



BRYANT SIMON

## “A Down Brother”: Earvin “Magic” Johnson and the Quest for Retail Justice in Los Angeles

*After the 1992 riots, L.A.’s beloved Laker allied with Starbucks and other corporate dining and entertainment outfits to revive South Central. Why did he fail?*

They got there long before Magic Johnson did. They wore their old-school Los Angeles Lakers and Dream Team jerseys. They held onto basketballs, magazines, and sneakers for him to sign. While they waited, they got their cameras ready. In 1995 and again in 2000, when Johnson arrived in Crenshaw, or Compton, or Inglewood, always with a flock of dignitaries in tow—local council members, mayors, and Congressional representatives—the crowds edged close. They let their shutters and flashbulbs go and hooted and hollered when he cut the ribbon in front, depending on the occasion, of a movie theater, coffee shop, twenty-four-hour gym, or fast food outlet. Their cheers grew louder when he turned and showed off

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his trademark smile—that bright, warm, toothy grin he was known for since his NCAA days at Michigan State as Larry Bird’s foil and nemesis.

Away from the mayors and other politicians, and before he rode off to his Bel Aire office in his black Bentley convertible, Johnson took time to talk to members of the crowd. He looked them in the eye and listened to their stories. They told him where they were when he subbed in at center in the last game of the NBA finals against the Philadelphia 76ers during his rookie year; but they also told him, in his new position as business ambassador and community leader, about their retail woes and dreams. They urged him on, saying how much they admired him and what he was doing for their community when no one else would do much of anything. Once, after he signed an autograph for an elderly woman, she said to him, “We need a bookstore next.”

“A bookstore,” Johnson said, “okay. We’re going to look into that now.”<sup>1</sup>

The South Central Los Angeles crowds came out to see Magic Johnson not just because he orchestrated the Lakers’ elegant, fast, and furious “Showtime” offense for twelve years, or because he led the team to five NBA Championships. Nor were they there to serve as witness—to see for themselves that Magic himself was *still there*. Only years before the ribbon-cutting ceremonies, Johnson had announced that he was HIV positive, and this was when the AIDS virus appeared to be a virtual death sentence. And they didn’t come out just to see Magic’s magnetic smile or bask in the glow of his celebrity, even in celebrity-obsessed Los Angeles.

They came, like that woman asking about the bookstore did, because of what Johnson said and did in his post-basketball, post-HIV years. He had invested in their communities and brought higher-end products to the shopping centers at the end of their streets and near the freeway entrances they passed on their way to work. They were there because of Johnson’s actions and how he framed those actions. They were there because he spoke a language that made sense to them and made sense of their world. It was a message with deep intellectual and popular roots in African American thought. Saying little about brotherhood and integration, it stressed, instead, racial unity. It urged the black middle class to tie its fate to the black poor and pull them up. It was also a broadly anti-government, or perhaps more specifically non-government, message—

the powers-that-be in Sacramento and Washington, it suggested, are not the best way forward.

At the heart of this call was the idea of black economic self-determination: the faith that black people could and should control their daily transactions and neighborhoods. In thought and in deed, Johnson shared this commitment to racial solidarity, a do-it-ourselves resolve, and a faith in the redemptive power of black capitalism. His beliefs, moreover, reflected the widespread dreams and popular social analysis of a vast majority of African Americans in South Central Los Angeles around the time of the city’s 1992 civil unrest. Those people waiting for Johnson in front of coffee shops and movie houses, therefore, stood there not just to relive the sports glories of their pasts, but to build for the future. By their very presence, their witness, the crowds suggested that in the last decade of the last century, Magic Johnson embodied the hopes of the black community for a better tomorrow as much as anyone at that time, including political figures like Mayor Tom Bradley and Representative Maxine Waters.

As the embers from the fires of 1992 cooled, urban theorist Mike Davis tried to make sense of the explosive riots that resulted in \$1 billion in property damages, 16,000 arrests, and fifty-six deaths. He pointed out to an interviewer that this was the nation’s first-ever multicultural, multi-centered rebellion; in other words, it was a series of rebellions within a larger rebellion. Each community of color and class within the city took to the streets to give voice to its own particular, even localized set of grievances.

When it came to South Central Los Angeles, to Watts, to Crenshaw, to Inglewood, and to Compton, Davis noted, African Americans rose up against dwindling economic opportunities. But, he took pains to explain, it wasn’t just the black poor or the jobless who rebelled. Repeating alarming statistics about economic trends familiar to most riot analysts, Davis explained how decent-paying union jobs widely available during the Cold War era, jobs that earned workers enough to pay a mortgage and support a family, had disappeared from the heart of black Los Angeles in the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>2</sup> African Americans came out onto the streets to protest the end of defense-driven, industrial Los Angeles, and to express their anger at police brutality, government neglect, and corporate indifference. Yet as Davis pointed out, they were also railing against the retail injustices that gripped their communities, and

rallying for greater control over their economic lives—over what they purchased and where, and from whom, they purchased things.

Many African Americans, Davis suggested, felt that outsiders—Latinos, Jews, and especially Koreans—controlled too much of the retail landscape in South Central Los Angeles. The absence of supermarkets and the reluctance of banks to lend to African Americans helped to create the oppressive string of liquor stores, cash checking outlets, and mini-marts along Florence, Slauson, and Normandy avenues. The mini-marts sold, almost exclusively, poorly made, overpriced, and often unhealthy items. Locals argued that these stores, run in many cases by Koreans, didn't serve the community's best interests. As a result, when these symbols of diminished control and limited retail options went up in smoke in the spring of 1992, few mourned.<sup>3</sup> Davis, in fact, maintained that middle and working-class black Angelenos pursued a "scorched earth" strategy during that year's civil unrest. Local journalist Lynell George heard this sentiment from a man she met on the streets during the unrest. "Maybe," the informant told her, "it had to burn . . . like how sometimes you have to burn a field. To make something new."<sup>4</sup>

While some citizens took the destructive references quite literally, most used the *idea* of destruction to highlight their own ideas about renewal. Some obviously looked to the government in the wake of the riots, but even more people, it seemed, focused inward. Out of the ashes of the violence, South Central residents hoped to see a new black unity take hold that could reverse the course of local retail underdevelopment. The riots, they thought, might push outsider money and interest away. In the "cleared" places, according to this vision, black business leaders would have the chance to step up and guide the area's reconstruction. These leaders, it was hoped, would be motivated not just by the bottom line, but also by a responsibility to give something back to the community. When people talked about a scorched earth policy strategy, then, they talked more generally about a black-controlled economy in South Central. This hope animated the riots and fueled the popularity of limited-government, do-it-ourselves black-led, post-riot development.<sup>5</sup>

As Mike Davis and Lynell George surely knew, this loosely articulated vision of civic and community-minded, black-guided capitalism was not a new dream for African

