

I'm Migration Series: Citizen King

Network of Immigrant & African American Solidarity

January 17, 2015

As part of the I'm Migration Series, NIAAS hosted a film and dialogue series on the PBS documentary *Citizen King*. In the context of the state of violence against communities of color and the protests in Ferguson and Staten Island, NIAAS invited folks to bridge what was happening to the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and reflect on the meaning of citizenship and rights today.

Members from NIAAS's core group, folks all the way from Providence, Rhode Island and as close as Jamaica Plain came together to watch the documentary *Citizen King* together. People ranged in their experience and knowledge of Dr. King and the Civil Rights movement, with some present who had marched with Dr. King or others who rallied in Washington D.C. demanding that a federal holiday be named in his honor, to others who had been more recently involved in Occupy movements and #BlackLivesMatter. There were also those who have migrated to the US, and were involved in movements, like the labor movement, in their home country and felt they only knew little about Dr. King.

We watched the documentary in 9-minute segments, after each segment we were to write our impressions down in silence. This pattern continued until nearly done with the movie, where we stopped and began a group reflection. Trina, the co-coordinator of NIAAS, along with Joel, a core-group member and community historian, facilitated our dialogue on our reflections. We began by going around the circle and having everyone share what surprised us as we watched the film. Here is what jumped out at folks:

FBI, Edgar J Hoover and the hatred that was shared for Dr. King

Grateful. There is still racism but grateful for all the work that was done for us

The Strength of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference

The March in Cicero, Illinois. How could this not be a defining scene of that city? How could it not be told?

Orangeburg Massacre

"MLK took the fear out of us" (quote from film)

Links to the recent protest on I-93, there is a Cicero-ish feeling to it

Terror that enveloped the African American Community

Role of religion

Listening to people's stories as part of the People's Movement

Leader & Teacher

How he moved to a critique on poverty, capitalism, and that was when he was assassinated

The reflections moved us naturally into a conversation about our experiences as they related to the documentary. One of the Core Group members reflected marching on a May Day march from Revere to Chelsea and recalled white people leaning out of the window and yelling out of their houses at them while marching. Another member reflected on how she marched with Dr. King, how she heard his speech from his lips to their ears, and how in those moments they did not feel like it was history being made. She urged, "if we do not believe you are involved in making history today, believe it."

Reflecting on the ways that Dr. King is remembered and understood today, one member reflected how growing up in another country and then moving to the United States, she only learned of Dr. King as a civil rights leader and never learned the connection to his activism on Vietnam or the economy. She reflected how the documentary showed how he grew on his path to see these issues more broadly and interconnected and how that we are all like that if we allow ourselves. Others followed this thread and commented how you can see how he grew more radical, partly in contrast to and in support of others in the movement, like Stokely Carmichael. Yet, while noting his move to radicalism others pointed out his strategic comments and actions to move away from communism. This is easily seen through Dr. King's change from saying negro to black. Multiple people in the room did not understand why this was a significant moment. One person explained how Malcolm X said negro means "never grow," and others pointed to the history of anthropology and slavery. One person pointed out the importance of nomenclature, particular in who is doing the naming and what names can tell you. The power for the movement of the contrast of "negro and white" vs. "black and white" was a more powerful way to frame the conflicts.

Others shared the way the intense personal and collective fear that exists when working in movements, but how Dr. King had an incredible talent to be able to remove that fear. They even noted his ability not to be charmed by politicians to move on his demands for the movement, giving examples of activists who move into government and have changed their positions. In discussing King's attributes as a leader, some began to question whether today we needed a leader. This launched into a discussion comparing the strong leadership and religious structures that fueled the civil rights movement to the Occupy movement, which attempted more leaderless and egalitarian strategies, to the #BlackLivesMatter movement which has been fueled both locally and through social media. As a group, we questioned whether we needed someone with charisma and conviction, or whether new strategies for today's context were important. Others

wondered whether the lack of community centers like churches have eroded our ability to come together and organize.

Where do we go from here? Being so animated and absorbed into the conversation we had already gone past our time. Trina and Joel led a quick discussion on where do we go from here. Here were some of our thoughts:

