

A tribute to Coretta Scott King: 1927–2006

Simidele Dosekun



Coretta Scott King, the African-American civil rights activist, passed away on 30 January 2006. Coretta was the wife of the late Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. She became famous around the world as the woman who marched by his side and as the widow who fought to keep his ideals alive after his assassination in 1968. But Coretta was also a social activist and idealist in her own right before and during her marriage to Dr King, and after she was widowed at the early age of 40. Born in 1927 in Alabama, in the deeply segregated American South, Coretta experienced poverty and racial discrimination as a child. Out of this grew a strong commitment to social justice and racial equality. She dedicated her life to the struggle for the freedom of black people at home in the United States and abroad. She also campaigned for the rights of women and children, workers, and gay and lesbian people, among other causes.

Coretta's active involvement in black politics began during her college years. She graduated valedictorian, top of her high-school class in Alabama, and was awarded a scholarship to attend Antioch College in Ohio in 1945, enrolling as one of its few black students two years after her older sister, Edythe, had entered as the first fully sponsored student of colour. Coretta was intellectually stimulated and challenged at Antioch and generally found her fellow students welcoming. Nevertheless, she was sometimes frustrated by their ignorance and assumptions about black people, and by their contradictory perceptions that she was somehow "different" from other blacks, yet at the same time a representative of her race to whom all questions about "her people" could be posed. She became active in the Antioch chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and also served as a member of the college's Race Relations and Civil Liberties Committee.

Such engagement was further spurred by an incident of overt discrimination that reminded Coretta of the degree to which racism structured American society, configuring access and opportunity as much in the seemingly progressive North as in her native South. She was required, as part of her studies, to teach for

a year in a public elementary school, but the school board would not permit this. The student body of the school in question was racially integrated, but the teachers were still all white; Coretta's presence among them would have upset the status quo. Disappointed, Coretta nonetheless grasped that because she was black, she would always have to actively struggle against racism. Moreover, she realised that this struggle or indeed *duty* to struggle could not be just for herself, for her personal aims or advancement, but for all people like her. Later, she was to describe this moment in her autobiography:

I am going to be black the rest of my life, and I have to face these problems [of discrimination]. So I'm not going to let this one get me down. I'll have to accept a compromise now, but I don't accept it as being right. I am going ahead in a more determined way than ever, to do something about this situation. I don't want those who come after me to have to experience the same fate as I did (1993: 41–42).

Thus, even more committed to her beliefs, Coretta left Antioch College in 1951 with a Bachelor of Arts in Music and Education and moved to the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, Massachusetts, to pursue a further degree in concert singing. In 1952, she was introduced to Martin Luther King, Jr, who was studying for a doctorate in theology at Boston University at the time. It was not, according to her description, love at first sight, but she soon came to appreciate that he was a man with whom she deeply shared many ideas and ideals. He acknowledged as much about Coretta in 1967, with the words: "I wish I could say, to satisfy my masculine ego, that I led her down this path [of struggle against racism]. But I must say we went down together, because she was as actively involved and concerned when we met as she is now" (cited in Applebome, 2006). Or, as Coretta was to assert in a 1978 interview: "I didn't learn my commitment from Martin. We just converged at a certain time" (cited in Trescott, 1978).

The two were married in June 1953, after which they moved back South in 1954 to Montgomery, Alabama, where Martin assumed the duties of pastor and Coretta those of "pastor's wife" at a local Baptist church. Their first child, Yolanda Denise, was born shortly thereafter, in 1955. Family life was soon deeply and irrevocably entangled with dramatic political developments in Alabama. In December 1955, a black seamstress, Rosa Parks, made history by refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger on a racially-segregated municipal bus. Her subsequent arrest triggered the famous Montgomery Bus Boycott, led by Martin and strategised from the Kings' home. During the

boycotts, the black community of Montgomery refused to use city buses, and marched and engaged in non-violent acts of protest against racial segregation and discrimination. These actions resulted in the 1956 desegregation of public transport in Alabama by the US Supreme Court. This success catapulted Martin to the forefront of the civil rights struggle. Increasingly, he travelled around the country to speak and lead marches and political gatherings. Coretta accompanied him when family and other duties permitted.