American Los Angeles. The Garveyites of the 1920s imagined a similar, and even broader, African American-engineered racial and economic transformations.<sup>6</sup> So did Central Avenue businessman George Beavers, Jr., and other moderate but still determined "race men" of the 1920s and 1930s who were, in historian Douglas Flamming's words, "the latest manifestation of the community's longstanding faith in Race enterprise." As these exceedingly respectable gentlemen saw it, "black-owned businesses would hire African Americans and provide useful services to black consumers." These same businesses, they reasoned, would keep money circulating within the community, enriching everyone in the loop. Like the Alabama business leader and publisher of *Black Enterprise*, A.G. Gaston, himself a kind of representative figure of race men, they linked commerce to uplift. Recognizing that a white, middle class-controlled government would do little, they put themselves in the role of community guardians, asking themselves always, "What do black people need now?"<sup>7</sup> In the postwar period, the messages of self-help and white indifference got radicalized, but they certainly didn't lose their appeal. Groups and individuals ranging from the Nation of Islam to Barry Gordy and Sam Cooke to the Black Panthers picked up on these ideas in varying degrees.<sup>8</sup> By the 1990s, South Central's Gangsta rappers and their fans in "X" hats embraced anew the themes of self-help and nationalism that link together the past and the present, race men and Black Power advocates.<sup>9</sup>

In a 2000 *New York Times Magazine* profile of Magic Johnson, Larry Platt mentioned with a touch of surprise that the basketball hero-turned-businessman sounded more like Malcolm X than Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>10</sup> What Platt didn't pick up on was that Johnson's borrowing of ideas from the Nation of Islam and from the race men of the past were crucial to his appeal in Los Angeles and beyond, allowing

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him to connect with teens wearing tricolor gear as much as to their parents and grandparents, who remembered the more economically vibrant days of George Beavers in South Central. Really, Johnson’s local fame and his commitment to the ideologies of economic self-help, racial unity, and anti-statism (or state distrust), suggest the tenacity of this way of thinking at the grassroots long after the Civil Rights triumphs of the 1960s.

Understanding the fidelity of everyday people to the transformative power of black capitalism helps, moreover, to make sense of the broad grassroots adherence to a loose set of separatist ideas. In addition, it underscores the long-term salience of these notions of racial progress in the pre- and post-King eras of the Long Civil Rights Movement. It may be, in fact, that the various strands of nationalism and self-help have had, as Tim Tyson, Devin Fergus, and others have suggested, more staying power in the black community than the ideas of integration and universalism. Johnson’s ideas, finally, which have never really been taken seriously on their own, made him more than just a famous African American personality and entrepreneur. They made him a man who reflected the reigning ideology of his times, a “man of the people,” as he was called again and again in Los Angeles in the 1990s.<sup>11</sup>

Yet Johnson’s status as a post-riot hero reflected, at the same time, a bit of wishful thinking in South Central Los Angeles. Many wanted change, and they wanted that change controlled by African Americans outside the political system. While Magic talked generally about the power of black capitalism and the need to recycle black dollars in the black community, he lacked the larger world view of Garveyism, with its forceful critique of capitalism’s brutal

relationship to colonialism and the exploitation of black labor. However much he sounded like Malcolm X, Johnson never directly challenged White supremacy as an oppressive system or analyzed its economic and psychological impact. Johnson’s rather narrow and uncomplicated emphasis on black capitalism, with his smiling face fronting operations but not always in full control of the money or the product, led to an investment strategy that emphasized style over substance, low wage service work over well-paying industrial (and unionized) jobs, investment of any kind over local sources, and middle-class consumer desires over working families’ material needs.

Earvin “Magic” Johnson regularly told interviewers that when he was growing up in Lansing, Michigan, in the 1960s and 1970s he admired businessmen, particularly African American businessmen, even more than he did athletes. Following their example, he said, he started a lawn-cutting business in his teens. Later, he worked with his father cleaning offices at night. When no one was looking, he would throw his long legs up on the top of the boss’s dark wood desk, imagining himself one day as the person in charge. “All I ever wanted was to be big in business,” Johnson said in 1995. “I never wanted to be a jock, to fall into that category of a dumb ballplayer.”<sup>12</sup>

During his glory days as an oversized point guard, Johnson, like his All-Star peers, signed a pack of endorsement deals. He pitched Pepsi-Cola, Converse sneakers, Spalding basketballs, and Nintendo game systems. After learning that his teammate Kareem Abdul Jabbar had lost everything he had in a devastating house fire, Magic bought a stake in a soda bottling company outside of Washington, DC, secured a licensing deal for NBA, NFL, and NHL jerseys and hats, and even tried to develop his own clothing line. What he wanted was investments that would generate income past his playing days, so he would never have to face the prospect that Jabbar did, of being personally wiped out by a single catastrophe.

Johnson’s universe, including his economic universe, changed on Thursday, November 7, 1991, the day he held a press conference at the Lakers’ home court, the “Fabulous Forum,” to announce that he was HIV positive and would stop playing basketball. While he boldly and forthrightly confronted his condition in public, Magic went out of his way to assert his heterosexuality, claiming that despite rumors to the contrary, he had become infected with the virus

through unprotected sex with multiple female partners. Appearing on his close friend Arsenio Hall's late-night variety show a few days after his stunning announcement, Johnson answered a question about his sexuality, boasting, "I am hardly gay."

Johnson's face-saving, hyper-straight-guy performance didn't save his business interests. Spalding, along with his other sponsors, didn't drop him right away or even completely, but they backed off. Johnson would play in an All-Star game in 1992 and join the famed Gold-Medal winning Dream Team at the 1992 Olympics. He would coach the Lakers for six games, losing five, in 1994. And he would make a somewhat successful thirty-two game Lakers comeback, playing power forward, in 1996. As he got back on the court, some endorsement opportunities returned.<sup>13</sup> Without basketball, though, the chance to pitch products—especially sports-related products—narrowed. And there remained the problem of his health and admitted lack of sexual restraint. As one ad man put it, "It's not so much the issue of HIV and AIDS. . . . It's how Magic was so outspoken about how promiscuous he was and all of his escapades. That just opens up a whole can of worms."<sup>14</sup>

