Interview by Etta Moten Barnett

[6 March 1957]
Accra, Ghana

On 2 March the Kings left for the Gold Coast, stopping in New York City where they joined Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., A. Philip Randolph, and Ralph Bunche before continuing to Accra by way of Lisbon, Dakar, and Monrovia. At a 5 March reception in Accra, King and Vice President Nixon met for the first time. After being introduced King remarked, "I'm very glad to meet you here, but I want you to come visit us down in Alabama where we are seeking the same kind of freedom the Gold Coast is celebrating." Nixon responded with an invitation to meet in Washington. At midnight on 6 March, King was among the tens of thousands of people gathered in Accra's polo grounds to watch Ghana's flag replace that of Great Britain.

In the following radio interview, conducted by Etta Barnett after the midnight celebration, King discusses Ghana's independence and "its worldwide implications and repercussions." Though he fell ill the next day, King felt well enough the following week to have lunch with Kwame Nkrumah, during which, according to King, the prime minister remarked that Ghana "would never be able to accept the American ideology of freedom and democracy fully until America settles its own internal racial strife." After leaving Ghana on 12 March the Kings flew to Kano, Rome, Geneva, Paris, and London. They arrived back in Montgomery on 27 March. The following transcript is taken from an audio recording, which was later broadcast on WMAQ radio in Chicago.

[Barnett:] One of the most significant visitors to the celebration of Ghana, here in Accra, is one Reverend Martin Luther King, a person whose name has been in the newspapers in connection with freedom in our own country, the United States of America. Reverend King, tell me, what were your feelings—were they mixed, or was there definite, emotional something—when you knew that you were coming to Ghana? Or did it occur when you got here?

[King:] Well, the minute I knew I was coming to Ghana I had a very deep emotional feeling, I'm sure. Thinking of the fact that a new nation was being born symbolized something of the fact that a new order is coming into being and an old order is passing away. So that I was deeply concerned about it. And I wanted

2. Etta Moten Barnett (1901—), actress, singer, and radio personality, was born in Weimar, Texas, and earned a B.A. (1931) from the University of Kansas. She sang and acted in Broadway plays (Porgy and Bess), Hollywood films (Gold Diggers of 1933), and on radio ("Etta Moten Sings") beginning in the 1930s. With her husband, Claude Barnett, founder of the Associated Negro Press, she traveled to Ghana as a member of Vice President Nixon's official delegation.
to be involved in it, and be a part of it, and notice the birth of this new nation with
my own eyes. So that that is why I’m here.

[Barnett:] Yes, I was delighted when I saw you and Mrs. King get off the bus, get
out of your friend’s car, this evening—it’s really morning, it seems like another
day, so many, many things are happening—at the convocation. Wasn’t that just
about the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen, this convocation, where the
Duchess of Kent was present out on the University campus? 4

[King:] Yes, it certainly was. I was richly impressed with the whole convocation.
It was a moment—a very delightful moment—filled with beauty at every corner.

[Barnett:] Reverend King, do you feel, have any feeling about the far reaching
influence of this particular occasion in the history of mankind? In the history of
peoples of color all over the world? How far do you think this will reach? How
much do you think it will influence the affairs of men that we’re interested in?

[King:] I think this event, the birth of this new nation, will give impetus to op-
pressed peoples all over the world. I think it will have worldwide implications and
repercussions—not only for Asia and Africa, but also for America. As you well
know, we have a problem in the Southland in America, and I think this free-
dom—the freedom in the birth of a new nation—will influence the situation
there. This will become a sort of symbol for oppressed people all over the world.
Just as in 1776 when America received its independence, a harbor of New York
became a sort of a beacon of hope for thousands of oppressed people of Europe;
and just as when after the French revolution Paris became a beacon of hope for
hundreds and thousands of common people; now Ghana will become a symbol
of hope for hundreds and thousands of oppressed people all over the world—
Africa and in Asia, and also oppressed peoples in other sections of the world

[King:] Yes it does. (In sections, yes) It certainly does. It renews my conviction in
the ultimate triumph of justice. And it seems to me that this is fit testimony to the
fact that eventually the forces of justice triumph in the universe, and somehow
the universe itself is on the side of freedom and justice. So that this gives new
hope to me in the struggle for freedom as I confront it.

