare we, in the name of celebrating a man, celebrate who he’s not, in the name of making us feel comfortable about what we don’t do?...” Mr. Johnson had said (Valley, 10th para., 2019). The diluting of public memory and concealment of historical fact is a powerful discursive function that has operated within many dominant cultures, such as in Nazi-occupied Poland (Drzewiecka, 2010) and the Belgian Congo (Hasian, 2010) and continues to operate today, especially on college campuses. These examples may seem extreme; however, the post-colonial contexts are similarly aligned with concepts of Otherization and essentialism. In fact, OU itself appeared to stumble on its own distorted public memory through its continual looping of Dr. King’s speech prior to the ceremony, which immediately came to my mind following Mr. Johnson’s remark.

The “zoo” metaphor described earlier clearly indicates the traditional American university’s tendency to Otherize its minority student populations. A traditional cynic, I had to relate this remark to OU’s present context. Additionally, I certainly believe Mr. Johnson would not have made this remark if he *didn’t* want his listeners to make this distinction. Here we might fall back on the OU student demographics described earlier. These figures clearly relegate a melting pot of cocultures under immensely generalized classifications. For example, just who is an Asian OU student? Or Hispanic? Or an Other, for that matter? These numbers are certainly helpful, but the question is: who primarily benefits from these “fast facts”? Mr. Johnson’s point in illustrating the underpinning discourse of advertising diversity seems to frame this advertising practice alongside a dominant White culture that Otherizes the school’s minority population. To offer a hypothetical example, a school proudly claiming seven native Maoris among its community is akin to a zoo proudly boasting its lion population. Furthermore, these statistics are to the benefit of the dominant White culture in that it states a White student can go to a

prominently White yet "culturally inclusive" university more than it suggests a non-White student can enjoy this same frame of reference.

Mr. Johnson's resentment over his inadequate, violently denuded family tree is tragic, and his remarks here were perhaps his most powerful as far as my own personal experience is concerned. It may be argued a critical component of constructing one's self-identity is through the notion of the motherland, even if one's motherland is not necessarily nation-based. While Mr. Johnson could theoretically discover new genealogical information as it becomes available, his point suggested this information is either inaccessible or simply non-existent, and one may further argue this is due in large part to the social and historical consequences of Western colonialization. To simply and hastily nominate Africa as something he can fall back on is completely overstepping the point. It's not so much that I'm an American, or a Michigan native, or even a lifelong resident of Troy, but also who my ancestors were and where *they* were located in history. It is a point of sad consideration that my ancestors (the Boone family, as in Daniel Boone) were slaveholders, but that Mr. Johnson has absolutely no frame of reference beyond a particularized niche is outright disturbing and heartbreaking. Like myself, Mr. Johnson may call himself an American, or Ohio resident, or Cleveland native ("Jeff Johnson", 2018), but it seems based from his anger ("And people ask why I'm so *angry*?" he had cried) that his sense of heritage does not extend much beyond his more immediate temporal and spatial contexts. This anger enunciated the hard reality of the double consciousness¹ dilemma — to be simultaneously excluded and included, but never seeming to "belong".

In my view, the speech was not *all* overtly critical. Mr. Johnson touches on concepts of community and equity, and its gravity in relation to diversity and inclusion. For example, he says: "Community and equity should be beyond diversity and inclusion" (Valley, 6th para.,

¹ The Center for the Study of Social Policy defines **double consciousness** as "an internal conflict when a member of an ethnic minority group feels caught between their membership in the dominate culture and their membership in their ethnic group " (class handout, p.4).

2019). Further on, he outlines the core principles of an alliance², which is predicated not on friendship, but on justice. The principles of justice, he states, must be embedded within every OU students' field of study.

In order to evaluate Mr. Johnson's speech, however, and the ceremony as a whole, I feel it necessary to evaluate it against the notion of self-Otherization. In other words, did the event effectively extract me, for the time being, from my own White subject position? I believe it did, and one key piece of evidence is my mere recollection of these key observations two months following the event. This recollection further evinces the weight of my own self-reflection such that I can remember it and recall its subjectivities and emotions. Mr. Johnson delivered a powerful speech; he is clearly a master orator. I can sense Mr. Johnson being a captain Otherized peoples can rally behind, and every word of his was clear and honest.

Furthermore, I have always been one to think (too) intently. It's often a disembodied experience, as if my mind actually detaches itself and mere chance is forced to automate all my physical mechanisms. In regards to the Keeper of the Dream event, it was not overly difficult for me to once again detach myself, this time from a White worldview, and tune into the immediate occasion. I'm afraid I cannot speak for everyone at the event in regards to this level of "tuning in/out", but the collective tensions experienced is perhaps telling and, more importantly, indicative of the discomfort entrenched in conscious identity separation or collision. To be made to place one's self outside their circumscribed identity is alarming, and necessarily so. Most important, this forced shift is only a figment of the struggles which marginalized Others are forced to experience daily all over the United States – this includes university campuses. To experience this discomfort, even distantly, is further evidence to the event's efficacy.

² Rowe (2010) touches on the concept of alliance within the framework of "power lines" in intercultural communication, especially in regards to empowerment among marginalized Others.

In sum, the Keeper of the Dream scholarship event enabled me to reposition my identity and worldviews within a counter-cultural discourse of "community and equity", contextualized here through a (apparent) Black-majority audience recognizing a group of typically Otherized non-White students. By describing, interpreting, and evaluating the event, I now conclude this paper with the following argument: that is, OU is sadly mired within situated public memories and discourses that ultimately privilege White students. This is not to suggest OU, as an institution, intentionally and maliciously mediates this discourse, but rather that the school is complicit in the privileging of its White students in ways that may be obvious to non-White students, but completely oblivious to White students. Evidence of this is the English-only school website (as far as I can gather), the prominently white Rochester/Auburn Hills community OU is located on, as well as the Otherizing discourse apparent within the school's "Fast Facts" student demographics web link. Furthermore, the historicizing of Dr. King as a kind of Black saint seems to only reflect the liberal White view of who Dr. King was and what he ultimately stands for. I'm confident very few Whites could name another Dr. King speech (I certainly can't at the moment) or describe some of the more controversial implications of Dr. King's mission.

Of course, the key idea here is ultimately one of visibility. It was nice to see the Keeper of the Dream awardees gain so much visibility, but it was otherwise constrained and largely unreported outside the OU community. A quick Google news search yields exactly two results: The Oakland Post report and one from the weekly C&G newspaper, neither of which sees any remarkable circulation. In fact, I may have been the only Oakland Press employee present (I'm not a reporter, however, but a copy editor). This low visibility needs to be acknowledged, and the fact that this low visibility keeps the dominant White culture firmly in place must also be acknowledged, as well as challenged.

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