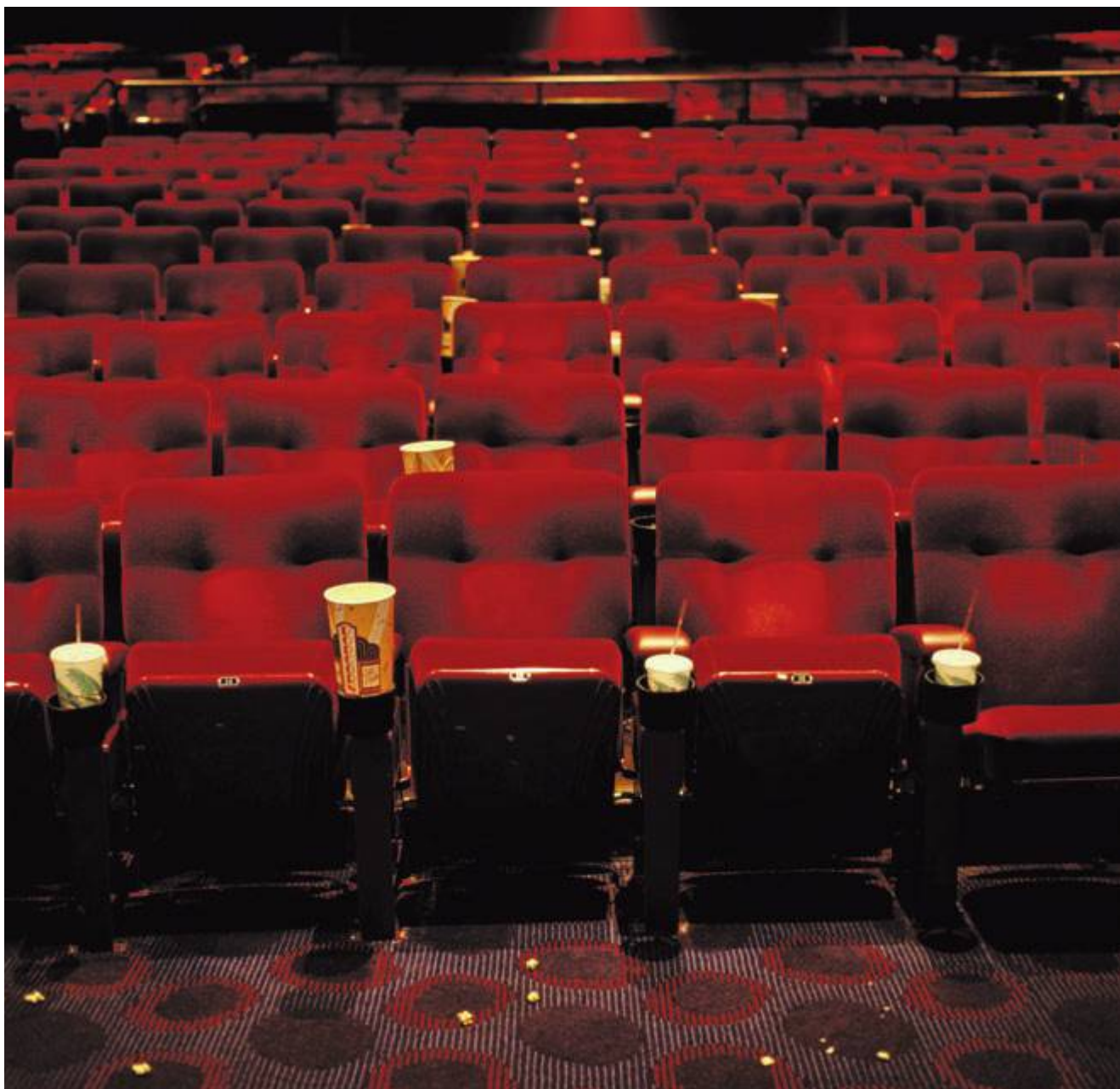
Unable to make money the old-fashioned way—just by smiling and holding a basketball or a soft drink in his hands—and searching, perhaps, as one observer maintained, for personal redemption in the wake of the announcement about his illness, Magic began to create a different business model for himself. Within ten years, by 2004, he would become, as his web site contends, a "leader in revitalizing and providing quality entertainment, products and services to ethnically diverse, urban communities." A vanity biography of Johnson stated, "Magic threw himself [after basketball] into . . . business projects . . . that helped to revive downtrodden areas." Through these activities, Johnson hoped to rebuild neighborhoods, but also to show young African Americans (another vanity biography asserted) that "blacks cannot only make money playing, but also make money in other ways. We can be businessmen, too." Johnson, in other words, would remake himself as an updated race man and role model, giving a renewed voice to the longstanding and widely popular black capitalist ideology of self-help, non-statism, and a commitment to giving back. He would turn himself into a symbol of the need, as he and others saw it, for successful African Americans to commit themselves, not just in words or even with charity,

but in direct deeds, to the larger African American community, to stay put and not leave the neighborhood when they made it.<sup>15</sup>

Johnson started on his new path at the Baldwin-Crenshaw Plaza, located on the western side of what increasingly in the postwar era came to be called South Central Los Angeles. Built in the 1940s, the line of one-story shops with parking in front was one of the very first malls ever built in America. When it was initially opened there was a movie theater nearby—several, actually. In those days, the neighborhoods and communities surrounding the plaza, Crenshaw to the East and Baldwin Hills above it, were almost all white. Following a familiar path, whites in these parts of South Los Angeles fled in the late 1940s and 1950s when African Americans, with those decent union jobs Mike Davis talked about, left an overcrowded Watts (made all the denser by the Great Migration), moved east and bought up the tidy bungalows on block after block of nearby narrow perpendicular streets. Soon South Central was a black neighborhood, with affluent African Americans, like the Academy Award-winning actress from *Gone With the Wind*, Hattie McDaniel, living in the hills, and working-class African Americans living in the lower lying areas.<sup>16</sup>

Globalization and the new rush to cheap labor everywhere, the end of the Cold War, and the larger restructuring of the US economy hit hard in these parts. As Mike Davis and others noted, South Central Los Angeles bled thousands of skilled, blue-collar jobs in the 1970s and 1980s. The early 1990s brought a sharp economic downturn, and once-middle class areas, like Crenshaw and Compton, were wrecked by unemployment, gangs, and open drug markets. As the areas around the mall grew poorer and as the numbers of people of color rose, the movie houses left, right along with white families and bank loans.

Responding to white flight and trying to stave off black flight, in the years leading up to the 1992 riots, African American developers and community leaders tried, without much success, to bring a movie house back to the Baldwin Crenshaw Plaza. "Anyone who knows anything about urban economics and inner city investment," noted A. Asadullah Samad, "knows third world cities get money quicker than us. I don't care how many black mayors . . . we've had in the past."<sup>17</sup> In 1994, Magic Johnson, in his new mode as a race man, stepped in to break the log jam. But money didn't come easy to him either at first. "I heard it all,"



Johnson recalled. “Urban neighborhoods won’t support a Cineplex.”<sup>18</sup> But as he put it, “I’d explain to them that they were missing out on the urban market because even though families there had lower incomes on average than suburban residents, there were far more of them packed into smaller areas and they had fewer entertainment options than suburbanites.”<sup>19</sup> After listening to Johnson’s pitch, the money men nodded their heads and asked the three-time NBA Most Valuable Player for an autograph, but they didn’t sign any checks. Finally, Johnson got funding for his idea for

urban development from the California Public Employees’ Retirement System. They helped him secure a \$50 million line of credit to support his idea to bring development to underdeveloped areas in Los Angeles in 1995.<sup>20</sup>

By this point, Johnson had honed a message that made him sound like A.G. Gaston and the race men of old. Without saying it, he rejected what historian Matthew Countryman has called “civil rights liberalism.”<sup>21</sup> He didn’t look for white initiatives or even black-white alliances to save the city, nor did he press for new anti-discrimination laws or

anti-poverty measures. Even more to the point, Johnson, like others in the community, seemed to have soured on black politics and mayors, and didn't look to the government for solutions but just to issue permits, help line up financing, and clear zoning hurdles. This made him even more a man of his moment.