Yet Coretta found it frustrating that she could not be as active in the struggle, in her own right, as she would have liked. Whatever Martin's public comments on his "masculine ego" and gender politics, such as those cited above, Coretta explained that her husband "in many ways had very traditional ideas about women ... He'd say, 'I have no choice, I have to do this, but you haven't been called.' And I said: 'Can't you understand? You know I have an urge to serve just like you have'" (cited in Applebome, 2006). There was thus a certain tension between them concerning how public and active Coretta could or even should be for the cause, as a woman and as Martin's wife. History shows that it was Martin's ideas and notions of familial responsibilities – by 1963, the couple had four children – that ultimately prevailed, limiting the visibility and extent of Coretta's activism relative to her husband.

This is of course not to say that Coretta would necessarily have matched Martin's engagement and leadership if circumstances had permitted her to try. Rather, the point is that in becoming Mrs Martin Luther King, Jr – the wife of a charismatic and high-profile leader and the mother of four – Coretta was obliged to sacrifice a significant degree of her independence of idealism and activism. She could not be on the front lines as often as she wanted; she could neither take nor be granted full ownership of her efforts and engagements for the black cause. Instead, *her* ideas and work were publicly represented as an extension of or complement to her husband's. Publicly she was defined – and defined herself too, it must be noted – as "the wife of Dr King", whether dutifully marching in protest and solidarity by *his* side, speaking in public on *his* behalf, or managing home and hearth when *his* commitments took him away from his family.

Nonetheless, despite the limitations placed on her identity and activism, Coretta did undertake certain independent initiatives in the service of the cause she held dear. On the first anniversary of the Montgomery boycotts in 1956, she joined a group of colleagues to perform in a concert in New York City to raise funds for the boycott movement, the Montgomery Improvement Association

(MIA). She sang some classical pieces, but her innovative idea for the concert was to perform the story of Montgomery and of the Movement for her audience with words and music, interspersing narrative with old Negro spirituals and new freedom songs. This piece was entitled “Portrait of the Montgomery Bus Protest.” Coretta later revisited this concept and developed it further. She decided in 1964 to give a series of “Freedom Concerts”, again using music, prose, poetry and narration to recite the story of the civil rights movement. She described this as “an inspired concept seeking to combine, in dramatic form, art and experience in a practical, relevant, meaningful way” (Scott King, 1993: 230). The idea was to use her musical talent and training to promote the racial equality and understanding to which she was committed, thus combining her two great passions. She performed over 30 concerts to audiences in major cities in the country. The concerts were enthusiastically received, and served not only to raise awareness of the struggle for non-racialism, but also to raise funds for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), an organisation which her husband had formed to fight against all forms of racism and promote non-violence. In her biography, Coretta tells that Martin was at first sceptical about her plans to raise money for the SCLC in this way, but was forced to admit his error after her first show in New York in 1964 brought in over six thousand dollars (1993: 232).

In the 1960s, Coretta became involved in broader causes and actions not directly related to the civil rights movement. She became a sought-after speaker on her own merits, and was invited to make speeches from diverse platforms, including anti-war rallies. She was asked in 1962 by the Women’s Strike for Peace to join the American delegation to the International Disarmament Conference in Geneva, Switzerland, to lobby for a ban on nuclear testing. Coretta also joined the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, convinced that “the women of the world, united without any regard for national or racial divisions, [could] become a most powerful force for international peace” (Scott King 1993: 193). Indeed, recognising that peace and freedom were intricately linked, Coretta was drawn to the anti-Vietnam protest movement at a time when her husband was fully concentrated on the black struggle. She urged him to speak out against American imperialism and aggression in Vietnam; for strategic reasons, he was initially reluctant to do so, but by 1967, he too had come to appreciate the political and moral urgency of the matter, and took his wife’s advice.

