

SYMPOSIUM:
THE DEATH AND LIFE OF MARTIN
LUTHER KING JR., 1968–2018

Introduction

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On the fiftieth anniversary of his death by assassination on 4 April 2018, commemorative events were held to honor the life and legacy Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in cities and towns all over the world. In Memphis, Tennessee, former colleagues and friends were joined by thousands of admirers congregated at the National Civil Rights Museum that now includes the room in the Lorraine Hotel where King spent his last night. The tributes offered there were joined by those participating in a conference held at the British Academy in London at the same time. King is now a global twentieth-century icon, but he was known throughout the world during his lifetime. From the time of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 to the campaigns in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963 to his receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 in Oslo, Norway, King was known internationally. And as he became closely associated with the movement inside and outside the United States to end the war in Vietnam, his activities were reported by radio, television, and print media all over the world.

This *Journal of African American History* (JAAH) symposium examines “The Death and Life of Martin Luther King Jr., 1968–2018” and begins with Jason Sokol’s “The World Stands Aghast: The Death of Martin Luther King Jr. in Global Perspective.” The assassination and subsequent rioting in scores of US cities and towns were reported by news media throughout the world; and

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in Kenya, Mexico, Australia, East and West Germany, the Soviet Union, and other countries, there were numerous public events and memorial activities. "In Madrid, Spaniards packed a church service for King while some 1,500 people stood outside, prying open windows and doors to hear the tributes," Sokol reports (354, in this issue); and several anti-Vietnam war marches and protests were organized in East and West Berlin.

The death of Martin Luther King, as with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963, is an event that most adults alive at the time remember so clearly that they can tell you where they were, and what they were doing, when they heard the news. For me, there was an outpouring of sympathy by Spaniards in Salamanca where I was studying at the university. I had arrived in Spain with my fellow Penn Staters in January 1968, and we were all stunned and saddened to learn what had happened in Memphis on 4 April. Given the tenor of the times it was both easy and difficult to understand what had occurred and the global responses. And Jason Sokol examines the responses of those who opposed King and all that he stood for. In Northern Ireland and South Africa, the leaders charged King with being a troublemaker who got what he deserved, while Enock Powell, a member of the British Parliament, declared that the social advancements permitted recent immigrants of color would lead to "Rivers of Blood" in British cities.

The campaign to make 15 January, King's birthday, a national holiday began shortly after his death. This was one of the goals of the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, established by Coretta Scott King in 1969. The National Parks Service created the King National Historic Site in Atlanta in 1980, which includes the Center, King's birth home, and Ebenezer Baptist Church. The campaign for the King Holiday in the 1970s was greatly assisted by members of the Congressional Black Caucus and other politicians and even the musician and composer Stevie Wonder. President Ronald Reagan signed the King Holiday Act in November 1983, and the first federal holiday was celebrated in January 1985. Daniel Fleming's contribution to this symposium, "'I have a copyright': The Privatization of Martin Luther King's Dream," takes the story from the establishment of the King Holiday Commission in 1984 to its collapse and closure in 1996, mainly due to the objections coming from King's children. The end of the commission was just the beginning of the highly controversial efforts by the King family to privatize and benefit financially from the dissemination of King's words, images, and publications.

The Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Washington, DC, is one of the most visited monuments on the National Mall. The establishment of the memorial can be traced to the goals and objectives of members of King's college fraternity, Alpha Phi Alpha. The prominent scholar Robert L. Harris at Cornell University was not only the Alpha historian during the years of fundraising for

the memorial, he also played an active role in the deliberations. In “Reflections on the Building of the Martin Luther King Memorial in Washington, DC,” Harris provides his personal insights into the various decisions made by the Martin Luther King Memorial Foundation Project, eventually authorized by Congress in 1998. The foundation was responsible for the memorial’s placement, themes, and design; and Harris offers his perspective on the controversies that arose among those involved, even after the memorial was dedicated by President Barack Obama in October 2011.

This *JAAH* symposium is meant to be a contribution to the ongoing process of documenting Dr. King’s legacy to determine those aspects of American and African American life, culture, and events around the world that were impacted by or have changed since his death in April 1968.