Coretta Scott King and Betty Shabazz: Coming Out From the Shadow of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X

Master's Thesis
North American Studies
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August 20, 2018
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Introduction

The struggle for black civil rights was one in which both men and women participated. Even though at first success seemed unlikely, the "movement" ultimately was very successful. It is difficult to determine who deserved the most credit for the great legislative achievements that succeeded the grassroots protests and actions by African-Americans in the period from the mid 1950s until 1968. As historian J. Todd Moye points out, "the multiple black freedom struggles we know as the collective 'civil rights movement' was a stew with hundreds of ingredients and thousands of cooks" (2). Nevertheless, until recently the role of women in the civil rights movement was often overlooked. This might have to do with the fact that, especially in the first decade of the movement, women were undervalued compared to their male counterparts, although they contributed in many ways. In her book about women in the civil rights movement, women's historian Sara Evans explains that by 1964 African-American women gradually began to refuse the "relegation to traditional sex roles" (*Personal* 83). As a result, women gained more power in various civil rights organizations, such as the Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee (SNCC), in which many women were active (*Personal* 83, 84). This was of course a gradual process and, as Evans points out, "frequently women were important but invisible" (*Personal* 111). In the past twenty or so years, however, an increasing number of scholars have researched the role of women in the civil rights movement. This has offered a more complete picture of the civil rights movement and gender relationships within the movement, even though there are many African-American activists of the civil rights era left whose roles and accomplishments are yet to be studied.

Two African-American women who deserve more scholarly attention are Coretta Scott King (1927-2006) and Betty Shabazz (1934-1997). King and Shabazz shared a similar experience that impacted their lives significantly: they both lost a famous husband in the struggle for black civil rights. Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. were killed in 1965 and

1968, respectively. Widows King and Shabazz were left behind with their children, taking upon themselves the responsibility of preserving their husbands' legacies, while at the same time carving out careers for themselves in order to support their children. Even though they had different social backgrounds, they were both strong-willed women with their own visions and plans to which they held on despite the traditional gender norms in the communities to which they belonged. In this thesis, I want to investigate what role Coretta Scott King and Betty Shabazz played in the advancement of social justice, both during their marriage and after their husbands' deaths and how this role was influenced by their very different social and economic backgrounds.

Even though there are numerous academic studies about the civil rights movement in general, there are also specific works about the roles and developments of women in the struggle for black rights that are important as a starting point for my research project on King and Shabazz. The book *Sisters in the Struggle* (2001), edited by Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin, partly a primary source and partly a secondary source, for example, is a collection of essays written by both female civil rights activists, such as Rosa Parks and Dorothy Height, and by female scholars who have conducted extensive research in the field. Other scholarly books about women's roles in the movement are Barbara Ransby's and J. Todd Moye's biographies about Ella Baker, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement* (2003), and *Ella Baker: Community Organizer of the Civil Rights Movement* (2013), respectively. There is also Lynne Olson's, *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement* (2001), and Belinda Robnett's, *How Long? How Long? African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (2000). An earlier key work is Vicki L. Crawford's and Jacqueline Anne Rouse's *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965* (1993). Together, these works demonstrate that women often played leadership roles not only in local activist groups but that they also worked along with

male leaders in national organizations like SNCC. As her biographers have pointed out, Ella Baker, for example, was the chief strategist of SNCC and a mentor to younger male and female civil rights activists.

There are several reasons why I have chosen to compare Coretta Scott King and Betty Shabazz. Since Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X were the two most important black leaders in the civil rights era, extensive research has been conducted on their lives and careers, but even the biographies of the men barely mention their wives. Even within studies of women in the movement, Coretta Scott King and Betty Shabazz are marginalized or even ignored. Scholars currently focus more on grassroots civil rights activists that are unknown, while, ironically, the women linked to the original, prominent leaders seem to be 'forgotten.' This sparked my interest to learn more about the lives of these women, their own activism, and their attempts to carve out (public) careers for themselves. I chose to compare the two women because, to my knowledge, there has not been a sustained comparative academic study of Coretta Scott King and Betty Shabazz. A comparison between Coretta and Betty is especially interesting because of their different backgrounds. While Coretta was raised in a middle-class family in rural Alabama, Betty was a working-class woman from Detroit. They went to very different kinds of universities and had different career goals, but both had the ambition to be more than the wife (and later widow) of a famous husband. Moreover, while a great part of the studies about women's roles investigates the period from the civil rights movement on, I am particularly interested in the way the way their very different social and regional backgrounds shaped their lives and career choices before the civil rights movement started in the mid-1950s.

Even though Coretta and Betty had very divergent backgrounds, they both were well-educated young women. Whereas Coretta studied music at a prestigious white college and was groomed for a marriage with a doctor or minister, indicating her black middle-class

aspirations, the lower-class Betty studied at a historically black college with the aim of having an actual career to support herself. However, both largely had to give up their ambitions when they married, though Coretta was more closely involved in her husband's work, in a way that was an extension of her own civil rights activism as a college student. After the deaths of their husbands, both women were able to carve out a career for themselves, which enabled them to provide for themselves and their children. Both widows were dedicated to preserving the legacies of their husbands. However, while Coretta made a career out of that dedication, Betty, who had fewer resources than Coretta, went back to school, earned a doctorate degree, and had an academic career. Whereas Coretta had a highly public profile, Betty was more reserved and private, though she later had her own local radio show.

In my investigation of the often-overlooked lives, ambitions, and careers of Coretta Scott King and Betty Shabazz, I have used primary as well as secondary sources. The primary sources that I consulted are mostly autobiographical works by Coretta and Betty. Coretta wrote two autobiographies, one right after Martin's death in 1968, while the second one was posthumously published in 2017. Betty only wrote a handful of autobiographical essays and book chapters. Besides these sources, I have used videotaped interviews and those published in print, as well as newspaper articles about her. These primary sources are important, because most of them convey Coretta and Betty's ideas and those of their family members and close friends. Besides these autobiographical accounts I have also made use of secondary sources in order to compare and examine narratives and events from different angles.

The most important secondary sources that I have used are biographies about Coretta and Betty, but also about Martin and Malcolm. One important difference between these biographies is that in the case of Coretta and Betty, the biographies give a lot of insights into all aspects of their lives, but also partly into those of their husbands. In contrast, biographies about Martin and Malcolm merely refer to Coretta and Betty in relation to their husbands,

largely ignoring their roles outside the family and household. Taylor Branch, for example, wrote three volumes that cover the different periods of what he calls the "King years." Due to its purportedly complete and comprehensive nature, one would expect that at least some attention would be paid to Coretta's role in the civil rights movement, but this was not the case. Furthermore, I have consulted scholarly articles and books about relevant subjects that add to an understanding of women in the civil rights movement in general, and specifically of Coretta and Betty – for instance, the history of the Mount Zion Episcopal Church, which played an important role in Coretta's childhood and adolescence and the history and ideology of the Nation of Islam, in the case of Betty.

This thesis is divided into two chapters. The first one is devoted to Coretta Scott King and the second one to Betty Shabazz. Each chapter will start with their family, social-economic, and educational background. In the second part of each chapter I will discuss Coretta and Betty's lives as wives and mothers and their struggle to forge a public role for themselves in the shadow of their more famous husbands. In the third part of the chapters I will discuss Coretta and Betty's lives as widows, focusing on the careers and public roles they carved out for themselves after their husbands' death.

Chapter One: Coretta Scott King

Coretta Scott King (1927-2006) was determined to make a change in the world. Growing up in a middle-class family in the rural south, in Perry County in Alabama, where segregation left a major imprint on the lives of black people, Coretta decided early on that the struggle for black rights was a task she would take on herself. Her parents had instilled in her a racial pride and the confirmation that black people were inherently equal to white people. That is also why her parents encouraged Coretta to aspire to a life that would resemble as closely as possible that of an average white middle-class woman. Music played an important role for Coretta who loved to sing and use her voice in the struggle for black rights. She fought for social justice throughout her entire life. Even though as a mother and supportive wife she had to sacrifice certain things – such as limiting the time she could give to public musical performances and to the pursuit of her own career as a social activist - she never stopped fighting for black rights. After Martin's death, Coretta found a mission and a career in keeping his legacy alive, but also in fighting for other causes she deemed important.

I used different sources for this chapter, such as Coretta's two autobiographies, her papers that are available on the King Center's website, biographies about Coretta and Martin, interviews, newspaper and scholarly articles, and more general studies of the civil rights movement and the Second Feminist Wave era. Her autobiographies are the main primary sources and are valuable, because Coretta writes about all aspects of her life in detail, from her childhood to her life with Martin up until 1968 in her first autobiography, and from her childhood to the last period of her life in her second autobiography. The insights into her younger years up until the moment she met Martin are especially valuable, since this is not extensively covered in other literature, where the focus is mainly on the period from the civil rights movement on.

1. Growing Up in a Segregated America: Coretta's Formative Years

1.1 Childhood

Coretta Scott King's parents and (great-)grandparents and the social milieu in which she grew up had a formative impact on her. Whereas most African Americans during the Reconstruction Era and later in the Jim Crow South lived in poverty as sharecroppers, Coretta's ancestors were able to work themselves out of slavery into the rural, landowning black middle-class and helped build strong communities. Coretta's great-grandfather Willis was a former field slave in Alabama (Bagley and Hilley 3). When the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution was finally formally ratified by the Alabama legislature, ending slavery, Willis found himself a free man (5). Since slaves did not have an official surname, he decided to take on the last name of his former owner and was now called Willis Scott. He worked on a farm that the white landowner rented out to former slaves through a sharecropping arrangement. By 1880, however, he had managed to own a farm in the northern section of Perry County near the town of Heiberger, Alabama. It was on this farm that his son Jefferson Scott, Coretta's grandfather, was born and raised and where Coretta's parents raised their children (5).

Jefferson Scott, who was born in 1873, and his wife Cora earned enough money with selling pine timber from his father's land to buy a farm of their own in Perry County, Alabama. One of the few black landowners, Jeff Scott became an influential man in the black farm community he lived in. Coretta explains in her autobiography *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1969) that by the time she got to know her grandfather, "he owned three hundred acres of land and was an important man in that rural black community." He either "led or played an important role in everything" that concerned the "uplift" of people in the community (19). He was, for example, the "preacher's steward" and "chairman of the board of trustees" of the local church, as well as of the Mount Tabor African Methodist Episcopal

(A.M.E.) Zion Church, supervisor of the Sunday school, and church secretary (19; Bagley and Hilley 8). In her co-written biography of Coretta, titled *Desert Rose* (2012), Coretta's sister Edythe Scott Bagley writes that their grandfather purposely sought positions of power in the community because he was "determined to give his children and grandchildren a better life and did not shrink from using his influence for that purpose" (Bagley and Hilley 8). He was also responsible for Sunday school programs "in all churches within [their] region" (8). Outside of the church realm, he was "chairman of the board of trustees of Crossroads School," the elementary school that "served three African American communities" in the northern section of Perry County and that Coretta would later attend (8). His positions of power distinguished him from most other black men of the time. Many blacks were illiterate and culturally isolated, but Grandfather Scott "attended church conferences in distant places" and was a strong leader. When he died in 1941, Edythe recounts, Jeff Scott was remembered "as a most remarkable man." She also claims that it was from him that Coretta "acquired an interest in the broader issues of the day and a cosmopolitan perspective that guided her throughout life" (9).

Coretta's grandmother Cora Scott passed away before Coretta was born, but in her autobiography she writes that it was said that Cora "was the real inspiration behind the success of Jeff Scott," and that she was a "woman of unusual strength and drive," a character trait which reminded Coretta's mother of Coretta (*My Life* 20). Like her husband, Cora was also determined to make sure that her children would have a better life than she had (Bagley and Hilley 7).

Coretta's maternal grandfather, Martin McMurry, also made his way up out of slavery. Martin was born in 1862 just before the Emancipation Proclamation and was the son of a slave woman and a white slaveholder. Despite his light skin color, Edythe remembers, Grandfather McMurry "had the heart and soul of a proud black man," and taught his children

"to love the race of their black ancestors" (Bagley and Hilley 10). Like Grandfather Scott, Grandfather McMurry was an influential man in the community in Perry County. However, whereas the former traveled all over the country and attended or spoke at meetings of the organizations he was affiliated with, the latter was more bound to home and never owned a vehicle to travel far. As Coretta explains, "his activities were confined to [their] immediate community and church" (*My Life* 20). Nevertheless, both grandfathers were remarkable in that, unlike the vast majority of African Americans in the South, they owned the land on which they worked. As Edythe points out, aspiring African American families such as the Scotts and McMurrys saw the "ownership of land as the prerequisite to independence and middle-class status, and they were willing to struggle and sacrifice in order to acquire it for themselves and their families" (Bagley and Hilley 14). Indicative of the family's middle-class status, "Grandmother McMurry was a housewife, who was mostly occupied with taking care of her eight children, sewing, cooking, gardening, and animal husbandry" (Bagley and Hilley 9).

Coretta was born on April 27, 1927, and grew up on the farm in Perry County that belonged to her grandfather. She lived here together with her older sister Edythe, her younger brother Obadiah, and her parents. The house in which they lived was built by her father, Obadiah Scott, in 1920 when he married her mother, Bernice McMurry Scott (*My Life* 18). Compared with other black families of the time, the Scotts were fairly well-off. Coretta explains that they owned items such as an "unusual collection of records" and a "Victrola" (phonograph), and they were fortunate enough to have a well in the backyard which furnished water for their large family the year around (*My Life* 18, 19).

