

**Along Martin Luther King: Travels on Black America's
Main Street**
by Jonathan Tilove

Random House Publishing
Group
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Format: Hardback
Number of pages: 240
Publication date: November 4, 2003
ISBN: 140006080X

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Inside Flap

Over the course of two years, Jonathan Tilove and freelance photographer Michael Falco traveled along some of the 650 Martin Luther King Jr. streets, avenues, and boulevards across the country—in Harlem; Belle Glade, Florida; Atlanta; Selma, Alabama; Jackson and Canton, Mississippi; Chicago; Oakland, California; Portland, Oregon; and nearly a score of cities and towns throughout Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Kansas.

As this journey reveals, life along King is at once tightly conjoined and kaleidoscopically diverse. And that is precisely what Tilove has lyrically portrayed in the writing of this book, and what Falco has so superbly illumined with his rich photographs of the people along Martin Luther King.

We meet Annie Williams, who lives and works on Belle Glade's Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, managing the Sudsy City Laundromat, and who likes the idea that every black community she visits now has a main street with a common name; and Marion Tumbleweed Beach, a seventy-three-year-old teacher, writer, poet, reporter, editor, and activist who lives on Martin Luther King Street in Selma, Alabama, but finds the phenomenon a source of dismay: "I say they still get us with trinkets. We go cheap. I resent it."

Tilove writes of the King streets: "Map them and you map a nation within a nation, a place where white America seldom goes and black America can be itself. It is a parallel universe with a different center of gravity and distinctive sensibilities, kinship at two or three degrees of separation, not six. There is no other street like it."

**Excerpt
Chapter 1**

The Main Street

Every town got a Martin Luther King.

Annie Williams, Sudsy City Laundromat, Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, Belle Glade, Florida, 2000

There is a road that wends its way through the heart and soul of black America. It may be called a boulevard, a drive, an avenue, a street, or a way, but it is always named Martin Luther King.

It happened without grand design but with profound, if unrecognized, consequences. Together, the circumstance of segregation, the martyrdom that made Martin Luther King the every-hero of a people, and the countless separate struggles to honor him have combined to create a black Main Street from coast to coast.

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Some six hundred and fifty streets are named for King in cities and towns from one end of the country to the other, with more added every year and no end in sight. Map them and you map a nation within a nation, a place where white America seldom goes and black America can be itself. It is a parallel universe with a different center of gravity and distinctive sensibilities, kinship at two or three degrees of separation, not six.

There is no other street like it.

Over the course of two years, a reporter and a photographer traveled along Martin Luther King streets of every size and description. Our only mission was to see where a journey along these streets of a single name would lead. We discovered that it leads everywhere—to every facet of black life, politics, thought, faith, culture, history, and experience—that in remarkable and uncanny ways it burrows deep into the marrow of that which is black America and into the enduring meaning of King's life.

Along the way, there are barber and beauty shops, fast-food chicken franchises and slow-cooked barbecue joints with sweet iced tea and standing fans. There are the brilliantly colored murals paying homage to Martin, Malcolm, Rosa, Billie, Biggie, and Tupac. There are churches of every size, denomination, and shade of Jesus, more preachers than pulpits, black Muslims spanning the cosmological continuum, and in Galveston, Texas, a Korean War veteran scaling a four-foot fish in front of a gigantic turquoise Buddha he salvaged from a Mardi Gras parade.

There is, in both Harlem and Dallas, the intersection of MLK and Malcolm X; in Selma, the intersection of MLK and Jeff Davis; and in just about the middle of nowhere, East Texas, the corner of MLK and MLK. There are poets, players, writers, rappers, thinkers, tinkers, strutters, shouters, and with inspiring regularity, local heroes who, without pomp or portfolio, in one mortal guise or another, keep the spirit of King on King. And everywhere there is endless, ardent talk about what it means to be African in America.

Stretches of many King streets have a ragged, wasted quality to them. The comedian Chris Rock famously advised, "If a friend calls you on the telephone and says they're lost on Martin Luther King Boulevard and they want to know what they should do, the best response is 'Run!'" It has become a commonplace of popular culture to identify a Martin Luther King street as a generic marker of black space and, not incidentally, of ruin, as a sad and ironic signpost of danger, failure, and decline, and as a rueful rebuke of a people's preoccupation with symbolic victories over actual progress.

But pause on King, begin talking to folks, and the clutter, the noise of the rest of America falls away, and you are transported beyond the sometimes battered facade into a black America that, with astonishing welcome, reveals itself as not only more separate and self-contained than imagined but also more tightly interconnected, more powerfully whole. Many black people have moved beyond the neighborhoods through which King runs (though there are now King streets in new black suburbs), but few live beyond the reach of the sounds, sentiments, and stories rooted on King. These are streets united by struggle and circumstance, by history and happenstance. One King street leads to the next and next and back again.

