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### I Was Called, Too: The Life and Work of Coretta Scott King

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*CUNY Hostos Community College*

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SEX &amp; GENDER

## I Was Called, Too

### The life and work of Coretta Scott King

January 20, 2020

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*This essay was delivered today as a Martin Luther King, Jr. Day talk at St. Paul's Church National Historic Site, Mt. Vernon, New York.*

This year, in honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s legacy, I thought it both appropriate—and overdue—to discuss the significance of Coretta Scott King. And not just as the wife, and eventual widow, of Martin Luther King; but as an important activist and shaper of Dr. King's ideas. Mrs. King was a significant figure in her own right, but as with many female historical figures her historical importance has often been minimized or negated; and that can lead to erasure, even in plain sight. This has largely been the case with Mrs. King and with black women in the civil rights movement more broadly.

In researching this talk today, I found only two book-length scholarly works on Coretta Scott King. Most of the books featuring her were geared towards

children and teenagers. While it is, of course, important for young people to know who Coretta Scott King was, it is also telling that more scholarly works have not featured her activism or influence on Martin. It risks allowing a narrative of their union; of civil rights movement history; and of American history writ large; in which “great men” alone make the decisions and carry out the actions that produce history, while women are absent from—or at best footnotes—in the story. The women are relegated or consigned to be behind men only as dutiful wives and mothers. No room is given for women to be activists, theorists, organizers, and leaders in any significant measure, although black women were all these things throughout the movement.

I do not want to perpetuate that historical narrative. Coretta and Martin both acknowledged the extent to which their marriage was collaborative, rather than merely conventional. In fact, Coretta insisted, and both Martin, Jr. and Sr. agreed, that the vow of obedience be removed from their wedding ceremony.

Mrs. Scott King opened her memoir, *My Life, My Love, My Legacy* (2017), by telling the reader that most people did not know the “real her because they only saw or thought of her as ‘Mrs. Martin Luther King, Jr.’” However, she also wanted readers to get to know “Coretta,” the young woman who loved to sing and dance, who stood up for herself against racial injustice at a liberal northern college, who became active in the peace movement while in college—and remained so throughout her entire life; who debated whether or not she should date—much less marry—Martin Luther King, Jr.; and who remained an internationally renowned human rights activist in the wake of her husband’s assassination.

Coretta Scott’s story began in Heiberger, Alabama, a small, thoroughly segregated town, on April 27, 1927. Growing up in the Jim Crow South, racial violence marred young Coretta’s childhood, as was all-too-common at the time. The family’s home, which her father had built with his bare hands, was burned to the ground on Thanksgiving night when she was fifteen years old. Racist whites in town resented her family’s economic independence, so they destroyed his property. Her family owned their own land and her father transported lumber in the truck he owned. Later, after saving enough money to open his own lumber company, it too was burned to the ground within a few months when he refused to sell to a white man. Even with these devastating shocks, less than five years later, in 1946, Coretta Scott’s father opened a grocery store and gas station on the family’s land that remained in operation for decades, serving black and white customers.

These experiences with racial violence, however, affected Coretta deeply, and for her entire life. There was no legal recourse for her family in the face of deliberate arson and destruction of property. The southern legal system did not

acknowledge black Americans' rights as citizens of the United States, and law enforcement officers were often either members or co-conspirators with white supremacist groups. Coretta Scott King said that she did not experience kind white people or those who considered her a full human being until she got to Lincoln Normal School, a semi-private school that she and her older sister, Edythe, attended. The faculty at Lincoln was almost equally white and black; predominantly northern in terms of the white teachers; and affirming to the students, both in terms of the curricular offerings and nurturing students' talents.