When Martin was murdered the next year, Coretta’s immediate public

priority was to sustain his work and legacy. The first thing she did was to lead a march in his place for workers in Memphis, Tennessee, the very city in which he had been assassinated, just four days after his death. “Because his task was not finished,” she explained, “I felt that I must re-dedicate myself to the completion of his work ... [so that] his death would have served the redemptive purpose which he talked about so often” (Scott King 1993: 304). To this end, Coretta went on to found The Martin Luther King, Jr Center for Non-violent Social Change in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1968. Its mission was (and is) to promote the non-violent ethos her husband lived by, and to advance the causes of social justice and equality he died for. It was the first nationally recognised institution built in honour of an African-American in the US. Coretta also campaigned long and hard to establish her husband’s birthday as a national holiday in the US, so that the history of the oppression of black people and their struggle in that country would always be publicly remembered. This holiday became law in 1986 amidst much political controversy; once again, it was the first time that such a federal honour had been accorded in memory of an African-American citizen.

Coretta spent the rest of her life as a spokeswoman and activist for a broad range of causes. In 1974, she formed the Full Employment Action Council, a coalition of over 100 civil society organisations whose aim was to advocate for progressive national policy on full employment. She mobilised over 800 human rights organisations to form the Coalition of Conscience in 1983, which sponsored the largest-ever march on Washington at the time, demanding jobs, peace and freedom for all. Although these were among her more high-profile activities, Coretta spent the greater proportion of her time and energies in later life promoting her message of peace and equality at a more grassroots level, by meeting and speaking to diverse activist and advocacy groups in the United States – and by publicly naming and speaking out against social injustice whenever and wherever she saw it.

Coretta also took an active interest in international politics. She and her husband had always drawn a link between the black struggle for rights and equality in the US and the struggle for independence in colonial Africa, and felt a moral and cultural kinship with Africans. They first visited Africa in 1957 at the moment of Ghana’s independence from colonial rule, and publicly supported other liberation movements on the continent. In now infamous scenes from 1985, Coretta and three of her children were arrested outside the South African Embassy in Washington DC for gathering to protest against apartheid. The

next year, she travelled to South Africa to gain a better understanding of the situation under apartheid, and to meet Winnie Mandela (then the wife of jailed anti-apartheid icon, Nelson Mandela). On her return home, she continued to put pressure on US President Reagan to sanction the apartheid government. In 1990, Coretta served as the chairperson of the Atlanta Committee which hosted Nelson and Winnie Mandela on their first trip to the US after his release from prison; later, she stood by Nelson Mandela's side as he celebrated victory in the 1994 democratic elections in South Africa. She was recognised at her funeral by Adelaide Tambo, the South African anti-apartheid activist and wife of ANC leader Oliver Tambo, as "an outstanding and honoured fellow combatant for the freedom of black people everywhere and the building of a just world order" (2006).

Despite Coretta's long list of activities and accolades, some critics have argued that in the final analysis, her greatest achievement was to marry Martin – because all that she did came from and referred back to their connection. It is certainly true that Coretta's fame and influence first derived from her position as Martin's wife. It is also true that Coretta spent the decades after her husband's death working in, for and from his name and memory. It is indeed difficult to find public representations of Coretta in which she is not cast primarily in terms of her late husband – as "the wife," "the widow," "the first lady" of the civil rights movement, and so on.

Yet, arguably, the very pervasiveness and persistence of such representations suggest that in order to assess the public life of a woman such as Coretta Scott King, it is necessary to consider how and why a woman's identity may be discursively reduced to that of her husband's, and if she may even be complicit in such a reduction. The constant identification of Coretta in terms of her husband also signals a need to consider what it must have actually *meant* and *taken* for her as an individual to live out this identity publicly, no doubt burdened but honoured by her husband's legacy, limited but empowered by his name. In looking at what Coretta ultimately made of her public identity as the wife and the widow of the most visible leader of the civil rights movement in America, it perhaps becomes clearer where her own legacy and contributions lie. Despite the public pressures placed upon her, despite her personal tragedy, she was a woman who remained constant and active in her commitment to racial equality and social justice around the world.

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Simidele Dosekun

is a Nigerian Master's student at the African Gender Institute, University of Cape Town, South Africa.