For many whites, a street sign that says Martin Luther King tells them they are lost. For many blacks, a street sign that says Martin Luther King tells them they are found.

When Dock Jackson—who played a role in naming the MLK in his hometown of Bastrop, Texas, where he is on the council, and in nearby Elgin, where he is the park director—arrived in Oklahoma City on business and needing a haircut, he simply headed to Martin Luther King and found Robert Gates's barbershop. When Barber Gates travels to a new place, he does the same. "When I don't know where

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I'm going, I'll find MLK."

Lives are lived from one King street to the next.

The Reverend Daniel Stafford, pastor of Peaceful Rest Baptist Church on Martin Luther King Boulevard in Jasper, Texas, is also pastor of Starlight Baptist Church on Martin Luther King Drive in De Ridder, Louisiana.

Dolores Cross was president of Chicago State University on King Drive before becoming president of Morris Brown College on Atlanta's King Drive. She grew up in Newark, New Jersey, graduating from Central High School on what is now Martin Luther King Boulevard. When she returned to Newark after the publication of her book, *Breaking Through the Wall: A Marathoner's Story* (published by Chicago State's Haki Madhubuti's Third World Press), she signed copies at St. James AME Church on MLK.

"It's haunting," says Cross.

The NFL linebacker Ray Lewis, who led the Baltimore Ravens to a 2000 conference championship playing on the MLK in Baltimore, was the most valuable player in the Super Bowl played on the MLK in Tampa, and spent the early preseason on trial at the Fulton County Courthouse on the MLK in Atlanta for murders committed in the hours following the previous Super Bowl. Throughout his trial (he ended up pleading guilty to obstruction of justice), his spiritual needs were tended to by the courtside presence of the Reverend J. Richard Harris, a minister we know from the MLK in Belle Glade, Florida.

On a late May day on the MLK in Portland, Oregon, the afternoon light streaming through an open door of a gospel festival at the Miracles Club illumines two little sisters playing with funeral home fans bearing the same sepia-warm image of Martin Luther King we saw on an identical fan eight months earlier in the hands of a laughing young woman sitting on a folding chair at a campaign rally on the MLK in Selma, Alabama. It was at that same rally that we met Martin Luther King III on Martin Luther King, and Emmanuel ben Avraham, the Trenton, New Jersey, community activist (raised Muslim, he later became a Baptist before converting to Orthodox Judaism) who led the effort to name the MLK there and in his native Newark, New Jersey.

On MLK Day 2000 in Belle Glade, Florida, we meet Angela Williams, just moved onto MLK there from Trenton, where she had lived near that city's MLK. "Same damn street," she says. "Think about it. Every Martin Luther King looks the same. The worst street in the city is named after Martin Luther King. Give a black man a black street in a black neighborhood? But that's not the purpose. The purpose is to honor him. They should name Main Street Martin Luther King Boulevard."

But Annie Williams (no relation), who lives and works on Belle Glade's MLK, managing the Sudsy City Laundromat, disagrees. "Martin Luther King would not fit on Main because myself, being black, I would like it to run just like it's running through a black town. Got to keep it black, got to keep this black, Martin Luther King got to be black," she says.

It is a debate that can be heard from one MLK to the next, that echoes across America, because, as Annie Williams puts it, "Every town got a Martin Luther King." Or so it seems.

In the decades since King's assassination, the grassroots efforts to name streets for him have gained momentum in the face of substantial inertia and resistance. It is a movement with no national organization, no national attention, not even self-knowledge that a movement is what it is—as if the transcontinental railroad had been built piecemeal by folks unaware of one another. The only national leader is King, dead now nearly as many years as he lived but still uniquely able to inspire black unity

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and activism on his behalf.

Occasionally, King streets turn up in unexpected places. There are two MLKs in Utah, in gritty Ogden and a main thoroughfare leading into Salt Lake City, where to the arriving traveler, the Martin Luther King sign first leaps to view breathtakingly framed against the snowcapped Wasatch Mountains. There is a squib of a street in Newcomerstown, Ohio, a bucolic dot on the map midway between Columbus and Wheeling, West Virginia, that was home to Cy Young and Woody Hayes and, on its MLK, the descendants of some black workers brought in from Alabama early in the century to work in the local foundry. In 1969 they petitioned the village council to rename the street for King, and it was done.

Some Minnesotans were apparently so abashed on reading news stories in early 2002 about their state being one of the few without an MLK that by year's end there were three—on the University of Minnesota campus in Morris; in St. Paul, where the state capitol is now on Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, and in Mankato, where they named a little street with nothing on it but a new National Guard armory for King. (Two days after Christmas an unidentified motorist mowed down both of Mankato's new MLK street signs while shouting racial epithets at some passing children.) Beyond the borders of the United States, there is a Martin Luther King Boulevard in Dakar, Senegal, another MLK Boulevard in the Dutch city of Drachten, and in Tuscany, a Via Martin Luther King in the lovely little spa town of San Giuliano Terme, where Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*.

