

**Martin Luther King  
and *THE TRUMPET  
OF CONSCIENCE*  
Today**

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# Introduction

## “A Sick Society”

*I keep telling you, this is a sick society.*  
—Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., 1963

This *is* a sick society. The same is true, if not even more so, in the twenty-first century. We are indeed a sick society. So very sick, in fact, that a global public health crisis forcing the entire world to pause could not pause the killing of Black people. It offered no respite from the reality of anti-Black racism and violence in the United States. Despite the fact that we had to rest from so many activities, including school, work, travel, leisure, entertainment, and church, the loss and devaluation of Black life manifest in racist violence continued. The pandemic could not pause police brutality, racist violence, nor racial terror meted out against Black and Brown people in this country. It could not stem the tide of white supremacy. Indeed racism has been a feature of American society since the arrival of the *Mayflower*, when multiple indigenous populations were wiped out to make way for the pilgrims, and then again in 1619 with the arrival of the first group of enslaved Africans on the shores of Virginia—racial injustice has been flagrantly persistent.

Just as the violence against Black people can be traced to slavery and colonization, the determination of Black resistance goes

back just as far. From the advent of slavery onward, racism has been a feature of US democracy that the enslaved have resisted. The COVID-19 pandemic further amplified the problems of social inequity in our society as Black and Brown people were struck by the disease and subsequently died in disproportionate numbers. It quickly became clear that racial discrimination as well as the lack of access to health care multiplied the vulnerability of Black people during the pandemic, and the wealth gap exacerbated this vulnerability due to the disproportionate number of Black and Latinx people serving as essential workers. As one organizer expressed, “The coronavirus has been anything but a great equalizer. . . . It’s been the great revealer, pulling the curtain back on the class divide and exposing how deeply unequal this country is.”<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the novel coronavirus has magnified divisions that have long existed in our society—whether it is the fact that Black and Brown people have disproportionately been infected with the virus or denied care, or, as the population of essential workers attests to, many Black and Brown people have had no choice but to go to work. The pandemic has magnified racial inequality in the United States—from who is able to social distance to who is disproportionately at greater risk of being vulnerable to the disease. As this global public health crisis unfolded, I wondered what our social justice warriors would think about this moment. I wondered how Harriet Tubman would lead raids at a time when people could not huddle together for warmth or comfort. What would Sojourner Truth say about the Black and Brown female essential workers leaving their families to care for others only to increase the potential risk of their own families when they return home? What would Martin Luther King say about the disparities in public health? Knowing that King was an advocate of the poor and the oppressed, I am confident that he would be appalled and dismayed by how health care has been one of the latest platforms for economic and racial injustice to take root.

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<sup>1</sup>Abdi Latif Dahir, “‘Instead of Coronavirus, the Hunger Will Kill Us.’ A Global Food Crisis Looms,” *New York Times*, April 22, 2020.

Indeed, the plight of the poor was always foremost on his mind, and he was attentive to how class was operating in the lives of poor Black and Brown people.

Given King's enduring commitment to revealing how economic injustice plagues our society, how would he respond to how poverty has made people more vulnerable to COVID-19? How would he react to our current lack of access to health care causing more harm to people who are sick and poor, or to the racial wealth gap that has not improved since his death? How would King respond to the reality that 61 percent of Black people in the United States are still living in poverty or just above the poverty line?

In our sick society, the pandemic has also revealed what King referred to as the conjoined evils of racism, poverty, materialism, and militarism that shape our society with nefarious outcomes. It has unveiled how few people of conscience populate our government. It has emphasized that the vast majority of people in our society do not operate as people of conscience. It has set new terms for our collective need for transformation and justice in this world. In the words of one historian, "The pandemic will not create the social transformation we need, but it will set the terms for it."<sup>2</sup> If the terms are being set, then what should be clear to us is that our sick society still has an incredibly long way to go. With people suffering in this moment, would King say, as he did in *The Trumpet of Conscience*, that "disinherited people all over the world are bleeding to death from deep social and economic wounds"<sup>3</sup> I suspect that he would—and that the persistence of these problems would grieve his heart.