Her father, Obadiah Scott, directly and indirectly taught Coretta a lot of things that shaped her view of life. It was through him that she learned about racial injustice and was inspired to fight social injustice. The only black person who possessed a truck in the

community, Obadiah was constantly harassed by white men who believed a black man should not be able to have a job that they felt was reserved for white men only (Turk 11). At one time, his sawmill was burned down just a couple of days after he had refused to sell it to a white man who told him that "a black man wasn't supposed to operate his own business" (11). In her autobiography, Coretta recounts that he was often stopped on the road by white men who cursed and threatened to kill him (King, *My Life* 25). Although he never could be sure whether he would come home alive, Obadiah was a courageous man who never gave up and who did not let fear dominate his life. He always showed his "strong will and determination" and strove to be more successful in his business (Vivian 30). As Coretta explains, "He never ran away, and I am sure that is why he survived. He would stand up to them quietly and respectfully. My father used to say, 'If you look a white man in the eye, he can't hurt you.' […] I learned very early to live with fear for the people I loved. It was good training, for I have lived that way most of my life" (*My Life* 25). This approach to life and to her goals is something that helped Coretta significantly in her later life as a wife, mother, and as a fighter for black civil rights.

Besides learning a lot from her family, Coretta's character also contributed to her eventually becoming a civil rights activist. Her independence and strong character were already noticeable from a very young age. Edythe remarks that Coretta was always busy as a child, taking on too heavy physical tasks and demanding that she help her grandfather "chop cotton and hoe the corn" (Bagley and Hilley 53). Coretta never hesitated to let people know exactly where she stood and did not let go whenever she had an argument with someone (56). Calling her "curious and confident," "positive, direct, and persistent," Edythe explains that Coretta was always the one who stood up for her older sister when she was bullied by other children. Coretta had an "uncontrollable temper," loved to "run, jump, and climb," and was a "fighter who believed in striking first" (55). The strong character she thus developed helped

her achieve her goals in her life and career.

1.2 Segregation

Growing up in the 1930s in the segregated South also significantly shaped Coretta's personality and experience as a black woman. Even though she grew up in a segregated society, her mother always made sure to minimize and compensate for the effects segregation had on her children. However, it was not always possible for her mother to protect Coretta. At school, for example, the effects of segregation were clearly felt. Crossroads School received financial support from a charity called the Rosenwald Fund and this made the school somewhat more "comfortable, functional, and aesthetically appealing than rural schools for blacks in [their] area that had been built solely with public funds" (Bagley and Hilley 54). Coretta thought it unfair that black children could only attend school seven months of the year, in contrast to white children who attended nine months (7). There were two black teachers at Crossroad School (there were no white teachers). In her autobiography, Coretta remembers one of them, Mrs. Mattie Bennett, as "especially dedicated" and encouraging (*My Life* 31). Mrs. Bennett soon discovered Coretta's passion for singing and often let her lead the class in singing, sing solos, or recite poems (31). These musical and oratorical activities were only a modest start of what would soon become a major part of her life and career.

Not only segregation at school, but also segregation in her social life had far-reaching effects on Coretta. Seeing how white children were brought to school by bus, while she and other black children had to walk long distances to get there, was a painful experience for her (King, *My Life* 30). Even though Coretta was "protected from the extreme hardships of segregation" by her family, she was always aware "of being deprived of the rights to which [she] was entitled" (26). Her early sensitivity to social injustice strengthened her will to fight for justice and black rights.

1.3 Church and a Strong Local Community

In spite of the racial injustices that taught Coretta the harsh sides of life, she stressed that her early experiences of social life in the black community were "happy" (*My Life* 27). Two interrelated factors were responsible for this: church attendance and activities and feeling part of a close-knit, black community. The largest part of her social life as a child and teenager took place at the Mount Tabor A.M.E. Zion Church where she attended services every Sunday (27). For her it was a "warm and heartening experience" to be at church with her family, especially with her grandfathers as leaders of the community, and she called it "the largest and most important part of [her] world" (29, 30). The time she spent at church also played a founding role for her later career as a musician, especially in her teenage years when she served as choir director and did special music programs with children (Turk 14). Thus, despite being part of an oppressed community and becoming more and more aware of the devastating effects segregation had on black families, Coretta grew up in a warm and loving family that always tried to protect her from injustices, and in a supportive black community.

The A.M.E. Zion Church that played such a prominent role in Coretta's life has an interesting history. The founding of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church goes back to 1821 when some black churchmen from Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, and New Jersey gathered together and formally merged themselves as the African Methodist Episcopal Church (Campbell 13). Six years later, an independent denomination of this church was founded by New Yorkers (13). They called themselves the A.M.E. Zion Church. In the early nineteenth century, Bishop Richard Allen of the A.M.E. Zion Church in New York and his fellow ministers lived in "a world of revolution and reaction, of expansive liberalism and intensifying racism" (20). "Racial proscription" produced a need among African-Americans to build autonomous institutions which served as spiritual, social, and economic resources and places where they were free from humiliation by white people in white institutions (20).

James T. Campbell explains that two of the Church's goals were to defend the black Americans' right to become first-class citizens, and to have their own separate black churches (20). Campbell concludes that "African Americans shared a basic empathy that provided a foundation for collective uplift" (20). In a book devoted to the doctrines and disciplines of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, published in 1817, it is written that its purpose was to "have a form of Discipline, whereby we may guide our people in the fear of God, in the unity of the Spirit, and in the bonds of peace, and preserve us from that spiritual despotism which we have so recently experienced" (Allen and Tapsico 8, 9).[1] The book also lists multiple guidelines and rules that members had to follow. For example, meetings should be at least once a week, and should start with a song or a prayer at the exact hour, and allow members "to speak, each of us in order, freely and plainly the true state of our souls, with the faults we have committed in tempers, words, or actions, and the temptations we have felt since our last meeting" (106). It was in this spirit that decades later, Coretta's Grandfather Scott joined and engaged in leadership roles in the Zion Church, as did eventually Coretta and her parents.

In her autobiography, Coretta describes how her Grandfather Scott opened the Sunday School service at the Zion Church singing a hymn (*My Life* 27). They first prayed in a larger group, but after that everyone went to their own classes where they were told stories from the bible and learned the catechism (27), "a form of instruction, especially of religious doctrine, taught by means of questions and answers, containing a summary or principles" (Discipline Codification Commission n.p.). As the Mount Tabor Zion Church in her area did not have the finances to hire a full-time minister, her two grandfathers would serve as leaders every other week on Sundays (28). For Coretta "church was a warm and heartening experience" with her

[1] This is just an excerpt of the mission statement which can be found in its entirety on page 8 and 9.

grandfathers leading the community and with her family and friends near her, and she called it "the largest and most important part" of her world in childhood (29, 30).

1.4 Education and Coretta's Growing Interest in Music

Even though it was not easy for black people at that time to obtain a good education, the Scotts attached great importance to it. Coretta's mother was determined to get her children to go to Lincoln High School in Marion, Alabama, because of its solid academic reputation, and because black and white teachers worked together to secure the best possible education for their all-black student population (Turk 12). The Scotts had to save each penny to be able to pay for the school's expenses, but they managed. Since the school was too far away to walk, Bernice arranged that Coretta and Edythe could live with a black family in Marion (13). When Coretta was a junior, the county decided to pay the transportation costs for rural students and from then on Mrs. Scott drove the children to school in a truck that Mr. Scott had transformed into a school bus (13).

In her autobiography, Coretta remarks that her education at Lincoln School was very important in helping her prepare for her later life as Martin Luther King's wife (*My Life* 35). Her experience at Lincoln opened many worlds for her, music being the most important one. When she was asked to train the Junior Choir in her church, Coretta began to develop her leadership skills (36). Her sister Edythe points out that Coretta learned from one of her favorite teachers, Miss Williams, how she could use music to establish harmonious relationships with other people. Coretta learned the "mollifying effect music had on racial tensions" (Bagley and Hilley 65).

Coretta applied and was admitted to Antioch College, a prestigious and predominantly white college in Ohio, in 1945, two years after her sister Edythe was enrolled as the first African-American student at the college. In an autobiographical article that I found in the

digital archive on the Antioch College website, titled, "Why I Came to College," Coretta explains why she was determined to go college. She observed that the most respected African-American women in her community were the few who were college graduates. Coretta saw that they had more freedom than other people in her community; they went on trips, visited cities, and were better informed about current affairs. "I concluded that the difference between them and other people I knew – who seemed to me equally good people – lay in their educations. Because of these differences, I decided that I had to go to college myself" (King, "Why I Came to College").

In her autobiography, Coretta writes that her time at Antioch was a life-changing experience (*My Life* 39). She explains that the "feeling of race superiority" and the "myths about black people" had made the white Antioch students "products of a society infested with racism" (39). The false presumptions about her race that she was incessantly confronted with certainly played a role in her growing desire to do something about it. This feeling was further reinforced when Coretta became the first black student to major in elementary education, which required two years of teaching. She taught music at Antioch college the first year, but was denied the opportunity to teach at the public elementary school in Yellow Springs for her second year of teaching. When the president of Antioch refused to appeal to the school board after Coretta asked for help, the only possibility left for her was to teach another year at Antioch college (*My Life* 41). She did not let it get her down, however, and said to herself that even though she had to make a compromise now, she would not accept it as being right (41).

Coretta joined the Antioch chapter of the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), was active in the Race Relations and Civil Liberties committees, and participated in political and peace activities at Antioch (King, *My Life* 42; King, "Address"). The Antioch experience helped her to "reaffirm and deepen the values which [she] had already acquired during [her] childhood and adolescence, in [her] parents' home and

at Lincoln High School" (42). The year after she graduated from Antioch, she met the almost two years younger Martin Luther King, then an ambitious graduate student at Boston University's School of Theology, whom she married in June 1953.

Even though Coretta's musical education helped her during her time as an activist, it did not really prepare her for an actual career as, for example, a nurse or a teacher. Coretta was an accomplished musician, but to make a career of it and to become a successful musician, she would have had to possess an extraordinary talent, especially as an African-American woman in the 1940s. Even for middle-class white women in that period a college education primarily served to enable them to develop intellectually so they could help advance their (future) husbands' careers; the goal was not to prepare women for a career of their own. Antioch was a 'white' school that was among the first that started offering education to people of color in the beginning of the 1940s ("Mission"). After her sister Edythe, in 1945 Coretta was the second colored woman who studied at Antioch. Her choice to move from the segregated South to study in the North indicates her upwardly mobile aspirations. However, the fact that in her second year Coretta was rejected when she wanted to do a teaching internship at a local white public elementary school indicates that race was still of overriding importance. This rejection hindered her career options. Nevertheless, an African-American woman studying among only white people, her sister not counted, was uncommon and illustrates Coretta's middle-class aspirations. A newspaper article from the Dayton *Daily News* features a 1945 photograph of Coretta among only white students, which has been on display in the Antioch college library since 2006. [2]

[2] http://www.mydaytondailynews.com/news/local/did-you-know-this-civil-rights-icon-earned-her-degree-from-area-college/6BNkpbARH8rTpelU1TYRdO/.

2. Gender Roles: Combining Family Life and Career

2.1 Betty Friedan: The Feminine Mystique

In her groundbreaking book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan critiqued the way women in the 1950s were expected to devote their lives as wives, mothers and housekeepers. She coined the phrase "The Problem That Has No Name" to refer to the emotional response to the conditions that married women in the 1950s faced: a gnawing feeling of dissatisfaction and yearning (5). Friedan encouraged women to reject a life merely filled with household tasks and taking care of their family and seek a more fulfilling life beyond domestic activities. In Friedan's own words, women do "not have to choose between marriage and career," but should be allowed to "combine marriage and motherhood and even the kind of lifelong personal purpose that once was called 'career'. She even maintained that women who adjust to being only housewives, or who want to be housewives, were similar to the people in concentration camps "who walked to their own death" (247).

Even though Friedan's work was valuable and stirred the Second Feminist Wave, her analysis has clear limitations. The most important limitation is that she only wrote from the perspective of white middle-class women, thereby ignoring the existence of lower-class white women and women of color. African-American feminist bell hooks writes that Friedan "made her plight and the plight of white women like herself synonymous with a condition affecting all American women. In so doing, she deflected attention away from her classism, her racism, her sexist attitudes towards the masses of American women. […] Friedan makes clear that the women she saw as victimized by sexism were college-educated white women who were compelled by sexist conditioning to remain in the home" (n.p.). Although Friedan's theory is not applicable to Betty Shabazz's situation, it is to Coretta's. The very fact that, as an African-American, Coretta had middle-class aspirations can be viewed as an act of protest against white gender and social norms. She was a middle-class, educated African-American woman

who climbed the social ladder and who had certain liberties as a black middle-class wife of a prominent leader. Also, the link Friedan controversially makes between housewives and people in a concentration camp is certainly not applicable to Coretta's situation. The support that she gave to her husband was exactly what middle-class women were educated for. Her situation was almost the same as those of white women, but Coretta also preserved a part of her life for only herself, for example by giving performances and raising money. These points indicate the limitations and incompleteness of Friedan's analysis.

2.2 Coretta's Marriage and Partnership with Martin

Coretta and Martin's marriage was troubled at times. On the one hand, Coretta insisted on equality in marriage. On the other hand, however, she followed Martin in everything he did, adjusted herself and her choices to what was required for his mission and career, and took on a supportive role. In a telegram she sent to Charles Sanders after twelve years of marriage in 1964, Coretta writes that she realized at the time that being married to a young preacher would interfere with her wish of becoming a concert singer. Eventually, however, she was at peace with it, because she believed that "God had meant for [them] to be together" (Coretta's Personal Story). Martin had a more traditional view of marriage: he expected Coretta to give up her career, while he provided for his family (King, *My Life* 88). Coretta accepted this and obeyed him. In her autobiography, she said that it was an "adjustment" that she had to make (88). First and foremost, she was a mother, which she said was the most meaningful and important thing in her life. She spent most of her time raising her children and keeping house, identifying herself as a "pastor's wife" who aimed to fulfil her duties that belonged to this role in the best way possible. She supported Martin and helped him with certain tasks, and felt that where Martin went she needed to follow.

