**Retooling Conversations on Civil Rights**

**Remarks on Martin Luther King (January 15, 1929 – April 4, 1968)**

Dr. Diane Turner, Curator Charles L. Blockson Collection

“It was Martin Luther King who made the contemporary church aware of its power to effect change.” - C. Eric Lincoln

MLK was 39 years old, when he died. He was a young man only 5 years older than Octavius Catto. However, his social world was not like Catto. It is his world that shaped his political and social thought. However, his world was shaped by the changes that Catto and his generation catalyzed through their efforts in laying legal foundations for black activism and for advancing by black education, including the creation of black higher education institutions.

The year MLK was born marked the end of a period known as the Roaring Twenties, the Jazz Age and the Harlem Renaissance with the Wall Street Crash of 1929 which ushered in a worldwide Great Depression. It was also the period of the Great Migration when Blacks move from rural south to urban north. 1929 was also the year that the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters receives its charter from the American Federation of Labor. This was a major civil rights accomplishment. King came into a world that included the rise of Historically Black Colleges, the NAACP and the Urban League. It also marked 8 years after the Klu Klux Klan open chapters in Philadelphia, Chester, Trenton and Camden, 4 years after 35,000 Klansmen marched down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C. and the peak period when hundreds of Confederate monuments were erected in throughout the South, as well as in the North. MLK was born into a deeply segregated America, where Plessy v. Ferguson and Jim Crow defined America’s social world. The majority of blacks lived in the South and lived under the systems of sharecropping and penal gang labor.

**Early Family Background**:

King stated in *Stride Towards Freedom* 1958*:*

“As far back as I could remember, I had resented segregation, and had asked my parents urgent and pointed questions about it.”

As a child before attending school, he had two white playmates. They were inseparable but that **changed** as he reached school age. His mother had to tell him about segregation.

His mother, Alberta Williams King, was daughter to a successful minister. She grew up in comparative comfort and attended the best available schools and college. She had been protected from discrimination. His father’s, Reverend Martin Luther King Sr. experience was very different. The son of a sharecropper had witnessed the brutalities of segregation and fought back at an early age.

Martin Luther King Jr. witnessed his father’s protests against segregation and discrimination. He did not accept the system. He was an activist in his own right fighting to equalize teachers’ salaries and eliminating Jim Crow elevators in the courthouse. He resided over a congregation of 4,000 at Ebenezer Baptist Church.

Martin Luther King Jr. never adjusted to segregation because separate was always unequal. He also said that the idea did something to his sense of dignity and self-respect.

**Education and Marriage:**

Coretta Scott King met Dr. King in Boston in 1952 when he was 23 years old. She grew up in rural Alabama, attended Antioch College in Ohio, and was studying music at the New England Conservatory. Married Coretta in 1953.

“Martin always had a commitment to helping his fellow human beings,” said Coretta.

Dr. King was working towards a doctor of philosophy degree at Boston University, when they met. He earned a B.A. in sociology at Morehouse College, a distinguished Historically Black College founded in 1867 in Atlanta, and a B.D. from Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, PA

He felt a deeply serious call to the ministry when he was 17 and a Junior at Morehouse.

At age 18 he was ordained and made an assistant pastor of Ebenezer Church.

While at the seminary he learned about Mahatma Gandhi and his teaching.

In *Stride Toward Freedom*, he wrote, “Gandhi was probably the first person in history to live the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale.

In 1954 took up his first pastorate at the Dexter Avenue Church in Montgomery, Alabama.

Like King, Coretta Scott was born in totally segregated society and both received education in Northern schools. As a couple considered staying in the North.

**King in Philadelphia:**

MLK had long and deep ties in Philadelphia. Some of these are marked with historical markers are in the handout produced by the District. Among King’s recorded Philly connections are:

* 1948 - Entered Chester Crozer Theological Seminary

Studied under Reverend J. Pius Barbour, Calvary Baptist (3 years)