In May 2020, three months after much of the northeastern United States was sheltering in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic, news about the pandemic gave way to a different illness. The fatal illness of racism reentered the spotlight after the video-recorded killing of

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<sup>2</sup>Nikhil Pal Singh, "Reclaiming Populism: From the Dying World to the World We Want," *Boston Review*, April 29, 2020.

<sup>3</sup>Martin Luther King Jr., *The Trumpet of Conscience* (New York: Beacon Press, 2010), 55.

George Floyd was made public. In rapid succession, that same year saw a series of deaths and events that were met with widespread outrage. On March 13, Breonna Taylor was killed by Louisville police. On May 5—just seventy-four days after she was killed—Ahmaud Arbery was murdered by vigilantes while jogging in his Georgia neighborhood. May 16 also marked the ten-year anniversary of the violent death of Aiyana Stanley-Jones, a seven-year-old Black girl fatally shot in the head by a white police officer during a raid in Detroit. (Aiyana Stanley-Jones would have been seventeen years old and possibly graduating from high school in the class of 2020.) Tamir Rice, who was killed by police in Cleveland at the age of twelve, would have been eighteen this year, and possibly beginning college. On May 25, George Floyd was killed, or more precisely, he was suffocated to death by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, who put a knee on his neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds while three other police officers stood and watched. Were it not for the bravery of a seventeen-year-old girl, Darnella Frazier, who captured the killing on camera, what happened to Floyd may have gone unnoticed. In that video, we hear Floyd's final words: "I can't breathe." He calls for his mother with his last breath. That sentence heard throughout the world—"I can't breathe"—is painfully familiar. "I can't breathe" haunts us because it recalls the death of Eric Garner, killed by a New York police officer in 2014. As a refrain, it is a reminder that we live in a sick society, in which Black people are gasping for breath, that Black people need to breathe. Then before summer 2020 had ended, another unarmed Black man was shot by police. This time, Jacob Blake was shot seven times in the back—*seven times in the back*—while his children watched from the car. Though Blake continues to live, he remains paralyzed from the waist down. By the end of the summer of 2020, it became commonplace to observe that the United States was facing two pandemics—COVID-19 and anti-Black racism.

I wonder how Martin Luther King would have reacted to these deaths. What would he have to say about Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud

Arbery, or George Floyd? Having witnessed the deaths of Black girls like Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, Addie May Collins, and Denise McNair who died as a result of the Ku Klux Klan bombing of a Birmingham church, what would he say about seven-year-old Aiyana Stanley-Jones killed by police in Detroit? Would King, who once said that “for the 35 million poor people in America—not to mention, just yet, the poor in other nations—there is a kind of strangulation in the air,”<sup>4</sup> associate the sentence “I can’t breathe” with the strangulation in the air that is systemic injustice? Would he invoke the sacred promise of breath and its biblical significance? How would Martin Luther King respond to the torturous refrain of “I can’t breathe”? Would he, like William Barber, return to the etymology of the word “breath” and its *pneuma*, which references the wind and reminds us that breath is holy? Would he, like the august theologian M. Shawn Copeland, offer a reflection of that breath to guide us in a meditation rooted in *ruah*, asking how the Spirit would respond to Black deaths? As Copeland writes,

Pentecost came early this year: divine *ruah* broke through the walls of our here-and-now, interrupting racial oppression, instigating hope and action for change. In Hebrew, the word *ruah* denotes spirit, breath, and wind, and it is almost always connected with the life-giving attribute of God. Spirit-*ruah*—paradoxical, elusive, uncontrollable, absolutely free, repeatedly entering into human history—inspires, exhorts, reproves, prompts, animates, empowers, and sustains human persons in our active imaginative engagement with one another, and with the transcendent Triune God. The breath of Spirit-*ruah* rushes through our land. Can we hear it crying out in a dying man’s words—“I can’t breathe”? Can we feel the energy of Spirit-*ruah* rousing hundreds of thousands of people to protest the deaths of George Floyd and of so many others suffocated by

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<sup>4</sup>King, *Trumpet of Conscience*, 56–57.

white racist supremacy? Can we allow ourselves to be moved by the power of Spirit-*ruah* to understand what it would mean to be *able* to breathe freely in America?<sup>5</sup>

Or, would King, like Reverend Kaji Dousa of Park Avenue Christian Church in New York City, be overcome with a holy rage that drives her into the streets to lead protests? What would King say about Breonna Taylor, who, relative to the men killed at the beginning of 2020, has inspired far less outcry and action? Breonna lay asleep in her bed when police burst through the door and shot her dead. Would King take to social media as so many have and demand justice day after day, week after week, while her killers remain at large? Would he use the pulpit to protest like the Reverend Otis Moss, whose sermon “Between the Cross and the Lynching Tree” revisits the words of the venerated theologian James Cone to lament and prophesy new hope for this generation?