However, Coretta acknowledged Martin's "ambivalent attitude toward the role of women" (King, *My Life* 57). Martin thought that women were equals to men and should be able to hold "positions of authority and influence" (58). Yet, she explains, when it came to his own marriage, he wanted his wife to be a homemaker and a mother of his children who waited for him at home (58). On the other hand, he did encourage Coretta to be active outside of the home and was glad whenever she could fill in for him (58). Martin put most of his time and energy in the movement, while leaving Coretta in charge of all domestic matters. His biographer David Garrow observes that "all of that selflessness might be commendable in a famous public figure, but King's version brought no pleasure to his own family" (182). The few times Martin was at home, he would be occupied with making phone calls or other business-related matters (Garrow 260). "I tried to carry on the family as best I could and not bother him about many of the problems", Coretta recalled, but according to Garrow this "lack of sharing resulted in tensions and resentments" (260).[3] Also, contrary to Coretta's saying that she always felt involved, Garrow argues that she "increasingly felt left out of much of her husband's life" (341). He cites a quote by Coretta commenting to a reporter, "I'm usually at home, because my husband says, 'You have to take care of the children'" (341). Another time she told an interviewer that she wished to be "more a part of it [the movement]" (Garrow 416). In her second autobiography, however, Coretta contradicts her earlier statement and writes that she did feel involved and that if she was not marching, she was somewhere else either filling in for Martin or on other public occasions (King, *My Life, My Love* 139, 150).

Perhaps because Coretta never entirely gave up the idea of a career during her marriage with Martin, she was able to carve one out for herself after his death in 1968. Six months into their marriage in 1954, they moved from Boston to Montgomery for Martin to become a minister at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. She followed Martin, but knew that it

[3] According to Garrow, the FBI had tapes of Martin heard engaged in sex with another woman (410-413). Coretta has always denied the accusations against Martin, however, and wrote in her autobiography that she never thought that "any affairs took place" (King, *My Life, My Love*, 130).

would diminish her own career opportunities. Yet, she wrote later, "despite my intentions to carve out a low-key role as a pastor's wife, my role quickly evolved into more of a collaborative partnership with Martin" (54). She described herself as a "colleague, wife, co-worker and friend" (Tucker). Coretta's contributions to the movement increased rapidly. Their partnership started during the successful Montgomery Bus Boycott and the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1956-57, but developed throughout their marriage. Once, when Martin told Coretta, "You see, I am called [by God], and you aren't," she replied, "I have always felt that I have a call on my life, too. I've been called by God, too, to do something" (King, *My Life, My Love* 97). As Vicky Crawford explains, Coretta's life was not "forced submission to male authority, but a carefully thought out decision to complement her husband's work" (111).

A clear shift can be observed briefly before the bus boycott when Coretta's supportive role was replaced by a more independent one: she became a fund-raiser for the Montgomery Improvement Association (King, *My Life, My Love* 70). This was a crucial moment in Coretta's life, and for her career in particular, for two main reasons. First, it was the moment when Coretta started singing and giving performances again, discovering a role for herself independently from Martin. Secondly, it marked the time when Coretta realized the significance of the movement. The boycott was very successful, and received worldwide news coverage. As Coretta recounts, "I felt that we were part of a great drama unfolding on the stage of history. It was what I had been prepared for all my life, and a great sense of fulfillment came over me" (King, *My Life, My Love* 72).

Growing up in a segregated society already instilled in Coretta a will to fight against social injustices. As Ellis Cose concludes in a newspaper article, "Born poor in segregated Alabama, she was already an accomplished singer and activist when King met her in 1952." When she was invited to perform among great stars at a big benefit concert that was organized

in 1956 by a group called In Friendship (founded by activists, among whom Ella Baker) to raise funds for "victims of economic reprisals in the South (King, *My Life, My Love* 70), different elements came together: Coretta's new role within the movement, the start of a partnership with Martin, and the beginning of her own career as a musical performer and activist.

After the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Coretta's role expanded and she struggled with making the right choices. In her recently, posthumously published second autobiography, *My Life, My Love, My Legacy* (2017), Coretta describes her dilemma:

> Could I continue my career as a concert singer? Should I be expected to become a public speaker? How could I balance being there for Martin *and* being home with the children *and* being deeply involved in the movement? How could I compartmentalize myself in so many ways and still hold on to the corner of my life that belonged strictly to Coretta? (73).

On March 9, 1958, Coretta was asked to "deliver the annual Women's Day Address at the new Hope Baptist Church in Denver, Colorado" (King, *My Life, My Love* 85). On the night of the actual speech a month later in April, she for the first time "publicly gave voice to the vision and path" she believed God had intended for her (86). It was from that time on that – besides giving concerts – she "more and more" served as public speaker, both standing in for Martin and on separate occasions (97). At the Freedom Concert in 1962, for example, she combined singing and speaking, which was "less taxing on [her] voice" than her usual repertoire (98). The Freedom Concert tour she participated in, combined singing, poetry recitation, and lecturing about the history of the civil rights movement. These concerts,

Coretta wrote, were "highly rewarding" because they raised thousands of dollars for the SCLC: money it desperately needed (98).

In her 2009 biography of Coretta, Laura McCarty points out that Coretta's engagements were often related to "fundraising opportunities or to programs related to women, children, and peace" (34). For example, she was a delegate to the White House Conference on Children and Youth in February 1960, and "lectured and performed for the Women's Day Program at the New First Baptist Church in Charleston, West Virginia, in November 1961" (34). However, the cause she was most interested in was peace. Her focus on peace was not something new, as she had already taken "an active interest in promoting world peace through the Quaker peace groups" at Antioch College (King, *My Life* 193). In March 1962, she was invited by the Women's Strike for Peace – an organization of women's peace activists founded in 1961 – to go as a delegate to Switzerland (King, *My Life, My Love* 97). The group was initially part of the movement to "ban nuclear testing and end the Vietnam War" (97). The women organized a march that convened "fifty thousand women to march and demonstrate against nuclear weapons in sixty U.S. cities," making it the "largest national women's peace protest of the twentieth century" (98). The ultimate goal was to "influence the atomic test ban talks" held there by the United Nations Committee on Disarmament, because radioactive fallout was damaging children's health" (98). She was also firmly opposed to the Vietnam War and publicly spoke against it in June 1965, on the Emergency Peace Rally held at Madison Square Garden in New York City (McCarty 45; King, *My Life, My Love* 149). Only Coretta participated (46). It was Coretta who wanted to connect the civil rights movement with the peace movement. As David Stein points out, Coretta encouraged Martin "to take a stand against the Vietnam War and work to align the civil rights movement with the peace movement," telling him that "you cannot separate peace and freedom; they are inextricably related" (84). Eventually, Martin followed Coretta and

spoke out against the Vietnam War for the first time in public exactly a year before his death, on April 4, 1967 (Garrow 613). As McCarty concludes, "This dated [Coretta's] involvement in the antiwar movement almost two years prior to Martin's" (45).

As Coretta's involvement in the peace movement and her concerts indicate, she had her own mission in life. Coretta did not live only in service of Martin. What distinguished her from the average American woman was her marriage to the most prominent black leader in the U.S., her active participation in the civil rights movement, and her increasing public profile. Coretta did not let traditional gender roles of the time obstruct her. As she wrote in her autobiography, "While I was happy to be Martin's wife and the mother of his children, I was more than a wife while he lived and more than a widow after he died. […] There was also a corner of life that belonged exclusively to me" (King, *My Life, My Love* 96).

3. Coretta After Martin: A Public Career of Her Own

3.1 Building the King Center: The Development of Coretta's Career and Public Role

After Martin was assassinated on April 4, 1968, Coretta's most important goal, besides raising her children, was to preserve her husband's legacy. In April 1968, almost immediately after his death, Coretta established the Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change: three months later, on June 26, she held a press conference to announce its founding (King, *My Life, My Love* 185). From the start, she served as the center's president and chief executive officer (Coretta Scott King Biography). As Coretta explains in her second autobiography, the King Center started in the basement of her house, and in the early years she was mainly occupied with "raising the funds to build the Center – to hire staff, implement programs, and build some physical structures" (*My Life, My Love* 186-191). The King Center was built in different stages. In 1970, "Coretta King generated support for classifying the Fourth Ward neighborhood of Dr. King's childhood home and the surrounding area as a

'national historic site,' a designation that would qualify it for federal grants and other assistance." After restoring the King Home between 1972 and 1975, Coretta bought an adjoining house at 503 Auburn Avenue and used it as "temporary administration offices for the King Center" (201). Coretta wanted to revitalize the Auburn neighborhood and started to work on building a community center. She said, "All the things I didn't have as a child, I tried to provide through the community center" (203). Among other things, it had an "early-learning center, a reading academy, […] and neighboring services to train young people in nonviolence," as well as a natatorium (an Olympic-size swimming pool) and housing and food assistance (203).

The most important goal of her "fifth child," as she called the Center, was to "celebrate and advance Martin's cause, mission, and legacy" (184). As David Stein points out, "The King Center would serve as her political base from which she could direct her own agenda and shape how her husband's legacy would be enacted" (88). Through the King Center, and other activities, she also guaranteed an annual income for herself (Theoharis). Because of her dedication and efforts to realize the endurance of Martin's legacy, "one can no more separate Coretta Scott King" from this "living memorial" that she created "than one can separate the name of her slain husband from the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s" (Ashkinaze et al. 1). However, it was more than just a memorial. Coretta writes in her autobiography: "Working with Martin brought me nearer to becoming a citizen of the Beloved Community of which I dreamed, and the King Center allowed me to advance those efforts, even on an international stage. […] In the end, I really consider myself a human rights activist" (*My Life, My Love* 238). The King Center gave her the opportunity to maintain Martin's legacy, but at the same time it gave her an agenda entirely of her own. After thirteen years of hard work and the help of many people, including Martin's sister Christine, and President Jimmy Carter and Henry Ford II, who endowed the Center with $3.5 and $8.4

million respectively, Coretta had raised enough money to build the center in 1981 (193). The Center was built across from the King Home and the Ebenezer Baptist Church where King had preached (About the King Center). The Center was not only an extension of Martin's life, but also an extension of Coretta's life (Ashkinaze et al. 2). In the end, it was "her perception of King's philosophies and ideals and her personality that have shaped the center's programs and directions" and "her strong influence" that shaped its "decisions and policies" (Ashkinaze et al. 2).

When after the "major campaign of lobbying the White House and Congress," Coretta succeeded in "getting legislation passed to establish the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site" in 1981, the Center opened the administration building including the King Library and Archives (King, *My Life, My Love* 204). Then, on January 15, 1982, the building phase of the Center was completed in its entirety with the "final construction of the Freedom Hall Complex" (204). As Coretta explains, "Until 1982, when we used the term *Center*, we were referring to our organization, a work-in-progress housed in temporary offices. But in 1982, all our staff and programs were finally in their own administration building" (205).

There were different projects in the King Center which started from the very beginning when Coretta worked from the basement of the King Home in 1968. In her second autobiography, Coretta explains that "more than twenty educational programs and more than a dozen community and public affairs programs," were led in the first twenty years. "At the core of the Center – its heart and soul – has been nonviolence education and training, which we have provided to tens of thousands of people through the years" (206). As Crawford points out, the first project was the "Library Documentation Project, established to collect the papers of Dr. King, SCLC, and other major civil rights organizations." Two years later, the Institute of the Black World was established to continue the intellectual work of the movement. Dr. Vincent Harding led this project to encourage scholarship in Black Studies "and to involve

students from the Atlanta University Center in its mission." When the institute eventually became independent, it focused on non-violence and sponsored regular educational workshops. The educational campaign was the King Center's strongest area for it was "instrumental in delivering training in nonviolence to antiwar, welfare rights, AIDS" and other activists and many other community groups. Furthermore, a preschool and early childhood program, and projects for prison inmates and single mothers were also carried out.

Coretta received a lot of honor for her contributions and carrying out the work of her husband. However, in spite of the "celebrations" that were "being spread by television and newspapers into every American community, conflicts and contradictions about Mrs. King's efforts to use the center to carry out her husband's agenda abounded," *New York Times* correspondent John Herbers reported in 1986. One major source of criticism, he wrote, was the Center's involvement with "workaday programs like day care and voter registration," while Coretta had wanted to "bring in the best minds and the best ideas the nation could provide to press for major civil rights advances," as she had claimed in 1969. Her critics also argued that she received "little support among the poor blacks whom her husband inspired," and that the center has never fulfilled the innovations of the civil rights movement that many had expected (Herbers). Instead of preserving and advancing King's unfinished work "through teaching, interpreting, advocating and promoting, nonviolently, the elimination of poverty, racism, violence and war," the focus was more on the "particular problems of small community groups and individuals," which according to critics of the center, among whom members of the board of directors, did not prove very effective (Herbers).