The 1990s were a crucial midpoint in the long era—one that is still going on—of a lack of faith in government in the aftermath of the Reagan Revolution in some parts of America and a sense of the limited overall benefits of successful legal challenges to segregation in others parts of the nation. It was when that weathervane of a politician, Bill Clinton, declared an “end to welfare as we know it,” and in response to civil unrest many Los Angeles residents looked to business leaders for answers and trusted that CEO Peter Ueberroth could do for South Central and rebuilding LA what he had done for the Los Angeles Olympics.

Over time, Johnson was no less grandiose in his ambitions than Reagan or Clinton or Ueberroth, but his path to a new LA was through development, not City Hall or the state house, or even 1960s-era tactics of protest. “My goal,” as he put it, “was to be a big businessman, so that I could show other African Americans that they could make it too.” On another occasion, he said, “Instead of talking . . . I put my money where my mouth is. We have a lot of successful and powerful African Americans, but sometimes we spend money outside our own neighborhoods. And the only way we're going to rebuild our neighborhoods is if we invest in them ourselves.” And again: “As a way of developing community support and curtailing the flight of local consumer dollars, while promoting a genuine sense of community ownership,” Johnson told a group of politicians, “we will provide an opportunity for local residents and community-based organizations to invest in the development should they so desire.”<sup>22</sup>

“Recycling black dollars,” hiring black workers and keeping money local would, Johnson predicted, revive South Central and other inner city neighborhoods. (It is worth noting that in his reading of South Central—*our* community—it is a distinctly and exclusively black place, not brown, even though, or maybe because, Latinos were the fastest growing population in the communities he targeted for revival.) By creating jobs for African Americans, he said, his businesses would boost African American businesses and home values around them. “Our quiet revolution,” as he called what he

was doing in his 2008 book, *32 Ways to Be a Champion in Business*, “provides jobs and increases tax revenues while revitalizing communities from within. We are doing it in Harlem, South Central, and other neighborhoods across the country.”<sup>23</sup>

For Johnson, the revolutionary revitalization of black communities through recycling dollars came with a twist on the usual narrative of black self-help. In 2000, he delivered a lecture on development. Perhaps steering his message toward more nationalist elements in the community, he said, “We need to stop posturing [and] complaining, [and] get our egos and petty jealousies out of the way. . . . Where we lack the capital,” he went on, “we've got to [find] joint ventures.” *Joint ventures* would emerge as crucial in Johnson's model of development. He would bring new investment (and new status symbols) to the inner city by putting up some of his own equity, and, more importantly, pairing up with an outside company, a well-known, well-established, recognizable middle-class brand—like Sony, Starbucks, and TGI Friday's. These kinds of establishments would fill local needs—the need for places to go, and meet, and get better products. They would also symbolize—at least this was the hope—community vitality. They would, Johnson predicted, spark additional investment, and at the same time keep African American middle-class spending in African American neighborhoods. But while Magic's plan sounded like the older plans of George Beavers and A.G. Gaston, echoing parts of Marcus Gravey and Malcolm X's more ambitious agendas, it would rely heavily on outside capital that would *not* completely recycle black dollars into the black community.

For Johnson, teaming up with outside firms was obviously not a sell-out, but neither was it simply a matter of easy expediency. It was part of his idea of what fairness and equality meant in America's postwar Consumer Republic.<sup>24</sup> As Johnson would say over and over again, justice, retail justice, meant the opportunity, really the *right*, for African Americans to spend like other Americans without having to drive to a white area of the city to do so. Recalling those older models of black capitalism, retail justice under Johnson meant, moreover, work for the people who shopped in the stores in their neighborhood. To Magic, bringing brands to South Central fit, finally, within his own notion of doing service, of giving something back to African Americans by making available to them the promises of American consumer capitalism. Johnson repeatedly struck the theme



*Magic Johnson shares a hug with Starbucks chairman Howard Schultz*

of *retail justice*, of inclusion in the world of branded buying, as he set about remaking the shopping landscape of South Central Los Angeles, beginning with the Sony movie theater that he opened up at the Baldwin Crenshaw Plaza in 1995.

“We deserve the best,” Johnson declared again and again. With this in mind, he vowed to deliver fully mainstream experiences to African American city dwellers. As the Baldwin Crenshaw Theater prepared to open, Johnson repeatedly told members of the press that his movie house would offer “state-of-the-art,” “first-run movies” with “oversized seats” accompanied by “the highest quality digital sound.” Ken Lombard, a senior official with Magic Johnson Development Corporation, added that the new theater would “allow residents to experience first-class entertainment.” Once it opened, the cinema’s managing director claimed, “People really have a sense that it’s their theater.” Even though he still lived on the wealthy, largely white west side of Los Angeles, Johnson projected an image of himself

as part of South Central. He went to church in the neighborhood and regularly showed up there for other events. “One of my greatest pleasures these days,” he wrote in his 2008 business how-to book, “is visiting my businesses in South Central . . . the soul of Los Angeles.”<sup>25</sup>

The theme of community ownership and retail justice, of South Central residents laying claim to the best to be had in the Consumer Republic, would be sounded in all of Johnson’s business deals, including his well-publicized agreement with Starbucks. Three years after starting to show first-run films at the Baldwin Crenshaw Theater, Magic Johnson Development Corporation entered into a fifty-fifty partnership with the Seattle coffee giant to open cafés in what the deal called “ethnically diverse urban and suburban neighborhoods.” Between 1998 and 2007, Urban Coffee Opportunities stores, as the inner city coffee shops would be named, would open in Harlem, on Chicago’s Southside, and on the edge of the neighborhood where Martin Luther King, Jr., grew up in Atlanta. But the focus of Johnson’s



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coffeehouse development would remain in South Central Los Angeles. He would serve “high quality handcrafted drinks” near his movie house at the foot of the Baldwin Hills and not far from the corner of Florence and Normandy, the explosive starting point of the 1992 riots. He would open Starbucks stores in Altadena, Bell, Crenshaw, Compton, Hawthorne, Inglewood, Long Beach, and Riverside. In all, by 2009, Johnson would own half of thirteen locations for lattes and Frappuccinos in greater Los Angeles.

Johnson talked about the Urban Coffee Opportunities stores in the same way he talked about his movie houses. “Come in and have meetings here . . . socialize here . . . have Bible studies meetings here,” Johnson told an African American audience in Compton, the home of the legendary rap group NWA. “If we can be successful with Starbucks, which is the number one brand in America, then other companies will come here as well.”<sup>26</sup> What Johnson promised, again, was to kick-start development, delivering retail justice along the way. “Most Starbucks you see are mostly in the suburbs and other areas where most of us don’t live,” he explained. “It just made sense for me to offer the products in urban areas that our community likes and is familiar with. People said that blacks would never buy \$4 coffee. But I knew I could make it work.” What African Americans wanted, Johnson said over and over again, “was what the suburbs had.” The problem with retailers, Johnson told a reporter, is “when they . . . come into urban America, they want to give us a second or third-rate store or second or third-rate customer service. We want everything the suburbs have. If you build a store in urban America, we want the same store that you build in suburban America. We want the same service. We want everything the same.”<sup>27</sup>

Johnson’s fidelity to the idea of retail justice, to inner-city Los Angeles getting what the suburbs had, with its strands

of black self-help and self-determination, could be heard again in how he portrayed his deal with Starbucks, and how different his take was from that of Howard Schultz, the liberal(ish) CEO of the company.<sup>28</sup> As a kid, Schultz told reporters, he played basketball on Brooklyn’s asphalt playgrounds. After the coffee business made him a very rich man, he bought a stake, which he later sold, in the NBA’s Seattle Supersonics. Although he took pains to establish his hoops credentials, Schultz insisted, he had more than basketball in common with Johnson. “When Earvin and I first met,” the Starbucks chairman told a reporter, using the name that Magic prefers and that his oldest and closest friends call him, “there were lots of similarities in how we grew up. I would characterize it as growing up on the other side of the tracks.”