The similarity between the theologies of James Cone and Martin Luther King has been noted by many previous scholars. They both espoused similar views of racism, economic injustice, and the necessity for the person of faith to address these issues. Cone, however, has clearly placed the burden of reconciliation squarely on the shoulders of those with the most power and ability to change the system. “The ever-present violence of white supremacy—psychic, physical and spiritual—in the black community should be the chief concern of white Americans. Reconciliation is a white responsibility.”<sup>6</sup> Cone has also gone to great lengths to decry the pervasiveness of white supremacy in our society, especially in churches and in theology.

Would King decry the injustice of incarcerated people held captive in prisons? What would he say about the prison industrial

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<sup>5</sup>M. Shawn Copeland, “Breath & Fire: The Spirit Moves Us toward Racial Justice,” *Commonweal*, July 8, 2020.

<sup>6</sup>James Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody: The Making of a Black Theologian* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 47.

complex, given his commitment to the gospel and a Christ who came to set the captives free? Would he be disgusted that the US prison population has swelled to more than 2.1 million people and morphed into a system that the scholar Michelle Alexander aptly describes as the “new Jim Crow”? Would he look at mass incarceration and see it for what it is, a crisis that is afflicting the poor and vulnerable in disproportionate numbers?

Would the last words of George Floyd grab hold of King and jolt him out of a pandemic sleep into a new nightmare of American racism?

*I can't breathe.*

*I can't breathe.*

*I can't breathe.*

It is a haunting refrain that strikes us even harder now in 2020 as we live through the realities of a pernicious pandemic—a respiratory virus that literally takes breath away from Black and Brown people in alarming numbers. Just as COVID-19 sucks life away from the lungs of those who are stricken by it, racism is both the air that we breathe and the system that takes our breath away.

Sadly, and as many of us are painfully aware, the tragic loss of and disregard for Black lives is not unique to the twenty-first century. It is far from new. It is why King fought, and preached, and protested, and taught the way he did decades ago. It is far from new, because we have been here before. Most Black and Brown people in the United States are not surprised when lives are senselessly taken, or when Black lives seem not to matter to people outside of ourselves. We have been in a space of mourning over the tragic loss of life of our Black brothers and sisters for most of the twenty-first century. Not only since 2013 when the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter was first used after the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the man who killed seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin, or again after the death of Michael Brown in 2014, or when #SayHerName was set



in motion by the death of Rekia Boyd, and, in fact, any time police officers kill Black people and are found not guilty by juries—not only in the twenty-first century.

As King knew far too well in the 1950s and 1960s during the civil rights movement, Black people fought for their right to be human and were faced with ongoing terror. The realities of lynching, being brutalized and beaten by the police, inflictions of state and vigilante violence were quotidian realities not unique to the mid-twentieth century. Racial terror has been a feature of life in the United States for more than four excruciating centuries. The fact is that it has been occurring since 1619 when the first group of Africans were brought to this country and enslaved. We have been here before. The protests are familiar, the groundswell is familiar, the chanting refrain of “Black lives matter” is familiar. And yet, it *feels* different now. We have been here before, but not like this . . . because we are in a pandemic. We are in a global public health crisis because of which the entire world is forced to pause. Yet the racial terror that Black people are subject to in the United States is not on pause, as these deaths remind us. It persists mercilessly and without impunity.