Journalist Juan Williams, in a 6000-word article published in *The Washington Post* in 1989, wrote that Coretta should have lent her voice to the SCLC instead of using her "new power and prestige to perpetuate her husband's image and to make him an American legend" by creating the King Center. The Center may be an "impressive achievement," but "produced

little beyond image to improve the lives of blacks in America" Coretta, her critics asserted, rather spent time raising money for "mortar and bricks instead of social activism" (Williams). In a 1984 report for the *New York Times*, William Schmidt similarly pointed out that an often-voiced complaint was that "rather than advancing [King's] work and developing programs that directly benefit the poor, the center seems more committed to buildings that memorialize the past" (Schmidt). This contrasted sharply with her husband's "great disregard for material things" (Williams). David J. Garrow, author of the Pulitzer Price-winning biography on Martin Luther King Jr. *Bearing the Cross* (1986), also is quoted as saying that the King Center is not "advancing Dr. King's legacy in any tangibly significant or measurable way" (qtd. in Williams). Another important biographer of Martin Luther King Jr., Taylor Branch, also voiced his criticism of the King Center. According to Branch, if you go to the King Center, there are a lot of "people in designer clothes taking themselves very seriously," making the King Center more like the "Kennedy Center than an institution in the spirit of Dr. King's civil rights movement" (qtd. in Williams). Another target of criticism was the King Center's revenue being grounded in the selling of Martin Luther King T-shirts, postcards, booklets, cassettes of the "I Have a Dream" speech, and photographs. In an interview, Coretta said that by buying these memorabilia through the King Center people will know that "this is the authentic way" (Gardner). Hosea Williams, one of Martin's earliest followers and former executive-director of the SCLC, argued that the commercialization of Martin's legacy was sending the wrong message. He says that the life and deeds of Martin Luther King "must be always presented, especially to younger blacks, as having been sacred" (Merchandising). All in all, critics agreed that "the King Center had failed to take the lead on contemporary issues like poverty, voting rights and the Iraq war," and complained that "access to the center's archives, a trove of civil rights-era documents, was restricted" (Dewan).

Despite the criticism of the King Center, there was also support. Some disagreed with the assumption that the King Center would deprive the SCLC of money. As William writes in his article in the *New York Times*, they compared it with saying that if Yale wasn't built, Harvard would have "a larger endowment." Would that be a reason to "close down Yale?" asked Moss, who had worked for both the King Center and the SCLC (qtd. in Williams). Women in the movement defended her, however. Civil rights activist and former Education Director for the SCLC Dorothy Cotton argued that one should see the SCLC and the King Center as two different things. If Coretta had moved into the SCLC, she said, "her dream would have been subsumed" in the "extremely chauvinistic organization" that it was according to her (qtd. in Williams). Dorothy Height, also a civil rights activist and former President of the National Council of Negro Women, agreed with this and stressed that male leaders often found it hard to "recognize the strength in a woman like Coretta King." They preferred to see her as the widow of King, instead of as a leader in her own right. These women insisted that it cannot be denied the King Center was one of Coretta's greatest achievements (qtd. in Williams).

In the end, Coretta, despite receiving many setbacks and criticism, always did what she thought was right. She preserved Martin's legacy, but kept in mind that she also had to earn an income and wanted to focus on matters she found important. These three priorities shaped Coretta's career.

Because of her involvement in the King Center, Coretta's public role increased significantly. Newspapers had started to write about her more frequently right after her husband died. For example, in the archive of the local newspaper th*e Atlanta Constitution*, an important source of information for my study of Coretta, contains more than 112,000 results for the keyword "Martin Luther King" up until 1984, but articles on Coretta only started to appear from 1968 on with a total of 782 results up until 1984. In a 1976 article in this local

newspaper, Margaret Shannon writes that Coretta "has emerged as an activist" after the death of her husband, ignoring the fact that she had been so since her days at Antioch (Shannon 1). According to Shannon, Coretta's "major occupation is being the widow of Martin Luther King Jr." (3). Emphasizing that the name "King" was an important factor in the support for and image of Coretta, Shannon wrote that demands for her endorsement, appearance, and participation "poured in after King's death" (4). Shannon extensively discusses Coretta's activist life after she became a widow. Particularly the conclusion of the nine-page article gives a clear view of Coretta's career; Shannon quotes Coretta as saying that she was very busy with "the movement," not being able to distinguish public and private life, which turned out to be a problem:

> "I don't compartmentalize my life. I'm fortunate I can do it that way. I enjoy my work. It's hard, it's challenging and it's frustrating at times, but I can't separate the personal life, the family, from the church or the struggle. I don't have much social life. It's all tied in with the movement. I find myself just involved all the time."(9)

There were different causes that Coretta devoted herself to, but there was one in particular that received most media coverage: her advocacy for employment opportunities for African Americans and other minorities. In a recent article, David Stein, who has conducted extensive research on Coretta's economic activism, explains that "in the two decades after her husband's death," she dedicated "herself to achieving governmental guarantees to employment and disentangling militarism and violence from the economy" (80). She became a "leading figure in the struggle for a non-violent economy in the 1970s" (82). In her second autobiography, Coretta writes that she "always had a burning desire to alleviate poverty through good jobs," and that the "double-digit unemployment rates among blacks, Hispanics,

and the residents of the Appalachia" were worrying her deeply (*My Life, My Love* 266). Therefore, she helped develop and co-chaired the National Committee for Full Employment in 1974 which advocated "comprehensive legislation to address employment opportunity," hoping it would be as successful as the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act of 1964 and 1965 (266). Even though the results of the committee were less far-reaching than she hoped, Coretta wrote that she learned the ins and outs about employment legislation and was "able to operate in a different way from Martin"; while he achieved victories as an outsider applying pressure on the inside power brokers, she now knew "more legislators on the inside who were sympathetic" to their causes (266). In the winter of 1976, Coretta traveled to Washington to "train regional leaders of the Full Employment Action Council in ways to build grassroots pressure for passage of the Humphrey-Hawkins full employment bill" (Hume). Asking rhetorically, "if we can't solve the [unemployment] problem here, what can we do about the rest of the world?" Coretta devoted endless hours to supporting this bill, which for her was a "continuation of the 'human rights movement' her late husband began more than 22 years ago" (Rodrigue). According to the *Atlanta Constitution*, Coretta turned out to be "one of the most effective lobbyists" for the bill, which Coretta helped pass in 1978 (Gulliver).

Besides peace activism, Coretta was also still engaged in movements for racial equality, as becomes clear from newspaper reports in the *Atlanta Constitution*. In May 1973, at a luncheon gathering of Atlanta Jaycees, she said that "the backbone of segregation" had been broken, and reminded her audience of the importance of non-violence protest and what it had achieved in the past few decades (Bell). She criticized the Nixon Administration for "inflicting violence on American citizens" by operating through an "arbitrary and secret government," and said that "one of the goals of the King Center" was to "recover the disappearance of values of decency and justice" (Bell). Five years later, she was still trying to

prove people wrong who thought that "non-violent social action" was "less relevant" to solving problems than ten years earlier (Rodrigue).

In 1984, exactly twenty years after the passage of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964, she insisted in a press release that a "new commitment to progress in race relations" was needed (Associated Press, "Coretta King"). Speaking at the opening session of a conference on civil and human rights[4] she stressed that increased active political involvement by minorities was crucial for maintaining progress (Associated Press, "Coretta King"). She continued fighting for the rights of black people and other minorities throughout her career.

In 1977, Coretta co-organized a conference for the women's movement in which "the adoption of an 'affirmative action' resolution for blacks and other minorities was the 'highlight of the conference'" (Hopkins). This resolution was "a solid blueprint for action" by the government in "all areas to remove the scars of 200 years of racism and sexism" in U.S. society (Hopkins). Coretta acknowledged the progress that had been made since Martin Luther King Jr's death, but stressed that his dream was "yet to be fully realized," and that the anniversary of his death was a time for believers of the dream to "recommit" themselves to the task of making sure that "people everywhere have equal opportunity and freedom" (Reeves). Coretta fought for a very long time to institutionalize a national Martin Luther King Holiday on his birthday, January 15, to commemorate the legacy of her husband. She said that "we should use the holiday as an opportunity to spend serious time in reflection," and "not just as a day off work, but as a reminder of the history it represents" (Alexander).

Another cause that Coretta endorsed – although much later in her career - was gay rights. Coretta writes in her autobiography that, in 1993, she made a "strong stand for gay rights, speaking out firmly against discrimination in the armed services by writing a letter to the U.S. Congress on this matter" (*My Life, My Love* 243).

[4] The place of the conference is not mentioned in the article.

Coretta remained an activist her whole life. She sought ways to improve societal problems and the lives of people of all classes and races. She never had a specific profession, but always followed her ambition and used her power and prestige to contribute to social change.

4. A Career Unnoticed?

Coretta's work has received much less attention than that of her famous husband, and if she is discussed at all in biographies of Martin Luther King or historical studies of the civil rights movement, it is mostly in relation to her husband's work. For example, whenever Martin's criticism of the Vietnam War is discussed, his biographers make no reference to Coretta. In *Bearing the Cross*, David Garrow even seems to suggest that Martin introduced the subject of war protest to Coretta instead of the other way around (470, 528, 605). In his autobiography, however, Martin himself explains that Coretta shared his passion for peace, and that it was she who organized and took care of "meetings on the peace issue" regarding the Vietnam War (King and Carson 334). Whenever Coretta gave interviews when he was still alive, questions were almost always about her husband and his role. One time an interviewer, who initially came to interview Martin but talked to Coretta instead, did not ask her anything about her own role but was only interested in Martin's view on the Vietnam war and the protest against it. The interviewer later admitted to find Coretta better informed than he had expected, observing that "she really knows what it's all about" (Rothschild 3). Similarly, Taylor Branch hardly mentions Coretta in his much-acclaimed volumes about the "King years." When she is mentioned, it is only trivial information. None of the studies contain any significant or in-depth information about Coretta or her contributions.[5]

[5] Brief references to Coretta are made in: Branch, *At Canaan's Edge* 11, 161, 181, 197, 242, 282, 322, 348, 354, 473, 502, 503, 513, 741 and *Parting the Waters* 108, 114, 162, 188, 197, 199, 201, 218, 239, 247, 489, 578, 706.

Sometimes the biographers briefly mention Coretta's activism, which could potentially provide significant insights into her contributions had they been elaborated on. For example, Branch writes that Martin "commended the draft" of an anti-war speech that Coretta would give (*At Canaan's Edge* 385).[6] It is striking that the only remark that gives some useful information about Coretta's contributions, a two-sentence summary of the main point of this speech, is written in parentheses, and receives minimal attention. Branch does not discuss Coretta's contributions in any depth and this brief mention does not do justice to Coretta's work. Another example is when Branch writes about Coretta joining other leaders for the Jeannette Rankin Brigade anti-war march on January 17, 1968 (673). Here, Branch fails to elaborate on why Coretta joined this particular march. She went abroad numerous times, for example when she traveled to Switzerland to "support international efforts to ban atomic testing" as part of the Women Strike for Peace in 1962 (King, *My Life, My Love* 97, 149). She also participated in a press conference in Washington, DC, with the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom on March 28, 1968, to discuss how the Vietnam War "was negatively contributing to the urban crisis" (156). These are just a few of her many contributions to the pacifist movement, but she receives no credit for her activism in any of the biographies on Martin Luther King.

Coretta's partnership with Martin is also not well represented in the main biographies about the latter. For example, her Freedom Concert tour is often overlooked. Garrow mentions the various concerts that Coretta joined, but does not mention her name or her role in the fundraising for the SCLC (89). Also, as the terms "Freedom Concerts" and "Freedom Concert Tour" do not appear in his book, he ignores the most important performances of Coretta's career. Not only do King's biographers minimize her role in the movement and as a partner of Martin, they portray her negatively as well. She is often presented as a woman who

[6] Date is not given.

is dissatisfied about her marriage (Garrow 260, 316, 341, 364, 376, 395, 416). Such accounts put Coretta in the light of a nagging wife, rather than presenting her as a woman with a mission and a career of her own.

Coretta herself also felt that her contributions to the movement and other missions were underestimated. Because the spotlight "shone so brightly on Martin, the press overlooked [her] agenda, pro-peace and antiwar activities since [her] days at Antioch" (*My Life, My Love* 149). In her autobiography Coretta writes, "How well I understood the power of my husband's name and what he represented! But sometimes I wondered how and when people would look beyond the name and see me as a woman of substance and commitment, working for the Cause each day of her life" (*My Life, My Love* 184). In a 1995 interview Coretta said, "I had a commitment even before I met Martin. If I didn't believe in this, I wouldn't be working 18-hour days. I don't have another life. This is my life. I'd like to see the legacy prevail because if it does, we would have a better world" (Eddings).

5. Recognition at Last?

According to David Stein, Coretta's role in history is "fraught with misunderstanding" (81). "When she passed away in 2006, no less than twenty-three members of Congress honored her life and efforts to create a just society," including "those who opposed many of her goals" (81). However, in doing so, Stein points out, they did not look at the Congressional Records thereby overlooking Coretta's "most significant efforts" and misunderstanding her goals (81). No attention was paid to her coalition, the National Committee for Full Employment/Full Employment Action Council, which was the "energetic lobbying force behind the Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment Act of 1978," one of the most important legislative attempts to guarantee employment for all (81). She became a leading figure in combating what she describes as economic violence in the 1970s, as unemployment and poverty were also forms

of violence in her opinion (81). Coretta's commitment to ensure governmental guarantees to employment for all Americans was very profound. Not only her accomplishments are important, but more so the efforts and energy she put into the causes for which she fought. That is why Stein "investigates the civil rights movement from the perspective of campaigns that went unachieved, in contradistinction to those that were won" (81). It is important to have an inclusive look at the civil rights movement, because even if some of Coretta's efforts were unsuccessful, she always continued fighting. For example, in her efforts for the creation of employment opportunities, results were often far from what she aimed for. Yet, she "continued to work with the NCFE/FEAC far into the 1980s, even as the promise of full employment receded further and further" (97). Therefore, in order to get a clear account of everything Coretta has done as a human rights activist, it is important to look beyond the achievements, and also focus on the process. A lack of such an investigation of Coretta's career could be an explanation for her being underestimated. Yet, in this thesis I have shown that Coretta had a career of her own and that it would do her injustice to just see her as the wife and widow of Martin Luther King.