It was very much Coretta Scott's mother, Bernice McMurry Scott, who continually emphasized the importance obtaining a good education, even though she had not progressed beyond the fourth grade herself. It was, of course, no mean feat to send one child—let alone three—to high school in the Deep South, as many counties had no public high schools for African Americans. Southern local governments did not believe black children needed schooling beyond the elementary grades. It was a testament to the fortitude of the Scotts that both daughters—and later their younger brother—attended secondary school over ten miles from home. Mrs. Scott actually drove the bus that transported the neighborhood's black children each way. And this was during the Great Depression and Second World War.

During high school Coretta's mind was being broadened in a variety of ways. She was introduced to classical music, which she instantly took a liking to. And it was there that she met a young pacifist named Bayard Rustin for the first time. He introduced her ninth-grade class to the principles of nonviolence and the anti-colonial struggles throughout the British Empire. Mrs. Scott King would get to know Rustin well over the course of their lives, but her introduction to the peace movement began as a teenager in the midst of Jim Crow Alabama.

Coretta Scott King wrote in her 2017 memoir that her mother had told her often since she was a young girl that she would go to college when she was old enough, and as a result she believed her mother, even if she had no idea where that would be. Well, one thing was known; the college would not be a public institution in the state of Alabama. None of them admitted African Americans. The state preferred to pay for African American college and professional students to attend out of state institutions than integrate their own schools.

In 1943, two years before Coretta graduated from Lincoln Normal School as valedictorian, her sister Edythe graduated with the same distinction and was awarded a scholarship to Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. Edythe Scott was, for a time, the only black student at the small, unconventional liberal arts college in the southwestern part of the state. Students were required to work off-campus part of the year and attend classes the remainder of the year. While

Coretta would be excited to follow her sister north and experience life outside the shadow of southern Jim Crow, she would find that racial discrimination did exist in the North. Antioch's work requirement that would make Coretta advocate for herself against racial injustice.

In order to complete her elementary education major and qualify for teaching certification in Ohio, majors were required to teach in both the public and private schools in Yellow Springs. There were no black teachers in the Yellow Springs public schools and she was the College's first black elementary education major. Coretta had completed her year as an assistant teacher in an Antioch private school, but was denied placement in the Yellow Springs public schools because of her race. This was happening at liberal Antioch, above the Ohio River. This kind of discrimination was not supposed to occur "up North," but of course racial discrimination knows no geographic boundaries.

Going to the supervisor of student teaching provided no relief. Neither did the president of the college. In fact, the supervisor of student teaching told Coretta that blacks and whites should not mix. Appealing to the local school board was to no avail, and she was not successful in mobilizing her fellow white students on her behalf. Ultimately, Coretta was faced with the unfair choice between traveling nearly ten miles from campus to student teach at a segregated elementary school in Xenia, Ohio, or spending another year at the private school in Yellow Springs. She refused to teach in a segregated school, for escaping segregation was why she had left Alabama. However, Coretta wrote a poignant and defiant letter to the College's administration condemning their decision not to intervene on her behalf, and arguing that this kind of injustice will harm the entire country in the long-term. She wrote, "My precious time and money have been spent for a commodity which I never received only because my skin color happened to be darker. . . . This kind of injustice which I experienced is mild compared to what Negroes are facing all the time in our society. . . . Do you then wonder why America as a leader among the nations in the world cannot command more respect among the common people who make up the majority of the world? Her inner corruption cannot long persist without backfiring." And then, as she wrote in her memoir, "This was the first time I stood up publicly against discrimination, and I found that I rather liked making waves and being a catalyst for change. . . . I knew that I would be black the rest of my life, so I could not back down or remain silent in the face of the injustice I would inevitably face." For a woman during the 1940s, "making waves" would be frowned upon as unseemly or unladylike. To like making waves would get one branded a "troublemaker," or soon a "Communist." But it says a great deal about her personality and character that she would continue to stand up for herself and other throughout the remainder of her life.