Sometimes there isn't a King street where you might expect it, like Philadelphia. There are the occasional white folks on King. Former President Bill Clinton has his office on 125th Street, also known as MLK, in Harlem. The would-be presidential assassin John Hinckley is confined indefinitely behind the forbidding walls of St. Elizabeth's, the Victorian psychiatric hospital that sprawls on and on along the MLK in Washington, D.C. There are MLKs that run through black neighborhoods and keep going. Morris Brown College is on the MLK in Atlanta, but so is the World of Coca-Cola, and the road dead-ends at the cemetery where Margaret Mitchell is buried.

But, for the most part, King streets are exactly where you would expect to find them—concentrated in black neighborhoods in communities with significant black populations. According to Derek Alderman, a geographer at East Carolina University, who has studied and mapped the naming of streets for King (he has also studied the naming of public schools for King), the densest swath of King streets is in the Deep South, from East Texas to Florida. Mississippi has at least sixty-five King streets, and King's home state of Georgia has at least seventy.

The more King streets there are, the more blacks in communities without one want one. "We're surrounded by communities, some even smaller than ours, not as progressive as we proclaim to be, they all have streets renamed for Martin Luther King," says Bernita Sims, a leader in the most recent of what has been a decade of futile efforts to name a street for King in High Point, North Carolina. "Thomasville has a street, Lexington has a street. Greensboro has a street. Winston-Salem has a street. Hickory has a street."

Most recently, Sims and others, who did not want their MLK confined to the black community—"everybody benefited from that struggle," says Sims—sought to rename College Drive, but they ran into opposition, starting with High Point University, which while its address is not College Drive, considers it a matter of honor to keep that name for the street that runs alongside the campus. The city rejected renaming College Drive for King in 2001 and again in 2002, after which the city council changed the rules to make it more difficult to rename streets. "The bottom line is they just don't want the street in town," says Sims, who was elected to the council in 2002 and vows the campaign to name a street for King will continue.

Every King street tells a story: Where it begins. Where it ends. What's on it. What's not on it. Who was in favor of renaming the street. Who was against it. Like all the best battles, the struggle to name a street after King is a fight over turf, pride, and power, and often it does not come easy, if it comes at all. It is the story of streets named, streets not named, streets named and then unnamed, streets given the new name while still keeping the old name, and other things named as consolation prizes for streets not being named (in 2001 it was the train station in Toledo, Ohio).

Businesses don't like the bother and expense of changing their addresses. There are always some folks devoted to the history and significance of the old name. But in the scores of skirmishes one also catches a glimpse—or an eyeful—of deeper white resistance and, in the intensity of the reaction, a bracing reminder of the real King, the man with edge and meaning, and not simply the dreamy King of grammar-school coloring contests.

Typically the biggest argument over naming a King street is whether the name should stretch beyond the black community and across the tracks—figuratively and many times literally—to the white side of town.

When Mayor Richard Daley and the Board of Aldermen chose to name South Park Way in Chicago King Drive less than four months after King's death—making it probably the first King street of them all—it did not escape notice that, unlike some other major arteries through the city's black South Side, South Park's thirteen miles never leave the South Side.

On the freshly minted MLK in Elgin, Texas, we visit in June 2001, Dock Jackson, the park director, tells us Elgin lagged thirteen years behind the neighboring cities of Bastrop and Smithville, because the proponents in Elgin wanted both the white and black ends of the street to bear King's name. Finally, he said, they settled for the black half alone.

It might have been the same story back in 1975 in Austin—just west of Elgin—were it not for J. J. Seabrook, an elder statesman of the black community, who suffered a fatal heart attack while imploring the city council not to treat King like that. He died and won. Austin's MLK crosses racial lines and borders the state capitol complex.

— *End of excerpt*

Reviews

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—from *Along Martin Luther King*

Biographical Note

Jonathan Tilove has written about race for Newhouse News Service since 1991. He is a three-time

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winner of the National Headliner Award and in 2001 was honored with a lifetime achievement award from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism Workshops on Journalism, Race & Ethnicity. In 2003 he was the winner of the Freedom Forum/American Society of Newspaper Editors Award for Outstanding Writing on Diversity for the newspaper series on which this book is based.

Michael Falco is a freelance photographer based in New York City whose work has appeared in *National Geographic*, *The New York Times*, *British Vogue*, *W*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Garden Design*. He is the winner of numerous Associated Press photo awards and was a finalist in the 2002 Gordon Parks Photography Competition for one of his *Along Martin Luther King* images. Michael is also a New York City-commissioned Public Artist.

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