Chapter Two: Betty Shabazz

Like Coretta Scott King, Betty Shabazz (1934-1997), was married to one of America's great leaders during the civil rights era. Her husband, Malcolm X, was arguably the second most influential black leader in the 1960s after Martin Luther King, though his politics were much more militant than King's, at least until shortly before his death. Betty Shabazz and Malcolm X were married in 1958. When he was assassinated on February 21, 1965, Betty became a widow with four daughters to raise and twins on the way.

The most significant difference between Betty and Coretta is their social background. Betty grew up in the urban north, in the black inner city of Detroit, and grew up in a working-class environment, in contrast to Coretta. This chapter will investigate Betty's life in different time periods. First of all, I will compare Betty's life a few years prior to her marriage to Malcolm X with her life as his wife. I will also pay attention to Betty's conversion from Christianity to Islam, focusing specifically on the role expected of her as a woman within the Nation of Islam. Then, I will investigate Betty's life after her husband's death, and how she made a career for herself. I will use different sources: autobiographical articles written by Betty Shabazz, Russell Rickford's biography about Betty Shabazz, Manning Marable's biography of Malcolm X, Garrow's three volumes about the King years, the autobiography of Malcolm X as told to Alex Haley, newspaper and scholarly articles, interviews with Shabazz, Malcolm X, and their daughters, and videos of Betty Shabazz. There is much less documentation on Shabazz's life than on Coretta's life. I did not have access to the Betty Shabazz collection in the Malcolm X papers in the New York Public Library, which is only available on Microfilm in the library. Therefore, fewer sources are available for this chapter. Also, in contrast with Coretta, Shabazz never published a book-length autobiography, apart from three essays on her life with Malcolm X.

1. Betty's Childhood

1.1 Family background

There is much less information about Betty's family background than about Coretta Scott King's. Much mystery surrounds the first years of Betty's life. There are contradictory stories which make it difficult to establish the facts about Betty's childhood. It is certain hat Betty Shabazz was born as Betty Dean Sanders on May 28, 1934 (Marable 138). It is not clear, however, where she was born. Betty herself always maintained that she was born in Detroit, and most of her adult documents support this. By contrast, Betty's only biographer, Cornell historian Russell Rickford, points out that "some of her earlier records, including high-school and college transcripts, identify her as a Pinehurst native" (2). After her birth, Betty lived with her biological mother, Ollie Mae, but in her first year, her grandmother Matilda Greene took care of Betty until the former's death when Betty was six years old. Rickford speculates that the family of Betty's biological mother sent Ollie Mae away to give birth because the child was conceived out of wedlock (Rickford 2). After her grandmother died, Betty ended up with Ollie Mae again, but not for long. She was adopted by a couple named Helen and Lorenzo Malloy when she was eleven years old. The exact circumstances surrounding the adoption remain quite vague. As a woman who as a teenager was a neighbor of the couple confirms, "Betty simply showed up with the older couple one Sunday morning before church" without them giving any explanation how the girl had "wound up in their care" (Rickford 7). It is not clear how Betty was treated as a small child, because Betty hardly ever "discussed the life she had led before arriving in Helen and Lorenzo Malloy's orderly, well-furnished home around 1944 or 1945" (7).

Despite the contradictory and missing information on the first six years of Betty's life, some facts have been established. One of these is the religious environment in which Betty grew up in the Malloys' household. Religion played an important role in Lorenzo and Helen's

lives. As Rickford puts it, “the Malloys were church folk, so first came faith” (5). Both of them belonged to Bethel AME, a palatial worship house “where one found them between pews as many as three or four days a week.” Lorenzo served as a church officer and Helen was “a member of the women’s trustee auxiliary and a class leader, and taught both Sunday school and vacation Bible school.” Lorenzo was a graduate of Tuskegee Institute and a businessman with a shoe repair shop in Detroit. Helen Malloy was “active in civil rights, serving as an officer in the National Housewives League, a group that initiated boycotts of white-owned businesses that refused to hire blacks or sell black products.” She was also a member of the NAACP and Mary McLeod Bethune’s National Council of Negro Women (Marable 138). Even though they did not have children of their own, “the Malloys became aunt and uncle to a generation of the Bethel faithful” (Rickford 5). Bethel was a place where “little girls learned from the fanning, humming ladies to sport fancy hats and gloves, and to love Jesus and their black selves with their whole hearts.” It was in this environment where Betty was formed and educated, and in which she “sang her hymns, and at age thirteen vowed soberly that she would die a Methodist” (Rickford 6).

2. Betty in the Years Before her Marriage

2.1 Racism

Before she was introduced to Malcolm, Betty already had experienced racism. She started going to Northern High School in Detroit in 1948 where almost only black students were enrolled at that time. In the 1940s, it was impossible for most African Americans to escape racism. As Rickford points out, black people “faced overt discrimination” in restaurants and other “businesses that refused to serve blacks.” Her adoptive father, Mr. Malloy, told Betty a story in 1942 about how a mob rally resulted in a clash between black families and white tenants who wanted to preserve a “white community” (Rickford 17), but Betty was still in

grade school then and was not directly confronted with racism and discrimination when riots began to appear more frequently. She knew about it from her adoptive parents and hearsay, but was too young to fully grasp what it meant. Even though Betty and the other students did not face direct racism at grade school, it was clear how blacks were seen and treated. As Rickford explains, black students "understood without having to be told that they must somehow establish their singularity, prove themselves a credit to their race, or risk damnation as common objects of contempt, suspicion, or charity" (18). Still, Betty enjoyed her time at high school and joined many extracurricular activities. She was a member of the orchestra, the Russel Scholarship Committee, and the French Club; like Coretta, she was particularly fond of music. She also joined a social club for teens (19). Betty was described by classmates as "mannerly, even-tempered, and quiet" (19).

2.2 Education and Career Options

When Betty graduated from Northern High in 1952, there were basically two career options for her, and for black women in general in the early 1950s: nursing and teaching (Rickford 21). Even though Betty initially wanted to become a nurse and therefore joined a nursing club at her high school, she chose to follow her foster mother in becoming a teacher. She applied at Tuskegee University in Alabama. It is interesting that Betty chose to leave the north to study in the south, in Coretta's home state. This illustrates a clear difference between the two women. Betty's aim was to prepare herself for an actual career to support herself financially, for which Tuskegee, founded by Booker T. Washington, was an appropriate choice. Historian Robert J. Norrell, in his biography of Washington, argues that Washington was "the embodiment of black people's upward movement" (105). His mission was to make blacks economically independent and to teach them a profession. He was strategically publicizing his mission for his school by saying that blacks would be educated to become agricultural

workers, but what he was actually doing was training teachers so that they could move into black middle-class leadership positions (Norrell 97, 365, 367).

However, during her undergraduate training at Tuskegee University, Betty decided to switch majors from education to nursing (Shabazz, "Loving"*)*. She traded Alabama for New York City and applied to Brooklyn State College School of Nursing in 1953, a step that her foster parents disapproved of. The Malloys had wished for Betty to become a teacher and thus move up the social ladder (Marable 139), indicating their upwardly mobile aspirations for their foster daughter. They had taught Betty that education "meant security and happiness" and had been glad that she initially chose education as her major. When Betty decided to switch majors and left for New York City, she became more independent, the relationship with her foster parents deteriorated (Rickford 22). That she disappointed the Malloys did not stop her from doing what she wanted, though. Betty was a strong-willed young woman who made her own choices. Leaving for New York was one of the best decisions she ever made, Betty later said. It was in this city that she "would come fully to womanhood" and meet her future husband (Rickford 28). Thus, in contrast with Coretta, Betty's education did prepare her for an actual career. Betty was from a lower-class family, and knew she had to support herself at least until she would be married. Her education, therefore, was a means for Betty to make sure she could get a job and earn a living.

3. Betty's Marriage with Malcolm X

3.1 Meeting Malcolm X

While Betty was working as a nurse in New York, she became more aware of racial injustice. As Rickford points out, she and other black nurses got the "tough assignments" and always had a white nurse as their supervisor. "She could not yet articulate a clear vision of racial justice, but she was sick of pretending that race did not matter." However, it was Malcolm X

who "introduced her to the word racism" (Rickford 35). One night in 1956 when another black nurse invited Betty to dinner, she met Malcolm X in Nation of Islam's Temple Seven, where he preached regularly, as Shabazz recalls in an essay she wrote in 1992 for *Essence* Magazine (Shabazz, *"*Loving*"*). Not earning much money and not having had a decent meal in a long time, Betty was eager to visit there. She stepped into a world that was totally unknown to her; she did not know anything about Islam. When her friend invited her to visit Temple Seven she was hesitant at first, because she was "not familiar with the philosophy," and was afraid that her parents would "kill [her]" if they knew she "joined another religion and gave up being a Methodist" (Shabazz, *"*Loving*"*). Yet, after that first time visiting Temple Seven, several other visits followed, and Malcolm X slowly captured her heart. She said, "I was impressed with him clean-cut, no nonsense" (Shabazz, *"*Loving*"*). She felt a special connection from the very first time she saw him (Shabazz, *"*Loving*"*).

Even though Betty was impressed by Malcolm, she said she "was willing to leave it right there," and made up excuses whenever her friend invited her to the temple (Shabazz, *"*Loving*"*). However, soon Betty and Malcolm started spending time together, mostly in groups. "At one point, before I joined the Nation, I sort of drifted away from Malcolm because I thought I was strong enough to do that," she said. She went on summer holiday to Detroit and met with Malcolm's brothers, at Malcolm's request. She went out with his youngest brother, Wesley, but her heart was still with Malcolm. Wesley told her that she was talking a lot about Malcolm (Shabazz, *"*Loving*"*). It was when she was back in New York and met with Wesley again that the subject of marrying Malcolm was raised. It was a surprise for Betty when Wesley asked her why she did not tell him that she was planning to marry his brother. "I just stood there in total disbelief," Betty explains. Neither of them had said anything about marriage before, and it was the "first inkling [she] had that Malcolm was considering" to marry her. The day he actually asked her to become his wife, he was calling

her from a public phone in Detroit (Shabazz, "Loving"). According to Betty, this was the happiest she had ever felt in her life and she took a plane to Detroit the very next day. Her foster parents were in shock and did not like the idea of their daughter marrying a non-Christian, and asked Betty what they had done to her to make her hate them so (Shabazz, *"*Loving*"*). Even though this made Betty very sad, she and Malcolm got married in Lansing, Michigan, on January 14, 1958. The way Betty talks about the day they got married and, specifically, their wedding night – "Oh, my God, what am I doing?" – indicates that even though she presumably was in love with Malcolm, it was an impulsive move.

An important thing she had to give up now that she was married to Malcolm was her religion. She knew that that meant letting go of many of the things she was accustomed to. Betty was raised a Christian and her African Methodist faith had always played a significant role in her life. Her conversion from Christianity to Islam was a radical one and, as Rickford puts it, meant abandoning almost everything that "she had always considered proper and holy." She now had to accept Black Islamic theories about the history of civilization, "the origin of species, and the very nature of the universe" (54). It was a huge turning point for Betty. Where Christianity had taught her to accept and love all races, she was now taught by the NOI that whites were destructive people who despised "Allah's chosen people," the "so-called Negro" (55). She learned that the non-violence that Martin Luther King preached was a threat instead of a solution, and that the only "salvation for blacks was Islam and separatism" (55). Betty was now part of a "ghetto movement comprised largely of young men, a movement that boasted its own demonology, ontology, eschatology, and jurisprudence; its own politicized, hybrid Islam; and […] its own demand for an independent black homeland" (55). It would transform Betty, who had long accepted the constraints that being a black woman would put on her life, to Sister Betty X, who did not accept these constraints and who

would soon wish for her offspring "a better life than I have had, than any Negro in America has had, and an earth of our own" (qtd. in Rickford 56).

3.2 Nation of Islam

After Betty's conversion to Islam, she had to adopt all the Black Muslim ways. To put Betty's life and role within the Nation of Islam in context, I will briefly discuss the history of the Nation and its doctrines, focusing on the gender roles it prescribed as they played a significant part in the organization. I will mainly focus on the Nation of Islam in the period from 1950 until 1975, as that is most relevant to this chapter: it was in this period that Betty joined the movement and became immersed in it.

When referring to the Nation of Islam, I mean the original organization that was founded in 1930 and ended in 1975. Its founder and leader, Elijah Muhammad, proclaimed himself to be the "Messenger of Allah" (Austin 55). As Algernon Austin explains:

> According to the theology of the Nation of Islam, African Americans were descendants of "the Original Man," a race of Asiatic god-scientists known as the Tribe of Shabazz. […] All people of colour are descendants of the Tribe of Shabazz and therefore are members of the Asiatic Black Nation. The Nation of Islam taught that white people were genetically engineered by Yakub, a heretical member of the Tribe of Shabazz, to rule the Earth for 6000 years. The white race was seen as inherently evil and inferior. (Austin 57, 58).

It is only through fear and deception by whites that non-whites have forgotten about their true nature (58). Everyone within the Nation of Islam was taught these ideas and lived by its rules. As Bayyinah S. Jeffries explains in her book about African-American women in the Nation of

Islam, some Nation recruits claimed that "[i]t was a recovery place for a lot of people,' a restoration from racism, discrimination, spiritual servitude, economic poverty, low self-esteem, and more. Essentially, there were political, religious, cultural, social, familial, educational, and economic reasons for Muslim women and men to become followers of the Nation of Islam during the Civil Right-Black Power era" (Jeffries 73).