*I can't breathe.*

*I can't breathe.*

*I can't breathe.*

Gasping for air we cry, we post on social media, we call our representatives, we pray and protest, we work for change, we attempt to explain why to our children when we have no answers ourselves. We look for ways to engage in direct action. We support antiracist organizations and raise bail funds. We provide booklists for our white friends and neighbors; we hope that they actually read the books and their children are raised differently so that our children will be safer. We accept speaking engagements, we write op-eds to contextualize rebellion, we go on television to add context to the pain, to explain, and to perform. We shed tears in the car, or in any quiet time we have to ourselves. We are not okay. We cry in anguish

. . . all without pausing for breath. We beg God to have mercy on us and make it all stop. We channel our rage and our heartbreak into activism. We preach sermons, lead protests, write columns, write to our public officials, teach our children, and encourage people to vote. We try not to lose hope. These are the forms of activism that have become commonplace in the twenty-first century. Protesters are still met with violence by police. Tear gas is still sprayed on innocent faces. People are still rounded up and put in jail for protesting.

*I can't breathe.*

*I can't breathe.*

*I can't breathe.*

Today just as before, we can say that “this is a sick society.” As the quotation that begins this book makes clear, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King did not mince words in describing the state of the nation. He spoke the language of lament as frequently and as poignantly as he spoke the language of exhortation. He expressed sorrow as much as he prophesied. While we choose to focus on his prophetic anointing and how he dreamed of a more just future, we would do well to explore how the moral mission of his work operated according to a logic of calling things out. In fact, lament is essential to our struggle for social justice. Without lament, we cannot fully express the pain and the suffering to which we are subject. Without lament, we cannot readjust our vision to see the hope on the horizon. Without lament, we cannot feel our feelings and not to feel those feelings is to deny our humanity as we pursue change.

Our critique of “call-out” and “cancel culture” in the twenty-first century has become a way to chide young people for not being as peace-loving as their predecessors like King. I agree that people, as human beings, are not meant to be cancelled. But as a college professor, I have listened to my students explain that “calling out” and “cancelling” is one of the only ways to assert power—however tenuously—for those who do not have enough. In fact, the determination to admonish this generation is so pervasive that even King’s

own children have been challenged for what others erroneously perceive as misunderstanding his vision. But in fact, “calling out” people was as important a part of King’s work as “calling in.” He called out the wealthy; he called out white people; he called out the government; he called out Christians; he called out the white moderate; he called out his Black brothers and sisters. So when we accuse young people of deploying call-out culture for deplorable ends, we are overlooking a history and a tradition.

Even while the virus kills Black people at an unrelenting rate, the other sources of death in our lives tragically prevail. Furthermore, when we recall that King also referenced the “very legitimate anger” against racial injustice, we know that our anger is not the problem.<sup>7</sup> Anger was not a foreign emotion to King. More importantly, anger was not an emotion that Jesus shied from. What would King say to this generation today? What would he say to the young people like my students who are hungry for real change, frustrated by the lack of progress, and disheartened by how long this struggle has been waged? How would King react to the continued devaluation of Black life and the persistent threats against our humanity and dignity today?

To be clear, this is not a book *about* Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. Rather, it is a reflection on what we can learn when we take the insights of King’s last set of lectures and apply that wisdom to contemporary social justice issues. What happens when we listen to *The Trumpet of Conscience* and discern how it resonates today? In other words, I am interested in thinking about what would you—as an activist, a student, a believer, a parent, a feminist—say today if your conscience left you no other choice? Would you speak out against the global refugee crisis? Would you decry the injustice embedded in the Palestine-Israel conflict? Would you condemn the ravages of climate change? Would you stand unequivocally with rape survivors all over the world? This book takes these questions seriously, using *The Trumpet of Conscience*—in my view one of the

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<sup>7</sup>King, *Trumpet of Conscience*, 60.

woefully understudied works of Dr. King—as a point of departure. The book asks you to focus on the radical parts of his vision and seeks to apply them to our contemporary moment. It recognizes and mulls over comments like the one King made on April 4, 1967, in a speech at Riverside Church in Manhattan, in which he said, “Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor, it must be demanded by the oppressed.” This speech, in which King spoke candidly, and against the advice of others, about the Israel-Palestine conflict, was a moment that helps to capture his radical vision. It gives us a glimpse into the fullness of his vision and helps us to imagine how he would respond to social justice issues unfolding in the twenty-first century. Like Brandon Terry and Tommie Shelby, I concur that in our remembrance of King, “It is imperative that we consider what his thought still has to teach us about how to build a more just and peaceful world.”<sup>8</sup>