Despite that unfortunate experience, Coretta Scott learned other lessons while at Antioch that were more positive for her development. She would once again meet Bayard Rustin, who came to Antioch to lecture on peace activism, having been jailed during World War II as a conscientious objector. During her time at Antioch, Coretta became involved in racial and peace struggles on- and off-campus. She became involved in the Antioch NAACP and a student group pursuing global peace in the wake of the Second World War. It was while in college that Coretta Scott began to consider herself a pacifist. This position was in line with her religious beliefs. Her peace activism also led Coretta to support Henry Wallace's presidential campaign with the Progressive Party in 1948. The Progressive Party platform included ending segregation, supporting voting rights for blacks, and national health insurance.

After graduating from Antioch with degrees in education and music, Coretta Scott transferred to the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, one of the best in the country, in the fall of 1951. In the break between her first and second semesters, she was encouraged to go on a date with a young, charismatic divinity student from Atlanta. For Coretta, rather than love at first sight, she found Martin King too short, and too forthright in his affection for her. While he was pretty certain they would be married, she was not even sure whether she wanted a second date. Coretta Scott was not a woman without opinions or agency. She would be reflective and make only the decisions she was comfortable with in her mind and spirit.

However, both Coretta and Martin appreciated the other's intellect. Coretta Scott was a woman with well-formed political and moral views. She not only shared those views with Martin King, but she helped shape his ideas. It was Coretta Scott King that first spoke publicly in opposition to the Vietnam War, addressing an anti-war rally at Madison Square Garden in New York City in 1965. "Later that year, she took her husband's place when he changed his mind about addressing a peace rally in Washington, D. C. Asked whether he had educated his wife on these issues, he said, 'She educated me.'" Though the criticisms of his antiwar positions, in his words, "emotionally fatigued" him, Coretta and other black women antiwar activists, such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Diane Nash, and Rosa Parks, "stepped into the breach." "Few black Americans did more to infuse an antiwar ethic into the civil rights movement and a civil rights ethic into the antiwar movement than Coretta Scott King did."

In the two decades before 1965, Coretta Scott King's activist involvement continued to develop and deepen. She already knew Bayard Rustin, for example, by the time Martin met him as a married man. After Coretta Scott became Mrs. Coretta Scott King in June 1953, and Martin Luther King rose to prominence as the head of the Montgomery Improvement Association during the Montgomery

Bus Boycott, Coretta Scott King and other women worked alongside the men of the group doing secretarial tasks—typing, mailing, filing, and responding to phone calls as virtual press secretaries—but she also acted as a sounding board, helping to craft ideas and themes for speeches, and in some cases standing in for her husband. Coretta was not only a loving wife, not only a loving mother, but also a lover of the civil rights and peace movements, and an agitator for racial and economic equality in her own right.

Not only did Coretta Scott King help her husband craft his speeches and sermons, she also fundraised for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) by performing musical concerts. These concerts consisted of classical musical selections. Over time, these concerts evolved into a blend of spirituals and movement songs interspersed with anecdotes that highlighted racial inequality and the need to support SCLC. Mrs. King was also “present at the creation of the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy in 1957 and represented Women’s Strike for Peace at a nuclear-disarmament conference in Geneva in 1962. When [Dr. King] received the Nobel Prize, in 1964, she impressed upon him the role he must play in pursuing world peace. She considered it her burden, as well.”

Throughout their time as a married couple, Coretta Scott King remained steadfast in the pursuit of racial and economic equality, and global peace. That commitment did not diminish after Dr. King’s assassination on April 4, 1968. In fact, Mrs. Scott King rededicated herself to each of these issues; and also folded in others in order to protect and nurture the memories and legacies of Dr. King’s vision of creating the “Beloved Community” here on earth. So much so, that she remained a target of FBI surveillance. After Dr. King’s assassination, the connections Mrs. Scott King continued to forge on behalf of peace and equality around the world concerned the U. S. government. President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger required FBI agents to brief them on Mrs. Scott King’s activities for years after Dr. King’s death.