Railroad tracks run right down the middle of just about every American town from Maine to California, usually dividing white residents from black and Latino residents. But this spatial tradition of racial division didn’t stop Schultz from recasting his youth and Johnson’s youth. “Earvin and I had a natural connection about the values of the working class. And when we talked about the visions of opening Starbucks together in underserved communities, it was a natural connection.” Ever since they got out of the “projects”—Schultz’s word for the largely mixed-race public housing complex where he grew up in Brooklyn and the modest single-family house in the Midwest where Johnson was raised—the two of them wanted, the coffee king maintained, to “give something back.”<sup>29</sup> What Schultz didn’t talk about in his coming together narrative was race, because his liberal, universalist framework was built to suggest that race didn’t matter and that we are really all alike.

When Johnson spoke about his Starbucks partnership, he didn’t talk about growing up on the wrong side of the



tracks or his “natural” connection with Schultz. He thanked Schultz for teaching him about business and brands. But he talked about race and how it definitely mattered and how it framed city landscapes. After retiring from basketball, Johnson explained that he went into business—the business of getting rich and the related business of racial uplift. When he discussed his corporate life, he talked about economic self-empowerment ahead of brotherhood and sounded more like A.G. Gaston (and a little like Malcolm X) than the “I have a dream” sound bite of Martin Luther King, Jr., that gets rolled out every January to celebrate the Civil Rights leader’s birthday. With his view of retail justice in mind, Magic wanted equality of access and equality of opportunity to spend for people of color. Integration and universalism didn’t figure into his vision (nor, by the way, did economic equality, because you needed money to spend at his stores). Unlike Schultz and other advocates of diversity, Johnson didn’t necessarily picture whites and blacks sitting together over lattes. He wanted, instead, to create

opportunities for African Americans to get quality, status-conferring goods. “Companies,” he noted, in his familiar refrain, with race clearly on his mind, “still have that fear of coming into minority communities.” National brands could turn a profit in the inner city, where, he explained, everyone wasn’t poor and without money; but, he insisted, coming back to his notion of retail justice, they had to deliver “high quality products.”

Asked about his hopes for the areas around his UCO Starbucks stores, he answered, striking another chord of black economic self-determination (however misleading, given his ties to a global chain) over liberal universalism, “I’d want to see more business here in this community, that means more jobs for this community and more social income being spent in this community. That means that the dollar is being recycled within the community and that is how the community grows.”<sup>30</sup> Johnson framed racial difference in yet another way. With a broad smile, he talked about differing tastes, but also used a broad “we,” that emphasized racial unity. “We don’t eat scones,” he told a reporter, “We try to serve the pound cake and some things that we eat and we like. It’s a little sweeter.”<sup>31</sup>

When Johnson opened a TGI Friday’s in South Central at the Ladera Plaza, next to one of his Starbucks stores, he again talked about retail justice. Portraying this business venture at least in part as community service, he said he hadn’t really thought about going into the restaurant and bar business until a local resident came up to him one day and told him that the community needed a place to go and get a decent (and healthy) salad.<sup>32</sup> Convinced that this was important to South Central, Johnson announced, “Our goal is to provide quality family-oriented restaurant alternatives to urban communities that are not currently served by retail chains.”<sup>33</sup> TGI Friday’s, therefore, symbolized another attempt at retail justice—no lettuce, no peace. Johnson also served the “sweeter” stuff at his restaurants, he said African Americans wanted, perhaps negating the health benefits of those salads, but again what he saw as racial differences.

Magic Johnson and his press team often boasted that their outlets were among the busiest of their kind—the busiest movie theaters, Starbucks, and TGI Friday’s in the country. But despite the fact that buying something or going to a store represents something of a vote of confidence in the Consumer’s Republic, locals were not completely unanimous in their praise for Johnson and his

model of retail justice. In many ways, the critiques of Magic came from a black nationalist, or more precisely, economic self-determination position, suggesting, in yet another way, the depths of support in the 1990s in LA for recycling black dollars as a solution to inner city problems. Some detractors chided the former basketball star, usually quite gently, for not recycling enough dollars in exactly the right places to do the most good for the most African Americans. In that way, the dialogue over the contributions of Johnson's businesses also revealed something of the contested geography of South Central, the idea that it wasn't one place, but a collection of different places sharing a tenuous link and perhaps a common racial fate.

With Crenshaw High School, located near the intersections of Crenshaw Boulevard and West Vernon Avenue, as a dividing line, the area that came to be known as South Central was long split between East and West. "East," which included Watts, was the distinctly poorer, more working-class part of the community. Towards the West lived "the least poor among us," in the words of Tom Bradley, the city's first African American mayor and a youthful resident of the westerly Leimert Park. Bradley continued, "And you can define poor in different ways. When I talk about the wealthier people, I include churchgoing folks who believed in education and hard work. Even if they didn't have middle-class money, they had what you might call middle-class values." The further south and east you went in Los Angeles, the one-time police commissioner and long-time politician averred, "the less of that people you had."<sup>34</sup>

Johnson's stores followed the map sketched by Bradley. He located all of his movie screens, Starbucks, and restaurants, all of his post-riot development, west of Crenshaw High School, often on the furthest westerly reaches of the area. He put one of his Starbucks UCO stores right next to the private University of Southern California campus (and its nearby tall dorms, filled with mostly wealthy, caffeine-hungry, space-needing students). This location obviously helped his bottom line, and allowed him tap into a higher-end market, and at the same time cater to underserved nearby neighborhoods. Other stores stood technically in South Central, but also right next to freeway ramps, making them accessible to everyone. None of his stores were in Watts, the poorest area in South Central, or in other heavily hit riot zones. Still, Johnson had little patience for those who questioned where he invested his money. He stated it

would have been "corporate suicide" to put a multiplex or a Starbucks "in the heart of Watts," pointing a reporter to the boarded-up storefronts there, saying that those empty retail spaces were "grim reminders of the riots that swept through following the verdict in the Rodney King trial."<sup>35</sup>

Other politically active and engaged South Central residents criticized Johnson for demonizing, or at least reproducing, incendiary stereotypes of black youth, especially young men, as a group that had to be monitored. When Johnson opened his Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza movie theater, he talked a lot about security in the press. He told reporters how he went to gangs and told them they were welcome to come to his movie house, but that they had to leave their guns and turf battles behind. "I just laid it out to them that I'm building this theater for the community," Johnson explained from his Beverly Hills office. "You can't have anything happen at this theater because we're going to hire your cousins, your mothers, your sons and daughters. You come in here and shoot up the place, it might be your own relatives inside." On another occasion, Johnson said, "If they fight and shoot in the theater that means we will have to close it down and they won't have anywhere to go."