From 1950 to 1975, believers of the Nation of Islam attempted to "restore African Americans to their proper place in human civilization and to provide their progeny with dignity. They also hoped to develop a sense of self-worth that was taken from them and their ancestors during European-American slavery and Jim Crow" (Jeffries 73). Converts found a "renewed spirit, a different way of seeing the world and their place in it, and each became heavily involved in African American Muslim affairs at the Temples, businesses, schools, and throughout the community" (71).

Gender roles had a significant function in the original Nation of Islam community (Jeffries 53). Men and women were assigned different roles which gave them certain responsibilities and power. Gender roles held both benefits and limitations for its members (63). For example, women, who had practical roles as mothers and wives, were "fundamental in the development of the community and the consciousness-raising of future Muslims, and therefore held currency" (54). As mothers, women could realize their dreams through their children (55). Moreover, "maternal positions quite possibly solidified the bonds between husbands and wives and gave women who did not have the chance to obtain higher status through a college education or career an opportunity to do so through their families" (55). An important benefit for Muslim women within the Nation of Islam was having a choice. Women who wanted to be more than just mothers or wives had ample opportunity to work outside the home (66). Women were allowed to work; the Nation employed a number of them. "While the Nation doctrine emphasized that the man must be the financial provider for the family,

women contributed, even though it was not necessarily their primary responsibility" (66). There was also opportunity for leadership. "Selection of women for leadership positions was based on observed attributes. Muslims who earned advanced degrees would be given positions that took full advantage of those skills" (67).

Women were encouraged to work together with their husbands to provide a "community and familial environment that fostered cooperation, intellectual growth, and high moral conduct" (Jeffries 56). Yet, despite "attempts at balanced notions of gender relations" women in the Nation were still confronted with sexism. Injustices existed as a result of chauvinist attitudes, by both male and female members of the group, as some members of the Nation brought their "patriarchal baggage" with them (56). A woman was perceived of as a "queen" who would help to lead and direct, who would stay loyal to her "king" and refrained from immoral practices (60). Strict gender roles, dress, and firm codes of behavior were prevalent. Some female members found the policies too restricting or could not bring themselves to adhere to the Muslim dress codes (71). A woman had to dress modestly (60). Elijah Muhammad, for example, "castigated women who dressed inappropriately, believing it degraded them, and by extension, the whole community as it opened women up to sexual advancements and mistreatment […]. Women who, as he saw it, boastfully continued to demean themselves could not reap the rewards of being in the Nation" (62).

According to Manning Marable, one of Malcolm's biographers, African-American women were attracted to the NOI, because many of them had experienced sexual harassment by white employers. The Nation, by contrast, offered them the safety of a private patriarchy. Temple women participated in neighborhood activities and monitored their children's progress in schools. Women at the Newark NOI temple, not far from Temple No. 7, were also involved in establishing small businesses. All in all, "what attracted them to the Nation was

the possibility of strong, healthy families, supportive relationships and ultimately an independent black nation" (143).

When Betty became involved in the Nation, she accepted its rules (Rickford 49). She began wearing her nursing uniform longer on the leg and even "insisted" in 1956 that her entire graduating class at Brooklyn State did so (51). Betty formally converted at the end of a Temple Seven lecture, when Malcolm X "asked those whom the gospel had convinced to please stand" (51). Betty quickly forged a role for herself within the Nation. With her college education, which granted her status, it did not take long before she rose to a "higher social stratum in the temple," one that was mostly occupied by "the wives of the ranking men under Malcolm, such as lieutenants and assistant ministers." She taught classes on basic medicine. Her rank stirred envy among other women within the Nation (Rickford 57). Nevertheless, it took some time before Betty was accustomed to all the Muslim ways. As Rickford explains, she was a twenty-three-year-old "still trying to balance the Nation's strictures with a longing for the world she had forsaken" (78). One thing that she had to work on were her cooking skills. She had never learned to cook a proper meal, and now had to cook according to Muslim rules (Marable 147). Taking this task very seriously, Betty spent hours in the kitchen. However, when cooking meals became a routine, she started to long for more appreciation for her work (Rickford 80). Sometimes Betty, who was "nostalgic for soul food," considered cheating on the Muslim diet, which existed mainly of "well-cooked lamb, chicken, fish, and beef" (Rickford 59). She knew her task as a wife was considered an important one, but she did not tolerate practices that made her unhappy.

3.3 Gender Divisions

Even though she said she understood, the limited amount of time she and Malcolm could spend together bothered Betty. Always busy with the movement, Malcolm was rarely home,

which Betty resented. Betty's feelings about their marriage were ambivalent. On the one hand, she claimed that she was very happy with Malcolm and that being with him was the best time of her life. On the other hand, his being away from home all the time and the restrictions that were put on her caused conflicts in the marriage. Betty did not like to talk about the negative aspects of her marriage in public, and rarely did so. As Rickford points out, Betty "seldom directly acknowledged one painful truth – that she had married a movement more than a man" (88). According to Marable, Malcolm hardly ever displayed affection towards Betty and that "any romantic fantasies she may have had about her future life were largely extinguished by the end of their first year" as a married couple. He also argues that they had little quality time together: Malcolm took her to a movie only once, in 1963, during their seven-year marriage (147). This is in line with what Betty herself wrote (Shabazz, "The Legacy" 176). However, in her 1969 essay "Malcolm as a Husband and Father" Betty does fondly remember the quality time they spent together as a family. He would take them to the beach occasionally and then would spend time together at home as well. In her opinion, Malcolm "spent as much time with his family as any other man" when measured in terms of quality (134). She also said that, even though Malcolm wasn't at home very frequently, he showed his affection in other ways. He would, for example, "leave money in different places around the house," and then send Betty letters with instructions on where to find that money. He wrote her that she could "buy something" for herself and sometimes included a love letter or a photo (Shabazz, "Malcolm X" 135). She also writes that Malcolm used to take her out to dinner once a week (Shabazz, "The Legacy" 176), although she did not say if this was always the case or only during a specific period in their marriage.

Throughout their marriage, Betty and Malcolm often struggled to reconcile their views. Malcolm had an ambivalent attitude towards women. In line with Black Islam, his view of women was very traditional: women were receivers, sexually and emotionally, while

men were providers. He also considered women to be "tricky, deceitful, untrustworthy flesh" (Rickford 46). He demanded certain behavior from Betty that she could not always live up to. Early in the marriage, however, she decided that Malcolm "would not run the household with the incontestable authority that he ran the temple" (Rickford 86). According to Betty, before they got married, Malcolm had said that he would find it difficult to tell his wife where he would be all day long. "It was basically that fear of a woman having control," she said. For that reason, Betty "never asked his whereabouts" (Shabazz, "Loving"). But when they were married, he would do the opposite thing. He would inform her about where he would be staying and also left some telephone numbers. They would laugh together about this contradictory behavior and he admitted not to know "where that fear of a woman having control came from" (Shabazz, "Loving"). On the other hand, Malcolm expressed great admiration for women, having "a high regard for motherhood." Quoting the Quran, he would often say that "paradise was at the feet of the mother, that man must always remember his mother, that he was born from her womb and she suffered much on his account." He also took great care of Betty during her pregnancies and always accompanied her to doctor appointments. "He treated me with such tender care and consideration when I was pregnant that I was just plain happy" (Shabazz, "Malcolm X" 137).

The gender role division in Betty and Malcolm X's marriage was conventional. Early in the marriage, Betty wrote in an essay published in 1969, they started to have family talks. In one of the first conversations, Malcolm expressed to Betty what he was expecting of her as a wife. Yet, when Betty told him *her* expectations of a good husband, "it came as a shock" (Shabazz, "Malcolm X" 134). Betty was disappointed that he did not ask her about her expectations of a good husband, but she told him that she did not plan on having her husband run the home in the same way as he did the temple (Rickford 86). Her behavior did not always correspond with her words, though. She was quite submissive, and was eager to obey

the rules. There were things, however, that she would not do. For example, even though women were discouraged to wear make-up, Betty would wear eye make-up and lipstick. Also, later in her marriage with Malcolm, Betty struggled with the Nation's strictures, and she would slightly cheat on the dress code, letting "more hair swirl from her gauzy white veils than Malcolm preferred" (Rickford 44). She felt that "Malcolm was a little too strict" with her:

> For example, he didn't want me to associate with anyone. He just wanted me to be for him. He didn't even want me to have women friends. […] I shared Malcolm, but I don't know if he could have shared me to the same extent. He was possessive from the beginning to the end, though I think he learned to control it. I started traveling and doing curriculum development and setting up classes for the women at the various mosques. I really wanted to work, though Malcolm didn't want me to, but he agreed to let me do this volunteer work – organizing the women's classes. I used to beg. "Oh, please," I'd say. "I want to work. I want to work." And he would take that to mean I was unhappy, that maybe I didn't love him. "You want to do what?" he would say whenever I said I wanted to work. "Here, read these three books and give me a report. I'll need the first one tonight." (Shabazz, "Loving")

This quote indicates that Betty was unhappy about certain aspects of her life with Malcolm. It is clear that he was dominant and possessive, and that this bothered Betty. According to her, all the stress she endured was over the fact that she wanted to work and that "he wouldn't even entertain the idea" (Shabazz, "Loving"). This conflict even made her leave him three times shortly after the birth of their first three daughters. The first time she went "running to

[her] cousin's house in Brooklyn," the second time she went to her biological father[7] and stepmother in Philadelphia, and the third time she went to Detroit. It seems to have been a call for attention more than a determined decision to leave her husband, as she claims she was always "so happy to see him" (Shabazz, "Loving")

As a substitute for working outside the home, Betty supported Malcolm with his work. In contrast with Coretta, Betty was not directly involved with her husband's movement. Whereas Coretta often marched with her husband and even gave speeches in his place, Betty supported Malcolm X in other ways. As Rickford explains, Betty gave Malcolm secretarial support, answering phone calls and taking down messages (93). However, Betty was not constantly occupied with these tasks. She was usually home and turned to "paperbacks and television between household chores" (Rickford 91). Betty did not seek the public spotlight, in compliance with the gender expectations imposed by the NOI. As Rickford points out, Betty rarely accepted media interviews, and when she did, her husband took the lead. It was as if she wanted to make herself invisible, constantly deferring to Malcolm X. "She was reticent about her past, and often parried reporters' queries." She did not talk about her past or her education at Tuskegee, nor her work experience at the New York City hospital. She said that "her duty as Mrs. Malcolm X" was to "master herself and obey the feminine protocols emanating from the Muslim command post in Chicago" (97). Thus, it seems that Betty's private feelings about her subordinate position were separated from what she showed to the outside world. It seems that she accepted the conventional gender roles she had to play in the public sphere. She obeyed Malcolm and the Movement and, as Rickford points out, her own feelings were "smothered under double layers of chauvinism – Malcolm's and the Movement's" (Rickford 97). She knew her place and even though Betty had her own strong opinions, "she never dissented publicly with her husband, even when she disagreed with him.

[7] This is the only reference I have found to Betty's biological father, with whom, by her own account, she apparently had established contact.

Except for views on children and education that were distinctly hers, the opinions she expressed around company were the minister's" (Rickford 99-100). Betty's sister-in-law Dr. Ameenah Omar, however, emphasizes that the fact that Betty did not want to be put in the spotlight does not mean she was inactive. She told Jamie Foster Brown, author of a biography on Betty, that Betty "acted out who she was without fanfare," and never tried to overshadow Malcolm. However, "Betty never walked behind Malcolm" (Brown 35).

Still, there were some subjects that caused frictions in the marriage. One of these was the family's financial situation. In his autobiography, Malcolm claims that his attitude "towards money generated the only domestic quarrel" that he ever had with Betty (Haley 293). He recalls that Betty wanted him to put away some money for his growing family, but that he refused, because he was afraid that it would negatively influence the organization. His answer would be that the Nation would take care of her if anything were to happen to him in the future. He conceded that this was a serious conflict as they "nearly broke up over this argument" (294).

Another problem in the marriage was about Betty's longing to work outside the home (Rickford 101). Every time she started the subject, Malcolm X told her that a woman ought to stay at home and gave her some occupations to keep her quiet, for example some books to read and write reports of (101). This led to marital tensions and Betty struggled with the need to obey her husband and give up her longing to work outside the home. In this respect, Betty and Coretta struggled with the same inner conflict, mainly caused by the pressure to conform to gender expectations imposed by their husbands. Abdullah Razzaq, a friend of Malcolm X with "more than peripheral knowledge of the minister's home life," as Rickford points out, observed that Betty protested against her husband's demands (103). Other acquaintances also had the same impression (Rickford 105). Eventually, however, Malcolm "made small concessions" by allowing his wife to do voluntary work for the Nation and she "began

organizing women's classes and developing curriculum for the sect's parochial schools." In turn, Betty compromised as well. She accepted "Malcolm's paternalism" and began to see "housewifery as part of her contribution to Malcolm's work" (Rickford 106). Thus, there were some improvements with regard to gender roles, but Malcolm only gave her some more freedom within his own realm: the Nation of Islam. Betty was not allowed to work outside the organization and therefore her freedom was highly circumscribed. In the period before her marriage, Marable explains, Betty had collected "a small number of debts" (148). Malcolm let her work to clear these debts, but did not make it easy for her. He never drove Betty to work when she asked him to do so. By "keeping firm control of the family finances and denying Betty the opportunity to earn income beyond what was needed for the repayments, he kept his wife 'in jail financially'" (148). Betty's freedom to work was confined to what Malcolm wanted: he drew the line. Later, Betty came to understand that it was her "naivety" that helped her survive the marriage. As she said thirty years later, "I was very accepting. I just wanted love" (106). As Coretta had always said about her relationship with Martin, Betty, too, believed that she was "destined to be with Malcolm," but, looking back at her life with Malcolm in 1992, she also said that what she "would look for in a man today" isn't what she "looked for in a man then" (Shabazz, *"*Loving*"*).