Coretta Scott King worked diligently to memorialize her husband, through the continuation of the Poor People’s Campaign that had been in the planning before her husband’s death, formation of the King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, and the passage of a national federal holiday—finally signed into law in 1983, and observed in 1986. Through these endeavors and others, Mrs. Scott King worked to keep their vision for a better country and world alive. And through her work and farsightedness, their ideas on nonviolent direct action continued to evolve and be taught to future practitioners from around the world.

Dr. and Mrs. King, as part of the SCLC, began planning the Poor People’s Campaign in the fall of 1967. Marion Wright Edelman, head of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund suggested the idea to Dr. King. He described the

campaign before its launch as, “the beginning of a new co-operation, understanding, and a determination by poor people of all colors and backgrounds to assert and win their right to a decent life and respect for their culture and dignity” (SCLC, 15 March 1968). Many leaders of American Indian, Puerto Rican, Mexican American, and poor white communities pledged themselves to the Poor People’s Campaign.”

“After King’s [assassination](#) in April 1968, SCLC decided to go on with the campaign . . . On Mother’s Day, 12 May 1968, thousands of women, led by Coretta Scott [King](#), formed the first wave of demonstrators. The following day, Resurrection City, a temporary settlement of tents and shacks, was built on the Mall in Washington, D.C. Braving rain, mud, and summer heat, protesters stayed for over a month. “[T]he campaign succeeded in small ways, such as qualifying 200 counties for free surplus food distribution and securing promises from several federal agencies to hire poor people to help run programs for the poor.”

Besides the work to institutionalize her husband’s memory, Coretta Scott King became an internationally renowned peace, women’s rights, and anti-Apartheid activist. Mrs. Scott King also spoke forcefully in favor of LGBT since the late 1970s, and critiqued American capitalism as forcefully as she and Dr. King always had. Mrs. Scott King continued to protest the war in Vietnam through marches, political meetings, and public statements. She always highlighted the role of women in both the civil rights and antiwar movements, arguing that the late 1960s was the time for “woman power.” Women, according to her, were “a force that not only stood to end the war in Vietnam but also, in her estimation, had the potential—the power—to cut the legs out from underneath racism and poverty.”

In the late-1970s, Mrs. Scott King began speaking out against discrimination against the LGBT community. In 1977, Coretta Scott King helped organize the National Women’s Conference in Houston; the first meeting of its kind in the U. S. since the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. Several of the women’s groups in attendance advocated constitutional bans of same-sex marriage. Mrs. Scott King advocated for gay rights in private conversations at the convention, arguing that gays and lesbians had just as much right to legal protections as any other group. She wrote in her memoir, *My Life, My Love, My Legacy*, published in 2017, “I believe unequivocally that discrimination against people because of their sexual orientation is wrong. . . . Racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, and bigotry based on sexual orientation are all forms of intolerance that are unworthy of America as a democracy.” Mrs. Scott King pointed out that gays and lesbians had been present in every civil rights campaign Dr. King had led, and deserved hers and the nation’s support. She continued her advocacy on the part of gay rights publicly and privately throughout the remainder of her life.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Mrs. Scott King through the King Center advocated to end apartheid in South Africa by encouraging corporate divestment of American companies, by using the Center as a forum for political mediation amongst South African political parties, and by visiting the country in 1986 to meet with leaders there, including Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

Until her passing in 2006, Coretta Scott King demonstrated in myriad ways that she was a committed activist for peace and equality. She did not merely follow in the footsteps of her husband, she joined her steps with his, walking beside him, in service to her God and all of humanity. Like many women of the day, Coretta Scott King was expected to be a dutiful mother, satisfying the desires of her husband. Also like many women of the day, she did much more than that, forging a path that was wide enough and deep enough to inspire many others to action. She has not been recognized enough for her contributions to eliminate inequality of all kinds in the U. S. and throughout the world. We should not perpetuate those errors of omission any longer.

*Kristopher Bryan Burrell is Assistant Professor of History at Hostos Community College.*

Related Names: [coretta scott king](#), [Martin Luther King Jr.](#)

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