Hammering home the point, he set up a series of easily read safety cues for customers. Beefy uniformed security forces were stationed by the ticket booth and in the lobby, while LAPD officers patrolled the theater's perimeter. Ushers marched up and down the aisles. A poster-sized "code of behavior" sign hung over the entrance, spelling out rules about dress and conduct. For Earl Ofari Hutchinson, a sociologist and author of the book *The Assassination of the Black Male Image*, the theater's security regime was too much. He watched with alarm as "hyper-vigilant guards accost[ed] or verbally chastise[d] patrons for wearing caps [and] [u]shers rebuked . . . patrons who whispered . . . comments during the screening." In a 1995 article in the *Los Angeles Times*, Hutchinson reported that "the near-siege climate . . . made me feel uncomfortable and dampened my film enjoyment."<sup>36</sup>

Others charged Johnson with running businesses which were, in a sense, not black enough. His vision of black capitalism, they suggested, and not unreasonably, resulted in little more than a homegrown version of trickle-down economics. Magic would get his, and Sony and Starbucks would get theirs, but little would be left in this model for

poor and working people in South Central. Some thought his version of branded redevelopment actually pushed out local, black-owned businesses in order to make way for flusher, better-financed, white-controlled chains. According to one Baldwin Crenshaw Plaza shop owner, once Magic came along with his Sony Theater, rents shot up and he lost his store.<sup>37</sup> Saying what some in Los Angeles surely thought, a Harlem business owner looked at 125th Street, and seeing the neon-draped Blockbuster Video and the Magic Johnson-owned Starbucks, commented acidly, “You don’t need to go to Bosnia to see ethnic cleansing. This strip is becoming ethically and economically cleansed of local, black-owned businesses.”<sup>38</sup>

Without attacking Magic directly, a group of Leimert Park businessmen—owners of small shops, eateries, and music venues—pushed for a blacker, more Afro-centric form of South Central capitalism, something closer to the global consciousness of Graveyism. Beginning before the 1992 unrest and intensifying after the uprising, they sought to turn their small strip of stores into an African-themed village, making nationalist, and positive, comparisons between what they wanted to build and what they believed already existed in Little Tokyo and Chinatown.<sup>39</sup>

“My vision for Leimert Park,” declared Jackie Ryan, co-owner of the Kongo Square Gallery and Gift Shop, “is that we continue to grow and provide a service and a product for African Americans. That small African American businesses continue to grow and prosper. That we continue to be able to determine what our needs are. That we continue to be self-determined.” To Richard Fulton of Fifth Street Dick’s, a restaurant opened just two days before the riots broke out, Ryan’s nationalist dream wouldn’t come easily, but still, it was worth trying to make happen. “Leimert Park,” he argued, “has been struggling along with the idea that this is a kind of black entrepreneurial area. But we’re being attacked by conversations over multiculturalism, which I think has happened over and over again in Los Angeles as a whole. I envision our community as a black entrepreneurship area. Others think multiculturalism is the way to go.” Asadullah Samad was not one of these people. Leimert Park, he said, could and should stand out in contrast to “the ‘white man’s mall’ on Crenshaw [where Magic’s theater and Starbucks store were located] that has become the community’s favorite hangout.”<sup>40</sup>

While some in South Central Los Angeles acknowledged

the criticism of Johnson, and even agreed with it, many stuck up for him, as they did when he got into a political row with the powerful local African American city councilman, Mark Ridley-Thomas, over a proposed LA football stadium. They didn’t just defend Johnson, they defended him in a self-help, nationalist-tinged vernacular.<sup>41</sup> Writing to the editor of the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Bobby Glanton Smith proclaimed that he considered Johnson the “only significant local figure involved in post-riot development.”<sup>42</sup> Part of Johnson’s appeal to Smith and others was that he wasn’t an elected official and that he stood outside of a system that many had lost faith in. Politicians, even black politicians, it was perceived, made promises but rarely delivered. Smith surely knew that Mayor Tom Bradley hailed from South Central, but once in office, he thought, as many others did, the city’s chief executive delivered for downtown interests first. “Many hand-wringers in politics and business promised investment in black areas,” wrote a Los Angeles journalist, looking back in 2010, but only “Johnson delivered, opening the pioneering theater...that was a symbol of hope.”<sup>43</sup> Other wealthy African Americans who stood outside the compromised political system could have helped, but they didn’t. “Magic,” declared Mark Broyard, a Crenshaw resident and working musician, “he’s a down brother. I look around and I don’t see the James Worthy Center or the Michael Jackson Center, or anybody else openly giving their money and putting their names on things. Crenshaw is the hub of black activity, but Mark Ridley-Thomas is doing nothing. Magic’s the catalyst for everything that’s happening here.” Broyard concluded his analysis of post-riot development with a nod to the area’s geography and a challenge, one issued with faith, to Johnson: “When he’s finished with this plaza, I hope he starts on the east side of Crenshaw.”<sup>44</sup>

Erin Aubrey Kaplan grew up in South Central. Her father wrote for the local paper, the *Sentinel*, and she covered the area in the years after the 1992 uprising for the *Los Angeles Weekly*. Her article, “The Accidental Populist,” is probably the best thing written on Johnson and his business moves. She understood why some Leimert business owners didn’t necessarily applaud Magic’s moves. “They didn’t want only retail justice,” she explained, “they wanted real justice.” Some thought, and again not without cause, Kaplan acknowledged, that while Johnson enriched himself and Sony and Starbucks, he didn’t really add much to

South Central, especially to the community's working-class sections. But she also recognized that these critiques came from small pockets in the neighborhood. Even if his plans had flaws, to most South Central residents, Johnson was, Kaplan believed, "the only guy in modern times to step up to the plate." "All black people," Kaplan wrote, are "tired of being short-shrifted not just by movie theaters and shopping malls but by public education and job opportunities and criminal-justice injustices and all the rest—that inclusive we and our that Johnson employs so purposefully and passionately in conversation—that is the biggest reason he has emerged, intentionally or not, as a man of the people."<sup>45</sup>

Like Magic, most African Americans—Johnson's *we* and *our*—believed that white power brokers weren't going to rebuild the most distressed, blackest sections of LA, especially not after what they defined as the riots. That meant that black people would have to do it themselves. But who in the black community would act? As Kaplan (and Boyard) pointed out, Los Angeles was home to hundreds of prominent black celebrities, but where were they? Where was Denzel Washington, Kaplan asked, in the wake of the riots? "Magic," Kaplan answered, "was the only one willing to pay attention." With his focus on the South Central, Magic sought to deliver a message to the city's wealthy and middle-class African Americans. Through his investments and involvement, he issued, Kaplan thought, a call for racial unity across class lines. Central to Johnson's mission, and to his appeal, was the idea of retail justice, that offering the best of the best was what was fair and would recycle black dollars, specifically middle-class black dollars across the entire community. It was also meant to keep black doctors and lawyers "at home" in South Central. Johnson's talk along with his walk, Kaplan recognized, amounted to a challenge to the black middle class—to do what he was doing and stay put in the black community and invest in black communities, thereby rebuilding them from the ground up and from within. As Kaplan knew, and as Crenshaw and Baldwin Hill residents knew, this wasn't a new message. However compromised it was by Johnson's partnerships with large outsider corporations, his ideas were part of the intellectual fabric of the place, as old as Marcus Gravey and George Beavers and as new as NWA and the black business owners of Leimert Park.

