

January 9, 2013

Reflection 2, Option 1

MIT IAP: MLK Seminar

1. Segments from “Our Stories”

In “High Yellow”, Ellen Broms talks about her own personal account of being a student at UCLA and traveling to Houston as a Freedom Rider. She was part of a group of students who picketed and protested in favor of the sit-ins going on throughout the South, many of which asked for inclusion of civil rights to the presidential platform that JFK was about to run on shortly after receiving the presidential nomination from the Democratic Party. Ellen, along with the other people travelling with her, were sent to jail after sitting at a segregated lunch counter, going on to stay there for about eight to ten days. Due to the common practice in the South at that time of segregating according to race and gender, Ellen was placed in a cell with Black women, despite her Jewish descent, but was shortly sent to the cell with white women after other women in her group asked about her in the jail. While the white women received kind treatment from the other women throughout their duration in jail, the white men did not fare as well, receiving beatings and thus being taken out of jail in four days. The group of students were eventually bailed out of jail by the Congress of Racial Equality, whom needed the money the students were trying to raise for them, and then went on to return to California to attend school. Though Ellen partook in the traditional actions of marrying young and having children, her interest in civil rights activism never waned. She ends her piece by encouraging us all to make displays in our communities’ libraries, seeing how this is much easier than “standing in the rain with a sign”.

“Honoring Our Ancestors, Honoring Ourselves” is another personal account, much like “High Yellow”, by Fatima Cortez-Todd. Coming from a family of activists, Fatima went to Louisiana for the Voter Education Project where she helped in registering people to vote. Fatima was trained for several weeks by members of CORE , going on to register people to vote in preparation for the upcoming presidential election. Although the people housing all the volunteers were endangered and often bullied by the KKK, who walked around neighborhoods to stir fear, they continued to house all the volunteers. Fatima claims people were very nice to them (the volunteers) and that she learned a lot from their humility and unconditional love. Throughout the duration of her stay in Louisiana, Fatima slowly learned that getting people to register to vote was only a small step towards getting people to vote because in addition to registering, people had to first learn how to read and had to be healthy enough to go to literacy classes. In poor communities, “voting was way down on the list [of needs] in comparison to jobs, education, housing, and medical care”.

2. Segments from “Our Thoughts”

“Doing the Right Thing” by Robert + Helen Singleton tells of Robert and Helen’s experiences with lack of equality in the US and segregation. They start off their piece by establishing that most of the arguments in the US center around the lack of equality for all. Though the Equality Doctrine claimed that all men are created equal, the US steered away from the Equality Doctrine through “slavery, the Civil War, failed Reconstruction, Jim Crow laws, and the establishment of ghettos in response to the Great Migration”. As a soldier stationed in Georgia, Robert experienced his first interaction with segregation where he first saw a “White Only” sign. Helen, on the other hand, saw segregation every summer when she traveled to Virginia to see her family. In efforts to reach equality, they then they joined the NAACP, CORE, and Freedom Riders.

In “Schools to Prison Pipeline, Today’s Civil Rights Issue”, Constance Curry tells of the unequal treatment and access minorities receive in terms of education and prison systems. Constance worked in the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the American Friends Service Committee on school desegregation, voter registration and economic development. Though many thought that the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act had solved problems of racism and injustice, Constance argues that these problems remain in today’s society. For example, many black men cannot vote after being released from prison, meaning more than 5.3 million Americans can’t vote (even if they’ve completed their terms and aren’t on probation). About 60% of these prisoners are either black or Hispanic, thus diluting their voting power enormously. Under President George W. Bush, private prisons flourished in rural areas [which were often poor, in hopes of improving the local economy]. With the US having the highest incarceration rate in the world, Constance states that public education and “criminal justice injustices are the present-day American civil rights movement in this country today”.

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Having studied social movements in Latin America, which usually deals with three groups in society: group A, that of the elites; group B, that of the middle class; and group C, that of the oppressed, I wonder how these groups come about or how these social groups each used their power in the US context to either help or prevent Blacks from gaining more rights. From yesterday’s video, it seems that, although middle class whites were involved in helping Blacks to gain some rights, it was mostly through African-Americans’ own work that they gained some equality. I’d also like to talk about the US Civil Rights Movement in terms of public opinion— what was different about the ‘60s that created a successful social movement instead of having one shortly after the Civil War?

Courtesy of Deborah Ransom

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