A letter that surfaced in 2002 sheds some light on Betty and Malcolm X's sexual relationship (Rickford 106). In the letter, which Malcolm wrote to Elijah Muhammad in 1959, the former complained that the "main source" of marital problems was sex (Marable 149). Betty had complained about Malcolm's inability to satisfy her sexually (149). In the letter, he also wrote that Betty had mood swings and exasperated him with her behavior. Moreover, he called women "naturally guileful, manipulative, and childish creatures," to which Betty was no exception in his view. Though Betty showed some resistance against his male chauvinism, she never did so in public. Betty's friend Muriel Feelings told Rickford that Betty made

herself appear less educated in public than she was in reality. Feelings said that Betty "sometimes feigned naïveté around outsiders" and played "the traditional role," but was much "savvier" and "better informed" than she appeared and as a result was often underestimated (Rickford 206).

According to Rickford, "Betty's constrictions coincided with her husband's most sincere efforts to conquer his chauvinism" (203). In an interview in Paris in November 1964, Malcolm said, "If you're in a country that's progressive, the woman is progressive" (Rickford 203). However, his efforts did not mean greater freedom for Betty at all. Right after Malcolm left the Nation of Islam in March, 1964, he established his own organizations, Muslim Mosque Inc., and the Organization of Afro-American Unity. There was also an opportunity for Betty to become involved. The organization offered Saturday classes on different subjects, such as black history and international affairs, but "despite her passion for education, Betty never got involved" (Rickford 204). She missed "social and cultural affairs" that could lift her up, but her role remained the same, and all Malcolm allowed her to assist him with were administrative tasks (205). To some extent, Betty was bound to home due to security reasons. Since Malcolm had left the NOI and broke with Elijah Muhammad, he received threats regularly. Also, Malcolm was planning a campaign in Africa as part of the fight for equality, but some leaders "felt that Malcolm had no business in Africa," and his campaign had "drawn the attention of the State and Justice Departments" (Rickford 212). CIA agents were shadowing him, and Betty and Malcolm "suspected the agents of sinister designs" (212). When he went on his planned trip to Africa from July to November, 1964, to meet different politicians, Malcolm wanted Betty to stay home safe with their children and hired a bodyguard. Betty felt locked up and complained that she couldn't "even go to the store to get a quart of milk." She was constantly surrounded by her bodyguard, Kenyatta, and "the tightening security threatened even her modest liberties" (Rickford 206).

As Rickford points out, Malcolm expected Betty to remain "literally and figuratively beneath the veil" (206). What Malcolm was not aware of was that the tightening security measures during his absence drew her closer to her bodyguard. As Marable explains, "Betty felt particularly vulnerable as an unhappy wife in a strained marriage," and she had been "left behind by Malcolm under the guard of Charles 37X Kenyatta, who held a position of some significance" within the Muslim Mosque, Inc., the organization Malcolm X had started after leaving the Nation of Islam (379). Malcolm had chosen Kenyatta as the only protector of his wife and children, giving him the sole access to the Shabazz household, which was "on the verge of a breakdown as Betty struggled to shoulder the burden of Malcolm's absence" (379). Marable argues that, even though Malcolm had the intention of making his wife feel secure, Betty must have felt "utterly abandoned." With four daughters under five years old, a newborn, a meager income, Betty "could hardly have believed that her husband's political responsibilities should take precedence over her personal needs" (380). According to Marable, these circumstances drew Betty closer to Kenyatta. Betty was often seen going out together with her bodyguard and "within weeks rumors were rife" within the MMI and Mosque No. 7 that "Betty and Kenyatta were sexually involved, and even planned to marry" (380). According to Marable, it is difficult to ascertain the nature of their relationship, other than that it was considered "highly inappropriate" by both orthodox Islam and Nation of Islam standards. Even though Marable seems a reliable source, the affair between Betty and Kenyatta is not discussed by any other author who discuss the relationship between Betty and Malcolm. For example, Rickford does not mention anything that hints at such a relationship between Betty and her bodyguard. Moreover, Marable also mentions Betty's suspicion that her husband was sexually involved with other women and affirms that this was true (379). However, he presents no hard evidence for this.

During Malcolm's absence from July until November, 1964, Betty also seemed to take on more political responsibilities and tasks. Marable explains that even during the time she may have had an affair with Kenyatta, she sent letters and magazines to Malcolm to keep him "at least partially informed" (381). Betty also became directly involved with the OAAU and the MMI. She "met secretly with MMI security head Reuben X Francis, who was planning to start a new youth group" that would function separately from the MMI (381). Marable argues that Betty was "perceived as an influential political force in her own right" (382). It is remarkable that Betty, in a way, took the lead and felt freer to go public while Malcolm was away. She seemed to have felt less inhibited, freed from Malcolm's shadow, and made decisions that derived from her own will.

4. Betty Shabazz as a Widow

4.1 Combining a Career and Raising Six Daughters as a Single Mother

Things started changing, however, from the moment Betty's husband was brutally assassinated in front of herself and her four daughters in 1965. Like Coretta, Betty also wanted to preserve the legacy of her husband, but her first priority was to feed her children (Rickford 259). She was pregnant with twins, although she did not know that they were twins until they were born, and had to raise four daughters, but she had "no house, no savings, and no inheritance" (Rickford 259). She had no income and had to look for ways to survive. It was only late that year that some money started dripping in with the sales of Malcolm's autobiography, although she had to split the royalties with Alex Haley, with whom Malcolm wrote the book (259). Some funds were raised to collect money for the Shabazz family for example by actors P. Jay Sidney and Percy Sutton, but the main income came from a group of women who "launched the most successful and enduring relief drive for Betty and the girls," the Committee of Concerned Mothers (Rickford 260-261). Around twelve thousand dollars

were raised in June, 1965 (262). There was also a concert, organized by a student organization against inequality, at which artists and entertainers such as Sammy Davis Jr., Nina Simone, Ossie Davis, and Ruby Dee performed to "help buy a house for the Shabazz family" (Rickford 262). These are some examples of how Betty and her daughters were financially supported, but the aid was massive and many more groups of people helped the family. The financial support she received enabled Betty to give new direction to her life.

In addition to offering financial security, Betty had to support her daughters emotionally as well after the loss of their father. In an essay in *Ebony* Magazine published in 1969, in which Betty describes the first four years after Malcolm's assassination, she says that they were so grief-stricken that it took her and her daughters "two years before [they] could even hang pictures of him in the house" (Shabazz, "The Legacy" 176). Even though the three oldest daughters could remember the "three different times when someone tried to kill their father," Betty said that she always tried to stress the happy memories to put "their minds at ease" (176). Raising six daughters on her own was a hard task, but she claimed to always follow Malcolm's guidelines regarding child-raising. In the essay, Betty explains that "his indoctrination was so thorough, even to me, that it has become a pattern for our lives" (176). Family memories also helped them to get through this difficult time. She reminisced, "He used to enjoy coming home to a house filled with the odor of baked bread. […] I used to make all of our bread, although when we were married, I didn't know how to cook; I had to learn with on-the-job training" (176). She also remembered that Malcolm thought it important that their daughters "study music because he felt it would teach them precision, poise, timing and coordination" (176). Betty said that she wanted her daughters to travel as much as possible, to "Africa, the West Indies and the Middle East" in particular, and to places that "their father visited" in order to "broaden their scope" as "Malcolm would have wanted" (Shabazz, "The Legacy" 182).

After Malcolm's death, Betty invested a great deal of her time in her own education and career. She started working as a volunteer at the Mount Vernon Day Care Center, the center where she took her daughters for a couple of hours a day (Rickford 304). As Rickford explains, "the school officials recognized her experience with early-childhood education, and she accepted their invitation to join the center as a regular administrative volunteer" (304). She devoted herself to the center and found it "therapeutic" as it "distracted her from grief." Betty also connected with other mothers at the center. She was pleased that "the day care was helping to draw them out of the home while also supporting working women," including single mothers like herself (305). It was also a way for Betty to bring herself out of NOI circles, because her previous public activities, before Malcolm's break with Elijah Muhammed, had all been within the Nation of Islam.

Education was, and had always been, very important to Betty. In 1969, four years after the death of her husband, Betty decided that it was time to finish her bachelor's degree that she had abandoned fifteen years earlier. She received her bachelor's degree within a year, her master's degree in health administration two years later, and decided to go on for a Ph.D. in health administration right after she graduated (Rickford 358). In January 1976, the Medgar Evers College "hired Dr. Betty Shabazz as an associate professor of health sciences with a concentration in nursing" (369). Nine years later, Betty "assumed the title she would hold at the school until her death in 1997: Director of Institutional Advancement and Public Affairs." Her mission was "to empower and inspire students" (380).

Betty's career, in contrast to Coretta's, was not a public one. Betty continued with what she left off before meeting her husband. She resumed her education, because she had to find a job with a steady income to support her family, and to remain in the black middle class that her marriage with Malcolm placed her. The only difference was that she had six daughters to provide for now. Whereas apart from her activism Coretta's career mainly

consisted of her activities at and those that flowed from the King Center, Betty supported herself and her family with a job in education that provided an income.

4.2 Keeping Malcolm's Legacy Alive

When Malcolm X was still alive, Betty was mostly at home. Betty was an intelligent woman who always had her own opinions, but the gender restrictions within the Nation of Islam, and her husband's authority, kept her quiet most of the time. After Malcolm had died, she felt more free to speak up; in fact, she felt it was her duty to do so to keep Malcolm's philosophy alive. However, her assertiveness alienated her from others who had a vested interest in keeping his legacy alive. When Malcolm died, "the only group that truly embraced Malcolm's widow from the time of his death were poor and working-class blacks, who were unafraid of Malcolm's aggressive, separatist rhetoric," Lawrence Otis Graham, an acquaintance of Betty's, pointed out after her death in 1997. Betty invested time and energy to safeguard connections her husband had made when he was still alive. For example, she often attended United Nations receptions "to maintain the ties of friendship established by" Malcolm during "his travels in Africa and the Middle East" (Shabazz, "The Legacy" 174).

Betty's views on how to preserve Malcolm's legacy conflicted with those of Malcolm's former confidants. As Rickford points out, "one of the first encounters involved Razzaq," Malcolm's former right hand, who refused to turn over "all the mail and transfer [Malcolm's] post office box to the widow" when she demanded that he do so. Like some others, Razzaq believed that "he had a greater claim to Malcolm's intellectual legacy and the custodianship of the movement" than his widow (268). This caused frictions between Betty and Malcolm's disciples. Everybody knew Betty as a homemaker and mother because she had kept quiet publicly when her husband was still alive. Now that she began to be more demanding, her assertiveness was resented by Malcolm's circle of confidants. Another

change, Rickford suggests, was that Betty "was abandoning some of the strictures of her first-lady role." Although it was a "humble transition," with Betty trying out "dangling jewelry and colorful dresses" in the first year, it was clear that she had changed (269). She also broke ties with members of the Organization of Afro-American Unity, founded by her late husband (Rickford 271). Betty did not like Ella Collins, the interim leader of the organization, and publicly expressed her displeasure with her. She said, "it's saddening and disheartening to see people who know nothing about it taking it over" (qtd. in Rickford 272). However, she did not hesitate to pursue her goal: getting "as much of Malcolm in print as possible," not in the least because she needed the money the publication of the papers would provide to take care of her family (Rickford 273).

One thing that Betty and Coretta had in common is that they both had the idea of founding a memorial center for their husbands. As we have seen, Coretta built the King Center to preserve Malcolm's legacy, but it was also the base for all her career-related activities. Betty also wanted a center for Malcolm, their daughter Ilyasah Shabazz has said, and in 1992/1993 "formed a coalition of community, political, and educational leaders to establish the Malcolm X Memorial Center at the Audubon Ballroom" in Washington to "triumphantly honor her husband's legacy" ("How Betty Shabazz Persevered"). It was not easy to accomplish that, however. On the website of the Shabazz Center, Ilyasah Shabazz gives more details about the founding of the center, which Betty wanted to be located in the Audubon Ballroom and Theater, where Malcolm X held his weekly meetings with the Organization of Afro-American Unity, and the place where he was shot to death. The Audubon Ballroom had closed its doors after Malcolm's assassination. The plan was to erect a medical center there, but this plan was opposed by grassroots groups and by Betty who wanted "the building to remain standing as a memorial" to Malcolm's "humanitarian efforts," and as a "permanent symbol of the African American struggle for equality." A section of the

building could be used as a memorial, and Betty was responsible for the planning of the memorial center. Ilyasah continues, "My mother was fond of sharing the plans for the Center with me. And, I enjoyed seeing her filled with love, admiration, and pride as she talked about the Center's mission to carry on my father's vision and work." There were challenges, though, and "promises that were not being kept in making the Center a real and living memorial to her husband." Because of these issues, the Memorial Center was not founded yet when Betty died in 1997. "The Malcolm X and Dr. Betty Shabazz Memorial and Educational Center officially opened its door to the public in May of 2005" and was located in the Audubon Ballroom Theater as Betty had wished and planned (The Shabazz Center). The Center "provides cultural, educational, and social programs designed to heighten awareness and further the cause of human rights globally" (The Shabazz Center). Moreover, there are documents, videos, photographs, and commentaries for visitors to learn about the lives of Betty and Malcolm (The Shabazz Center).