For Erin Aubrey Kaplan, Johnson remained *the man*, a figure true to a nationalist, self-help tradition, until, as she



said, his credibility was tarnished by the advertisements he did and the money he invested in "those check cashing places." For others, Johnson lost his savior status more slowly. For years, he did seem like the only prominent person interested in South Central Los Angeles. Yet this wasn't enough—and maybe it was too much to ask—to rebuild the area from the bottom up. Though few locals blamed Johnson for this failure, he didn't have the power to fulfill most of his promises. For instance, he never got the financing together or maintained the political support to reopen and refurbish the Santa Barbara Plaza. Since 2005, this large footprint on the area's retail map has remained moldering and decayed. Even more to the point, local folks knew without saying it that Johnson's businesses, while garnering lots of headlines, were not big enough or powerful enough and didn't have enough reach to create the number of jobs and the level of investment that he had promised. Even if he had invested in the same vein on a larger scale, he wanted to create something not altogether different, in economic

terms, from the slot parlors and massive convention centers with their plethora of low-paying, mostly part-time service jobs city leaders seem to be constantly pushing for these days. Few provisions are made in these scenarios to ensure that high-end jobs such as legal work or accounting stay local; typically, they get shipped or scanned back to corporate headquarters in Seattle or New York.

Closer to South Central, the black-owned businesses around Johnson's theaters and coffee houses didn't necessarily thrive or start hiring more employees after one of these movie houses or cafés opened up nearby. Instead, his moves reportedly pushed some shops and restaurants out because they led to rising rents and chain-store preferences for predictability. In general, despite Johnson's investments and speechmaking, South Central Los Angeles remained short of stores in the wake of the riots, with fewer supermarkets and sit-down restaurants per capita than the rest of Los Angeles and suburban America.<sup>46</sup>

Maybe because the community didn't bounce back fast enough or because the profits didn't pile up high enough, Johnson seemed to suffer from what might be called South Central fatigue. He wasn't alone. African American suburbanization, to look at one telling index, continued and indeed intensified in the post-riot years. Many, it seemed, didn't just want what the suburbs had in their neighborhoods; they wanted the suburbs themselves, with their predictably safer streets, better schools, and multitude of shopping options.<sup>47</sup> Like the larger black middle class, Johnson himself spent less time in the area as the riots turned from a current event to history. Over time, he started to sell off some of his interests. When he had opened his first movie house in 1995, he promised local residents that the theater would be there for a long time. Yet it closed for renovations in 2006, and stayed closed for the next four years. Finally, it was announced in the fall of 2010 that it would reopen the next spring as a Rave Theater; Magic Johnson would not be involved in the decision-making, and his name would not be on the marquee.<sup>48</sup>

That same fall, Johnson sold every one of his Urban Coffee Opportunity Starbucks back to Starbucks. Reportedly, he planned to use the \$75 million in profits he netted from the sale to buy a controlling interest in an NBA basketball team, like Michael Jordan had, exactly the kind of black capitalism through sports, and only sports, that he had long derided.<sup>49</sup>

Not many in South Central these days would call Johnson *the man*. That moment has passed, along with Magic's more public politics of African American self-help and self-determination. Unlike A.G. Gaston, who, as his biographer suggests, constantly thought about the black community as *us*, Johnson has turned inward to himself.

Maybe his more recent moves showed that what he always offered was, in the end, fool's gold. In the riots' wake, people searched for a path forward. No government entity at the local, state, or national level offered much of a solution. The 1992 election, just months after the nation's second largest city went up in flames, revolved around flag pins on lapels and rhetoric like "read my lips." Magic Johnson stepped into that void. His promise of a new redemptive black capitalism delivered new consumer opportunities, and more important, it delivered hope. It sounded like an avenue for the African American citizenry to control the rebuilding of LA, but it wasn't, really. In public, Johnson sounded like a race man, someone dedicated to community uplift and self-determination. His ideas and persona intersected with the assessment of many on the ground. Yet Johnson's shops and cinemas didn't end poverty in South Central or engender black unity, or even keep the black middle class "at home." His program of black-fronted, branded "retail justice" never really had a chance of working, because it never challenged the deeply entrenched structural forces that locked far too many in black Los Angeles in a vicious cycle of poverty, lack of investment, underfunded schools, limited economic opportunity, and official neglect.

In some ways, the opening up of a Starbucks and TGI Friday's only reinforced those structures that emphasize consumption over production, status-buying over functional purchases, cheap jobs over well-paying jobs, profits for white-dominated corporations over community-led development, and the global politics of finance and downtown growth over the local neighborhood. These are big, knotty issues. Maybe Magic Johnson gave up because it was much easier to worry about the *me* than it was to remain concerned about the *us*. Or it maybe it was just a whole lot easier to take care of *me*. **B**

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Platt, "Magic Builds An Empire," *New York Times Magazine*, December 10, 2000.
- <sup>2</sup> See a clear analysis of local conditions in Joao H. Costa Vargas, *Catching Hell in the City of Angels: Life and Meanings of Blackness*