Audited University of Pennsylvania courses

* 1949 - Met Rev. William H. Gray Jr. - The Gray and King’s families developed a lasting relationship.
* In 1949, as a young seminarian, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had about given up on the power of love in solving social problems. He explains in his autobiography, *Stride Toward Freedom*, “One Sunday afternoon, I traveled to Philadelphia to the Fellowship House, Broad and Girard to hear a sermon by Dr. Mordecai Johnson, president of Howard University. Dr. Johnson had just returned from a trip to India and spoke of the life and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi.”
* 1959 – Martin Luther King Jr. and his father visited Bright Hope Baptist Church.
* June 6, 1961 – Guest speaker at Lincoln University
* 1963 March on Washington the largest contingent came from Philadelphia. Samuel Evan organized 500 buses and reserved train (42,000 people).
* On October 27, 1963, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke at the ground-breaking ceremonies for the new $1.2 million church and youth center.
* August 10, 1964, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr spoke at the 41st meeting of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority in Irvine Auditorium at the University of Pennsylvania to 3,000 African American women urging increased Negro voter registrations and asserting that violence and war were obsolete.
* Appeared in *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 11, 1964, page 2.
* Dr. King spoke at the Golden Slipper Square Club and received a donation of $1,000 plus $7,000 which had been given to Dr. King earlier by 60 Jewish communal leaders at the Locust Club luncheon and used to fight for Negro voting registration in Alabama and Mississippi.
* Appeared in *The Philadelphia Daily News*, May 4, 1965
* 1965 – Guest speaker at Villanova University.
* March 21-25, 1965 – Dr. King led the Selma to Montgomery March. C. Delores Tucker headed Philadelphia delegation to the Selma-Montgomery March.
* In 1965, Dr. King and SCLC planned a major protest campaign in 6 northern cities (Chicago, Cleveland, New York, Newark, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C.)
* August 1965 – 2-day visit to Philadelphia.
* 10,000 people rally in West Philadelphia, at Girard College wall with Cecil B. Moore, and the Baptist Temple at Temple University on August 4, 1965
* October 1967 – “Other America” Tour in Philadelphia. MLK spoke at Barratt Junior High, Saint Joseph’s College and held a big rally at the Spectrum with Harry Bellafonte.
* In February 1968, King developed laryngitis while in Philadelphia organizing an anti-Vietnam campaign. He was treated by Walter P. Lomax Jr. (WURD and Lomax Family Foundation founder).
* On April 4, 1968 – Dr. King is assassinated in Memphis.
* **The Philadelphia Martin Luther King, Jr. Association for Nonviolence, Inc.** was founded by the **Late Dr. C. Delores Tucker** and a group of local leaders in 1983 in Philadelphia.

**King’s Social Philosophy**:

King’s religious training at seminary was shaped by theologians of the Social Gospel Movement. The Social Gospel Movement was a religious movement that arose during the second half of the nineteenth century. Ministers, especially ones belonging to the Protestant branch of Christianity, began to tie salvation and good works together. They argued that people must emulate the life of Jesus Christ. King’s thinking was particularly shaped by Walter Rauschenbusch. He also had an international perspective to his own social philosophy.

His self-conscious social activism had five concepts:

1. Blacks were a people whose suffering and social situation prepared them for and in fact, gave them a divine historical mission of not only liberating themselves, but also of restructuring and spiritualizing U.S. society.
2. Blacks had both the moral right and responsibility to disobey unjust laws in their resistance to social evil.
3. It is immoral and cowardly to collaborate in one’s own oppression.
4. It is necessary for religion to have a social as well as spiritual function.
5. Human nature is perfectible through struggle.

King’s socio-political philosophy was important to Black religion and the Civil Right Movement:

1. It gave religious sanction to social resistance (spiritually inspiring an oppressed people in their quest for freedom)
2. It made social passivity immoral
3. It placed on preachers a continuing responsibility and pressure to take an active stand in the Freedom Movement and make religion more socially relevant.
4. Served as a transition in Black religion which encouraged self-criticism and pointed toward a Black liberation theology.

**MLK Quotes**:

“The determination of Negro Americans to win freedom from every form of oppression springs from the same profound longing for freedom that motivates oppressed people all over the world.” Martin Luther King Jr., “Nonviolence and Racial Justice,” *Christian Century,* February 6, 1957

“Young Negroes had traditionally imitated whites in dress, conduct, and thought in rigid, middle-class pattern….Now they ceased imitating and began initiating. Leadership passed into the hands of Negroes, and their white allies began learning from them.” - *Martin Luther King Jr. Companion* 1963

“I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in this stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice.” - *Martin Luther King Jr. Companion* 1963

“This America is the habitat of millions of people who have food and material necessities for their bodies; and culture and education for their minds; and freedom and human dignity for their spirits….But tragically and unfortunately, there is another America….In this America millions of work-starved men walk the streets daily in search for jobs that do not exist….In this America people are poor by the millions…Many people of various backgrounds live in this other America. Some are Mexican-Americans, some are Puerto Ricans, some are Indians, some happen to be from other groups. Millions of them are Appalachian whites. But probably the largest group in this other America….is the American Negro.” - *The Other America*, Speech by MLK Jr, April 14, 1967

In his last essay published in Playboy Magazine, January 1969, “A Testament of Hope” Dr. King wrote**:** “Confronted now with the interrelated problems of war, inflation, urban decay, white backlash and a climate of violence, it [United States] is now forced to address itself to race relations and poverty, and it is tragically unprepared.”