Next to her activities surrounding the Memorial Center, she mostly visited commemorational activities organized by others. Betty herself did not organize many commemorations herself. As Rickford points out Betty, "could not bear to visit her husband's grave" (303). This may indicate that she was not fully willing to accept the fact he was gone forever. Maybe it was too final or too confronting for her and perhaps she preferred to focus on doing other things in her life. Ruth Clark, a close friend of Betty's, points out that Betty always referred to Malcolm in the present tense, which she takes as a sign that Betty "never dealt with Malcolm being dead" (Brown 46). Betty felt the urge and the responsibility to preserve her husband's legacy, but did not really know how to. This raises an interesting question: was Betty even capable of preserving the legacy of Malcolm if she did not accept his death in the first place? Toni Fay, another friend of Betty's, was with her when she was in the process of writing a book about Malcolm. "She was working on that book, but she could

not get the story told," and was afraid that she would not finish it "because it was just too painful" (Brown 60). This also resulted in her not attending one of the annual commemorative events to honor the life of Malcolm X, the annual Ferncliff pilgrimages (Rickford 303): in 1965, Malcolm's sister, Ella Collins, and the OAAU had first organized this commemorative ceremonial event, which would be held annually and grew into a large manifestation over the years (Cunningham; Rickford 303). Another indication was her short-lived affiliation with the Brotherhood organization, which was a successor of Muslim Mosque, Inc. One of Malcolm's last directives, on February 18, 1965, had been, "Take up arms to defend thyself." He said this in a speech three days before he died to students and teachers at Barnard College in New York. Betty accepted an "honorary membership to the [Brotherhood] organization," and in the beginning often went "shooting with the troupe." However, as Rickford observes, Betty "was more concerned with caring for her daughters than with rehearsing for the militant self-defense her late husband had preached" (303).

Betty was always very careful about which memorial services she would attend and which Malcolm projects she would support. She was not always pleased with the way her husband's name and legacy were used, complaining that "some people invoke Malcolm's name to justify some highly unorganized, anarchistic ventures that he would never have dreamed of becoming involved in" (qtd. in Rickford 311). However, as time elapsed, Betty – like Coretta – "began dealing more forthrightly with her public role and discovering her power to promote Malcolm" (Rickford 314). She, for example, sold the movie rights of his autobiography to producer Marvin Worth in 1967 (314, 456). Since the movie was not in production yet, a few years later, in 1972, Betty helped promote Warner Brothers' documentary about Malcolm. When many years later Worth finally paired with African-American filmmaker Spike Lee, after the script and director had changed multiple times, Betty's role in the production became more important (457). Rickford explains that, according

to Lee, Betty was very volatile and dissatisfied with the script (457, 458). She was especially unhappy about the way she was represented in the film: "a loving and dutiful wife" who often clashed with her husband (458). It is not clear whether the final script of the movie was altered, but Betty eventually supported the film, which was released in 1992, simply titled *Malcolm X*, featuring Denzel Washington as Malcolm and Angela Bassett as Betty. Betty hoped that it would accomplish what she had tried to achieve in the previous twenty-five years: preserving Malcolm's legacy (459). In addition to her support for the film, Betty also "contributed her personal recollections to projects she deemed worthy" (316). Furthermore, Betty occasionally appeared at events to honor Malcolm's birthday or the anniversary of his death. "When you look at the condition of our youth around the world, it seems that Malcolm's teachings are the only thing that's able to inspire and motivate them," she told the *Washington Post* in 1987 during a voting rally organized by Jesse Jackson (Sanchez). She never "imagined herself as a token," though, and made it clear that she did not want to "live off [her] husband's reputation" (321). She was not afraid to take initiatives and express notions in public that were not in line with Malcolm's views, and always stood for what she believed in and not necessarily for what her husband believed in (Rickford 329-339). In fact, Betty remained a very private person who preferred not to appear in public: in her obituary, the *New York Times* quoted her as having said, "I'm private. But there were some public things I had to do, because of his commitment to the cause. I love him and he loved the people" (McFadden).

In a speech at the Malcolm X Mural Dedication in 1996, the year before her death, Betty talked about the influence Malcolm had on her and how it had formed her, emphasizing that her husband had taught her everything about responsibility and that she wouldn't be where she is now without the guidance she received from him (Shabazz, "Malcolm X Mural Dedication"). Though the occasion perhaps called for such an expression of humility, Betty

obviously deserved the main credit for taking on the many responsibilities Malcolm's death left her with.

4.3 Betty's Legacy

On June 23, 1997, Betty Shabazz died at the age of 61. Her troubled twelve-year old grandson had set a fire in Betty's apartment three weeks earlier, on June 1 (Swarns). Betty had suffered third-degree burns over 80 percent of her body, and after five operations and three weeks of fighting for her life, Betty "made a transition," as her daughter, Attallah, called it (McFadden). Her obituary in the *New York Times* recollected that she had had a busy speaking schedule, "at high school and college commencements, at conferences on black history and race relations, on television and at the openings of plays, films and other events based on Malcolm X." The main topics she spoke about were "health and education for disadvantaged children, but also Malcolm X and the causes for which he lived and died" (McFadden). A year after Betty died, a commemorative book, edited by Jamie Foster Brown, was published, *Betty Shabazz: A Sisterfriends' Tribute in Words and Pictures,* in which forty women who were related to Betty give insights into the relationship they had with her. The book is valuable for my study, because the stories these women share are personal and show the impact and influence Betty had on them. A remark by Betty's sister-in-law, Ameenah Omar, sums up what all these stories together say: it would be unjust to Betty if her life were to be solely linked to the legacy of her husband. Omar points out that "Betty's mark on [her] life and many other women of colors' lives was not directly related to Malcolm. […] Betty was a great person in her own right" (Brown 41). Betty's friend DeLores Tucker recalls Betty's response when Tucker once said to her that she had always thought that "the source of [her] faith, dignity, strength, and commitment to justice" came from Malcolm: "No girlfriend, I grew up with that ingrained deep in my soul. If anything, I inspired him" (Brown 83). Betty

always "sought out young people, particularly women, and gave them encouragement," wrote Cathy Hughes who felt that Betty "had an aura about her, even more so, to [her], than Coretta Scott King did, and maybe it's because Coretta Scott King had more visibility in the media (Brown 68). She wasn't much of an enigma – Coretta Scott King didn't have the mystique to [her] that Betty Shabazz did" (Brown 74). The comparison Hughes makes here is interesting, because it suggests an important difference between Coretta and Betty. Hughes says Coretta was less mysterious than Shabazz, perhaps because of her visibility in the media and her constant occupation with the preservation of Martin's legacy. What the majority of the testimonies in this book have in common is that the authors all mention the intimate conversations they had with Betty and how they bonded instantly, and about how Betty always made them feel important and how she remembered them whenever she met them again at an event. "It was always a little something more" (Brown 78). She was seen as "a royal icon of womanhood, motherhood, and sisterhood" (81).

According to Dorothy Height, president of the National Council of Negro Women from 1957 to 1998 and a friend of Betty's, what distinguishes Betty from Coretta is that Betty was more of a "private person" who "wanted to make a better life for herself, her children, and her community." She "would sit and talk with people and not only answer questions but also share with them her thoughts. She saw the value, and it was never something that she was doing as a celebrity. She always did it as a person who cared about people" (Brown 89). Thus, Betty did not seek or receive much media attention, but had an impact on people on a personal level. We cannot assume, however, that this is not true for Coretta, only because there is more evidence of such accounts for Betty. As Niara Sudarkasa, President of Lincoln University, indicates, Betty "lent her name" to many humanitarian and philanthropic projects throughout her life, but she did this "without fanfare and with little or no public acknowledgement." She gave "generously of her own modest resources in support of many such projects," both

nationally and internationally (Brown 95, 96) That she touched the lives of many individuals and collectives was clear at her funeral. She was the first "woman of color in recent U.S. history who "has brought together so many folks from all levels of government, education, the arts – and just folks" (Brown 103).

Thus, even though Betty found it important to preserve the legacy of her husband, her obituary made clear that it was not her only occupation. Whereas Coretta almost literally followed in Martin's footsteps, Betty prioritized other things. She invested much time and energy in her children, her academic career, and friendships with other women. She even had her own weekly radio program which was devoted to women. After Betty's death, Cynthia Smith, who worked together with Betty on her radio program New York's WBLS-FM, *A Forum for Women,* reminisces how Betty always opened her radio program playing and singing and dancing along to Chaka Khan's "I'm Every Woman." Betty "used her program to educate women and men on how to use resources available to them." She "discussed a variety of topics, including education, politics, health, and youth-oriented issues," and her guests "ranged from book authors, community activists, and everyday people to heads of state, celebrities, and business leaders" (Brown 106). There are only a few sources that briefly mention Betty's radio program. Sharon Shahid did so in 1990, but she does not discuss what kind of radio show it was and did not further elaborate on it. Her biographer, Rickford (481), and the writers of her obituary in the *Washington Post,* Dale Russakoff and Blaine Harden, only mention it once, also without elaborating on it. Betty herself mentioned that she had a radio program in a speech at the Malcolm X Mural Dedication in 1996, but also does not give any details about it other than that it is in New York (Shabazz, "Malcolm X Mural Dedication"). The small number of sources in which Betty's radio show is mentioned indicates that not many people were aware of what her career entailed, and it also shows that

Betty was not focused or interested in becoming a “celebrity” or even seeking media attention.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have shown that there were significant parallels between the lives of Coretta Scott King and Betty Shabazz. Both women were raised as devout Christians in an environment that stressed the importance of education. While Coretta grew up in a black middle-class family, studied music and engaged in political activism, the working-class Betty prepared for a more practical career, having to earn a living. Whereas Coretta wanted to become a music teacher, Betty wanted to become a nurse or teacher. Betty chose to go to the historically black Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee University in Coretta's home state, Alabama. Coretta, by contrast, deliberately chose not to study at a black college but went to the historically white Antioch University.

Coretta devoted most of her time to motherhood and the household, but she always sought ways to continue to contribute to the struggle for social justice. Even though Betty wanted to work outside the home, her life was more restricted than that of Coretta. Whereas Martin had allowed Coretta some freedom outside of the home, Malcolm was stricter and wanted his wife to be only a mother and a wife. Betty did not only have to deal with American gender norms, but also with specific gender norms within the Nation of Islam, such as dress rules. Both women experienced tensions within their marriage due to their husbands' demands that they stay home to be a fulltime mother and housewife. Betty and Coretta, both raising four children when their husbands were still alive, were unhappy with the frequent absences of their husbands, who were absorbed in their movements. Coretta was more open about her issues at home and in her marriage than Betty, who was very private and rarely gave interviews or sought the spotlight.

Betty and Coretta both have in common that their activities during their marriages were more limited than after their husbands' deaths. They had little time left for non-domestic activities and they mainly supported their husbands, as women in the 1950s were expected to

do, even those, like them, with a college education. Coretta eventually created a partnership with Martin to support him, but also to undertake activities she organized herself. Betty's activities outside the home were limited to community work for the NOI.

Another thing that Coretta and Betty had in common was that both were ambivalent in the way they expressed their feelings about their marriage. On the one hand, they fully stood behind their decision to support their husbands in everything they did, at least publicly. They often said that they were happily married and content with their lives. At the same time, both women often expressed their dissatisfaction about the limited time they could spend with their husbands. It is hard to determine Betty and Coretta's true feelings, because there obviously was much pressure on them to give a positive account of their married lives. The spotlight was on Malcolm and Martin, and Coretta and Betty did not want and could not afford to tarnish their husbands' careers or image by generating negative publicity.

A major change for both women came after the assassination of Martin and Malcolm. Coretta and Betty were determined to preserve the legacies of their husbands. Coretta founded the King Center right after Martin's death in 1968 and made a memorial of it. Betty, too, was working on a memorial for Malcolm. Coretta made a career out of preserving Martin's legacy, which provided her with an income after his death. Betty, on the other hand, mostly focused on her daughters in the first years after Malcolm's death. She was rarely seen in the media and undertook few activities. It was only four years after Malcolm's death that Betty started focusing on her career. She worked as an associate professor of health sciences with a concentration in nursing at the Medgar Evers College.

Coretta and Betty also devoted attention to causes that they deemed important and that were not connected to Martin or Malcolm's teachings. Coretta was actively involved in social justice and peace movements, which logically flowed from her work for the King Center. Betty was also concerned with social justice issues, albeit at a much later stage in her life

when she was planning a memorial center for Malcolm, and when she got her own radio show on women's issues. It was especially during their times as widows that they became independent and refused themselves to be held back by gender restrictions. They both achieved many of their goals and made something of their lives. Coretta, however, raised much more controversy than Betty because of the way she and the King family ran the King Center. Whereas Betty's motives were never doubted, Coretta's were.

Both Coretta and Betty did much to deserve admiration and praise for their perseverance. The hardships they had to endure were trying, and it was never easy being married to men who were under constant pressure and whose lives were under threat. The problems and trials they had to overcome testify to great strength of mind. They did not know many moments of rest during their marriages and as widows. They raised their children by themselves, worked in- and outside the home, educated themselves, kept alive the legacies of their husbands, and fought for social justice and many other good causes. It is safe to say that Coretta and Betty did everything in their power to preserve the legacies of their husbands, and to provide for themselves and their children. It is now up to them who care for the legacies of Betty and Coretta to make sure that they are preserved, too.

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