What do we learn when we wrestle with the parts of King’s vision that make us uncomfortable, based on readings of *The Trumpet of Conscience*? How do the social justice issues we are facing today benefit when we apply King’s vision? Alternatively described as “King’s Call to Peace,” these lectures from 1967 are a bold critique of what he calls the triple American evils of racism, materialism, and militarism. Throughout, he lambasts the evils of racism, the scourge of poverty, the snare of capitalism, and the horrors of war. This book asks the questions: What does King’s call to peace look like today? What does peace mean to us today? How might we take some of the lessons in *The Trumpet of Conscience* written over fifty years ago and apply those to our current visions for racial justice, gender justice, and socioeconomic inequalities? Throughout I explore and offer a Black feminist and faith-based understanding of pressing social justice issues, all the while asking questions similar to the ones King posed in his speeches.

A powerful example from another one of King’s speeches that I

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<sup>8</sup>Brandon Terry and Tommie Shelby, *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 2.

return to throughout this book comes from “I’ve Been to the Mountain-top.” This speech was given in support of striking sanitation workers in Tennessee, and in it King retells the story of the “Good Samaritan” and ends by suggesting that those who refused to stop for the wounded man on the road ask, “If I stop to help this man what will happen to me?” However, the Good Samaritan reverses the question and asks, “If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?” Today, people committed to social justice must ask these kinds of questions: “If I do not stop to help families separated at the border, what will happen to them?”; “If I do not stop to help Syrian refugees, what will happen to them?”; “If I do not stop to help those suffering as a result of income inequality, what will happen to them?”; “If I do not stop to help survivors of rape and sexual abuse, what will happen to them?”; and “If I do not stop to help #BlackLivesMatter activists, what will happen to them?” As Vincent Harding points out in *An Inconvenient Hero*, the questions that animated King’s conscience were “Who is my neighbor” and “What does love demand?”<sup>9</sup> What interests me about King’s framing of the Samaritan story is that it extends far beyond our current understanding of the term “ally” whereby the goal is to put love and justice at the center of how we interact with people who are marginalized, so that we ask: How do we create more justice? How do we imagine “allyship” differently?

Of the era of the 1960s, King said, “These are revolutionary times; all over the globe men are revolting against old systems of exploitation and oppression.”<sup>10</sup> “Revolutionary times” might also be a way to describe how the next decade of the twenty-first century is unfolding. When we take into consideration the Arab Spring of the 2010s, the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, and the global reckoning with sexual assault that #MeToo inspired, we are in a moment of multivaried resistance to systems of exploitation and oppression. When King made this point in “Conscience and the

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<sup>9</sup>Vincent Harding, *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 13.

<sup>10</sup>King, *Trumpet of Conscience*, 34.

Vietnam War,” he was also undoubtedly reflecting on the wave of decolonial resistance that was sweeping across the African continent. King spurned the machinations of oppression and exploitation that were manifesting throughout the world and affecting marginalized people. Taking his position against the violent inhumanity of colonialism, racism, and war as his guide, King spoke out against Vietnam, because he felt obliged by conscience to do so. Heeding the call to peace means taking a similar view of twenty-first-century resistance struggles. It also means moving beyond knowing and articulating the vision to putting the words into action.

The chapters that follow focus on three social justice issues and movements from a perspective that is informed by King’s call to peace. Throughout I bring my insights as a Black feminist scholar, a professor, a follower of Jesus Christ, a daughter of immigrants, an activist, and a mother committed to justice, joy, and advocacy. The lectures that make up *The Trumpet of Conscience* fascinate me because the topic of the speeches was left entirely up to King. He was given no guidelines—only the space and the freedom to speak his mind about any subject at all. In other words, he was free to choose whatever he wanted to talk about, and his choice of these topics then might reveal what was closest to his heart. *Martin Luther King and The Trumpet of Conscience Today* offers a unique window into his radical vision for the United States and for the world. We have much to learn from those lectures, and my hope is that by revisiting their insights we can imagine and create a more just future for the world.