[Barnett:] Do you think that the, when you get back home and people ask you,
“well, do you think they’re ready?” what would be your answer to a thing like this?
It’s been asked many many times about peoples being ready: have they had
enough experience? Have they had enough rehearsal in self-government? So far,
from what you’ve observed—you’ve seen ministers in charge; you were just now
in the Assembly, the Hall of the Assembly and talked with the Secretary of the
Legislature, what is your impression—and you’ve seen the Prime Minister
[Kwame Nkrumah], you were with him this morning—what was your impression
of the ability of these people to govern themselves?

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4. Princess Marina Oldenberg of Greece and Denmark became the Duchess of Kent in 1934.
[King:] Well, I think they are definitely ready. And I have the impression that they will govern themselves in a very worthy manner. Now, I realize that there will be difficulties. Whenever you have a transition, whenever you are moving from one system to another there will be definite difficulties, but I think there is enough brainpower, and I think there is enough determination, enough courage and faith to meet the difficulties as they develop. I often feel like saying, when I hear the question “People aren’t ready,” that it’s like telling a person who is trying to swim, “Don’t jump in that water until you learn how to swim.” When actually you will never learn how to swim until you get in the water. (That’s true) And I think people have to have an opportunity to develop themselves and govern themselves. And with that opportunity, they face the difficulties of it, and all of that. I’m often reminded of the statement made by the great prime minister of this nation: “I prefer self-government with danger, to servitude with tranquility.” I think that’s a great statement (It is, indeed), and they are willing here to face the dangers—and there will be some difficulties—but I think all of that will be over in a few years and Ghana will be able to profit by the mistakes of other nations (Right) that have existed over so many years, and develop into a great nation.5

[Barnett:] Yes, someone said that they can even profit by the mistakes of the West. [King:] That’s right.

[Barnett:] Rather than pattern after the West, they can certainly profit by the mistakes of the West. And one of the newspapers from Britain I noticed said that they are walking a tightrope without the springboard underneath, the net of the Colonial Office there to catch them if they should fall. But when you ask an African is he ready, does he think that they’re ready, they’ll say, “Well, was your country ready?” And of course, that shuts you up, doesn’t it?

[King:] Yes, yes.

[Barnett:] Well, Reverend King, it’s just absolutely wonderful to see you here, and I know that you’re going to enjoy your trip from now on. Are you going on after you leave here, after you leave Gold Coast, after you leave Ghana, will you go further down into West Africa?

[King:] Well, we will stop at one other point in Africa, in Nigeria (Oh, yes. That’s wonderful) for a day or so. (That’s fine) And then we will go into Europe (Yes) and then back to America to deal with the problems which we confront there.

[Barnett:] Oh, that’s wonderful. That’s wonderful that you’re getting this little respite. And I’m delighted to see you [King:] (Yes) and Mrs. King. I envy you because you’re going to stay all through the celebration. We’ll be here only Thursday, and then we leave with the vice president’s party, the press group that’s going with him. But, Reverend Martin Luther King, I feel highly honored, and I know that your listening audience through fifteen states of the middlewestern

5. Speaking to a reporter upon his return to the United States, King elaborated on this point: “I was impressed with the competence and dedication of the prime minister and his official family. . . . Ghana will not have it easy because literacy is at a low ebb, living standards are low and they will have difficulty with their economy because it is basically an agriculture one-crop country. . . . This country must stress free education, raise the living standard, and industrialize itself” (Stokes, “Dr. King Says He May Meet With Nixon”).
United States are delighted to have you in their homes tonight. Won't you say good night to them?

[King:] Thank you so much. I'm so happy to have been part of this. And I say good night to the hundreds and thousands of people of goodwill in the United States that I know and love so dearly.

[Barnett:] This is Etta Moten saying, "Stay well."

At EMBC-NN-Sc.

From Sherman Adams

13 March 1957
Washington, D.C.

The White House chief of staff responds to the Southern Leaders Conference's 14 February telegram, which repeated their call for Eisenhower to speak out against southern resistance to integration. Adams refers to a meeting between King and Vice President Nixon that was proposed when the two men met during the Ghanaian independence celebrations.¹

The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.
530-80 Union Street
Montgomery, Alabama

Dear Mr. King:

The President has asked that I acknowledge your recent telegram. He is pleased to know that you will be meeting with the Vice President concerning these matters upon his return from Africa.

The suggestions you make have already been given earnest study here, and I know the President will be interested in having the further expression of your views as conveyed to the Vice President.

Sincerely,
[signed] Sherman Adams

TLS. MLKP-MBU: Box 90.