- in *South Central Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 35–61.
- 3 For a strong critic of that landscape, see Mary Lee, “Drowning in Alcohol: Retail Outlet Density, Economic Decline, and Revitalization in South Los Angeles,” Box 22, Folder 7, South Los Angeles 20th C. Collection, South California Library for Social Studies and Research.
  - 4 Jervey Tervalon, ed., *Geography of Rage: Remembering the Los Angeles Riots of 1992* (Los Angeles: Really Great Books, 2002), 72.
  - 5 “L.A. Intifada: Interview with Mike Davis,” *Social Text*, (1992), 19–33.
  - 6 Steven Hahn, *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 115–62.
  - 7 Douglas Flamming, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 227; and Carol Jenkins and Elizabeth Gardner Himes, *Black Titan: A.G. Gaston and the Making of a Black American Millionaire* (New York: One World, 2005).
  - 8 Peter Guralnick, *Dream Boogie: The Triumph of Sam Cooke* (New York: Little Brown, 2005); and Harry M. Scoble, “Negro Politics in Los Angeles: The Quest for Power,” Political Science Department, UCLA.
  - 9 For more on this, see Robin Kelley’s essay on rap and on Malcolm X in *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1996); Vargas, *Catching Hell*, pp. 109–40; and Michael Eric Dyson, *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
  - 10 Platt, “Magic Johnson Empire.”
  - 11 The idea of the “long Civil Rights Movement” has been formulated most famously by the historian Jacquelyn Down Hall in her article, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History* 91 (March 2005), 1233–63. See, moreover, Tyson, “Robert Williams, ‘Black Power,’ and the Roots of the African American Freedom Struggle,” *Journal of American History* 85 (Sept. 1998), 540–70; and Devin Fergus, *Liberalism, Black Power and the Making of American Politics* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009).
  - 12 Bruce Newman, “It Was Easy When it Was Just Basketball,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 10, 1995.
  - 13 Ellen Labrecque, *Magic Johnson* (Ann Arbor: Cherry Lake Publishing, 2008); Keith Elliot Greenberg, *Magic Johnson: Champion with a Cause* (Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company, 1992).
  - 14 “Experts Believe That Magic’s Marketability is Limited,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 1995.
  - 15 <http://www.magicjohnson.com/index.php?enterprises/our-company>, accessed Oct. 10, 2010. From the vanity biographies, see Ellen Labrecque, *Magic Johnson*, 35; Greenberg, *Magic Johnson*, 52.
  - 16 On this process, see Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); and Emily Strauss, “The making of the American school crisis: Compton, California and the death of the suburban dream,” (Ph.D., Brandeis University, 1996).
  - 17 A. Asadualah Samad, “Between the Lines,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, August 9, 1995.
  - 18 Earvin “Magic” Johnson, *32 Ways to Be a Champion in Business* (New York: Crown Business, 2008), 8.
  - 19 *Ibid.*, 109.
  - 20 Mike Bresnahan and Greg Johnson, “For Magic: NBA was Halftime,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 2, 2008.
  - 21 Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005). See also, on the tone and tenor of the fight for rights outside the South, Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008).
  - 22 “Proposal to Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of LA for the Development of the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Plaza,” Richard Riordan Papers, Box 7, Folder 6, LMU.
  - 23 Johnson, *32 Ways*, 9.
  - 24 Lizabeth Cohen, *Consumers Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage, 2006). In this important book, Cohen talks about the way consumption organized ideas about citizenship and access to the American Dream after 1945 in the US. This, of course, was never equally distributed, as she shows quite clearly with the GI Bill, but nonetheless access to goods and stores shaped the struggle for Civil Rights, she argues, and beyond. In South Central, too, African Americans were pressing for inclusion, which meant inclusion in consumption and the building of an equitable set of consumer choices.
  - 25 “New Magic Theater to Open this Summer in Carson,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, January 29, 1998; and Johnson, *32 Ways*, 5.
  - 26 “Compton,” *Los Angeles Sentential*, August 5–11, 2004.
  - 27 Fran Spielman, “Magic Partnership Brings Starbucks to South Side,” *Chicago Sun Times*, September 23, 2004.
  - 28 On that opening, see Anthony Ramirez, “A Caffe Latte Spot on West 125th Street,” *New York Times*, April 28, 1999; Gersh Kuntzman, “Starbucks Goes Uptown,” *New York Post*, May 6, 1999; and Kuntzman, “Earvin’s Magic Bullet,” *New York Post*, May 9, 1999. According to Lance Freeman, the Starbucks store was certainly viewed by some as progress, but others noted that it didn’t really return revenues into the community. Freeman, *There Goes the ‘Hood: Views of Gentrification from the Ground Up* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 28, 208. More generally, see Howard Schultz, *Pour Your Heart into It:*

*How Starbucks Built a Company One Cup at a Time* (New York: Hyperion, 1999).

- <sup>29</sup> Article from the *Indianapolis Star*, July 13, 2005. I found this article pinned to the community board on the wall of a UCD Starbucks next to the remarkably prosperous University of Southern California campus in South Central Los Angeles.
- <sup>30</sup> From the *Indianapolis Star*, July 13, 2005. For a spot-on profile of Magic and his politics, see Larry Platt, “Magic Johnson Empire,” *New York Times Magazine*, December 10, 2000.
- <sup>31</sup> Fran Spielman, “Magic Partnership Brings Starbucks to the South Side,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, September 23, 2004.
- <sup>32</sup> Samad Asadullah, “Between the Lines,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, September 30, 1998.
- <sup>33</sup> Gersh Kuntzman, “Earvin’s Magic Bullet,” *New York Post*, May 9, 1999.
- <sup>34</sup> Bradley quoted in Michael Sokolove, *The Ticket Out: Darryl Strawberry and the Boys of Crenshaw* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 26. On the geography of the area, see also Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits*; Paul Robinson, “Race, Space, and the Evolution of Black Los Angeles”; and Reginald Chapple, “From Central Avenue to Lemiert Park: The Shifting Center of Black Los Angeles,” in *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities*, edited by Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramon (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 21–59, 60–80.
- <sup>35</sup> Newman, “It was Easy When There was Just Basketball.”
- <sup>36</sup> Letter to the Editor, *Los Angeles Times*, July 15, 1995.
- <sup>37</sup> Aubrey, “Accidental Populist,” *Los Angeles Weekly*.
- <sup>38</sup> “Magic Falters on New Court,” *New Amsterdam News*, May 13, 1999.
- <sup>39</sup> Erin Aubrey, “Lost Soul: A Lament for Black Los Angeles,” *Los Angeles Weekly*.
- <sup>40</sup> These quotes come from untitled clippings in South Los Angeles 20th C. Collection, Box 12, Folder: Neighborhoods: Leimert Park, South California Library for Social Studies and Research. On the politics of Leimert Park, see also Chapple, “From Central Avenue to Leimert Park,” 71–78.
- <sup>41</sup> On this dispute, see Erin Aubrey, “Game Over,” *Los Angeles Weekly*, October 19, 1999.
- <sup>42</sup> Smith, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, January 29–February 4, 2004.
- <sup>43</sup> Tibby Rothman, “A Magic Johnson Theater Era Ends,” *Los Angeles Weekly*, November 25, 2010.
- <sup>44</sup> Aubrey, “Accidental Populist.” Interview with Kaplan, September 25, 2010.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>46</sup> For more, see this excellent study: Josh Sides, “Renewal Through Retail: Corporate Retail Investment in South Central Los Angeles,” September 29, 2010: <http://www.csun.edu/csccs/research/sides.pdf>.
- <sup>47</sup> Smith to *Los Angeles Sentinel*, January 29–February 4, 2004. See also, “Straight Outtalk Compton,” *The Economist*, February 21, 2008; Dowell Myers, “Demographic and Housing Transitions In South Central Los Angeles, 1990 to 2000,” Special Report of the Population Dynamics Research Group, School of Policy, Planning, and Development, University of Southern California, April 22, 2002; James H. Johnson, Jr., Curtis C. Roseman, “Increasing Black Outmigration from Los Angeles: The Role of Household Dynamics and Kinship Systems,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 80, No. 2 (Jun., 1990), 205–222.
- <sup>48</sup> Rothman, “A Magic Johnson Theater Era Ends.”
- <sup>49</sup> Broderick Turner, “Magic Johnson Says Selling Stakes in Lakes, Starbucks Makes Good Business Sense,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 20, 2010.