**Other Important King Dates and Relationships**:

March 26, 1964 Martin Luther King Jr. (Christian integrationist) and Malcolm X (Muslim nationalist) meet for the first and only time in Washington, DC during the U.S. Senate’s debate of the Civil Rights Bill. Although the media portrayed them as adversaries, they were actually fond of each other. They were both fighting against racism. Their goal was freedom for African Americans which included advancement of Black liberation, Black solidarity, Black economic, political and social power.

Note: W.E.B. DuBois stated the dilemma that slavery and segregation created for African American (double-consciousness) “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” The dilemma “Here, then, is the dilemma the Conservation of Races.” “What, after all, am I? Am I an American or am I a Negro? Can I be both?” - *Martin & Malcolm & America,* James Cone 1991

January 20, 1986 – The Martin Luther King Jr. federal holiday is celebrated for the first time.

**Legislative, Organizational and other Accomplishments**:

The **Civil Rights Act of 1964** (Pub.L. 88–352, 78 Stat. 241, enacted July 2, **1964**) is a landmark **civil rights** and US labor law in the United States that outlaw discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. The law was made possible through the efforts of MLK and others putting pressure on Congress and President Johnson externally. LBJ also was able to use his political influence with Congressional leaders using King’s efforts to get the laws enacted.

Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) History:

The very beginnings of the SCLC can be traced back to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The Montgomery Bus Boycott began on December 5, 1955 after Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white man on the bus. The boycott lasted for 381 days and ended on December 21, 1956, with the desegregation of the Montgomery bus system. The boycott was carried out by the newly established Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), organized in part by local members of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the NAACP. Martin Luther King, Jr. served as President and Ralph David Abernathy served as Program Director. It was one of history’s most dramatic and massive nonviolent protests, stunning the nation and the world. The boycott was also a signal to Black America to begin a new phase of the long struggle, a phase that came to be known as the Modern Civil Rights Movement. As bus boycotts spread across the South, leaders of the MIA and other protest groups met in Atlanta on January 10 – 11, 1957, to form a regional organization and coordinate protest activities across the South. Despite a bombing of the home and church of Ralph David Abernathy during the Atlanta meeting, 60 persons from 10 states assembled and announced the founding of the Southern Leadership Conference on Transportation and Nonviolent Integration. They issued a document declaring that civil rights are essential to democracy, that segregation must end, and that all Black people should reject segregation absolutely and nonviolently. Further organizing was done at a meeting in New Orleans, Louisiana on February 14, 1957. The organization shortened its name to Southern Leadership Conference, established an Executive Board of Directors, and elected officers, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as President, Dr. Ralph David Abernathy as Financial Secretary-Treasurer, Rev. C. K. Steele of Tallahassee, Florida as Vice President, Rev. T. J. Jemison of Baton Rouge, Louisiana as Secretary, and Attorney I. M. Augustine of New Orleans, Louisiana as General Counsel.

In 1967, SCLC created the Poor People’s Campaign to address the issues of unemployment, housing shortages for the poor, and the impact of poverty on the lives of millions of Americans. Unlike earlier efforts directed primarily toward helping African Americans gain civil rights and voting records, King and other SCLC leaders now addressed issues that impacted all who were poor regardless of racial background. Their immediate aim was to secure federal legislation to improve the quality of life of the nation’s impoverished citizens by having full employment and the construction of low-income housing. The march was scheduled for April 22, 1968.

After King’s Assassination on April 4, 1968, the march was moved to May. The Poor People’s March led by Rev. Ralph D. Abernathy began as caravans from all over the country left for Washington DC to protest poverty and racial discrimination.

**Using the Blockson Collection:**

The Charles L. Blockson Collection at Temple University is one of the nation’s leading research facilities for the study of the history and culture of people of African descent. Its collection has over 500,000 items on the global black experience. It is open free to the public and welcomes students and teachers. We’ve provided you with bibliographies of holdings related to OV Catto and Martin Luther King, Jr. We welcome you to come to use some of the materials we’ve shared with you today.