“By laying bare the racial fault lines in one community after another, by calling attention to the circumstances of life in the heart of the black community while demanding better, the streets that bear his name are Martin Luther King’s greatest living memorial.” — Haki R. Madhubuti

Traditionally, public commemoration in the South has been devoted largely to remembering the region’s role in the Civil War and the mythic Old South plantation culture supposedly lost as a result of that conflict. These memories remain deeply ingrained in the southern landscape of monuments, museums, historical markers, and place names. Yet, African Americans who seek to make their own claim to the South and its history increasingly challenge Civil War-centered conceptions of the past. Perhaps the best known of these struggles involve ongoing calls to remove public symbols of the Confederacy. At the same time, African American southerners are using direct political action to build memorials that recognize their own historical experiences, struggles, and achievements. A major pillar in this trend is the commemoration of another, quite different revolution from that of the Civil War—the Civil Rights Movement.

The naming of streets after slain Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. is the most widespread example of African American efforts to rewrite the landscape of southern commemoration. Despite the growing frequency of naming streets in honor of Dr. King, this new cultural phenomenon has received limited attention, even though the inscription of King’s legacy onto streets is a potentially valuable indicator of where the South is in terms of race relations. On the one hand, communities name streets after King as a result of the increased cultural and political power of African Americans and the liberalization of white attitudes. While the commemorative movement is driven
predominantly by the activism of African Americans, there are noteworthy instances of whites not only supporting the cause but leading it. On the other hand, naming streets for King is often a controversial process that exposes continued racial divisions. Black activists who seek to rename thoroughfares that cut through and connect different communities have confronted significant public opposition. This frequently leads to the placement of King’s name on minor streets or portions of roads located entirely within the African American community. At the same time that Martin Luther King streets speak to how far the South has come since the Movement, they also speak to how far the region still has to go in reaching the dream of racial equality and social justice.

The emergence of Martin Luther King streets increasingly marks the symbolic place that these streets occupy within the lives of southerners and Americans in general. Martin Luther King Drives, Boulevards, and Avenues are important centers of African American identity, activity, and community—constituting what journalist Jonathan Tilove has called “Black America’s Main Street.” These streets are memorial arenas—public spaces for interpreting and debating King’s legacies, grappling with questions of race and racism. For many activists, finding the most appropriate street to identify with him comes with the difficulty of convincing the white establishment that King’s name belongs on major roads, that his legacy has relevance and resonance to everyone’s lives. To marginalize the commemoration of King on side streets within the black community, particularly in the face of African American requests not to do so, is to perpetuate the same force of segregation that the Civil Rights leader battled.

Martin Luther King streets serve as points of pride and struggle in the contemporary South. The photographs here challenge negative representations of these roads. As Tilove so keenly observed in Along Martin Luther King, “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 signpost of danger, failure, and decline . . . .” Not all of King’s roads are located in blighted areas, and only by exposing and combating that stigmatizing misconception can we hope to show the great potential of placing King’s name in more prominent places. Additionally, it is important to understand how the naming of even the most modest street has a story worth hearing; that, too, is part of the southern cultural experience.
King Streets are found throughout the country, but they are concentrated in the South. Of the 730 U.S. cities and towns that had named a street for King by 2003, 70% were found in Georgia, Mississippi, Texas, Florida, Louisiana, Alabama, and North Carolina. Georgia has the largest number, in part because so many Civil Rights organizations, campaigns, and leaders—including King himself—originated in the state. Overall, King streets are found most often in places where African Americans represent at least a third of a city’s population, which reflects the strong role that black activism plays in street naming. Local chapters of the NAACP and SCLC and various other black-led community improvement associations and coalitions, including King Holiday commissions, often conduct street naming campaigns, and naming streets for the Civil Rights leader occurs in a variety of places—from Atlanta and Houston to Denton, Georgia (pop: 269), and Cuba, Alabama (pop: 365). In fact, one characteristic that sets the South apart from other regions is that streets named for King appear throughout the region’s range of populated places, in both non-metropolitan and metropolitan areas. The average population size of a place with a King street is over 250,000 outside the South and less than 36,000 within the South, and well over 60% of the South’s cities and towns with a King street have populations of less than 10,000. King’s streets, courtesy of Derek Alderman, Matt Mitchelson, and Chris McPhilamy.
Although naming streets for Martin Luther King is prevalent throughout the South, it is part of a larger national and even global pattern of commemoration, testimony to the prominence of the Civil Rights leader’s reputation. Less than a week after King’s assassination, the city council of Haarlem in the Netherlands voted to name a street in his honor. Other international commemorative namings include streets in Israel, Belgium, and Italy; plazas and squares in Russia, Brazil, and India; and schools in Panama and Cameroon. A named road in Casalgrande, Italy, courtesy of Robert Legg.

The naming of streets after historical figures and events has long been part of the nation’s and the region’s political culture. Street naming inscribes commemorative messages into the many practices and texts of daily life, making certain versions of history appear to be the natural order of things. Road names permeate our daily vocabulary, both verbal and visual, appearing on road signs, advertising billboards, and maps. Street names are less ornate and awe-inspiring than monuments or museums, but they make the past intimately familiar to people in ways that these other memorials cannot. The late activist and scholar Melvin Dixon keenly observed: “Not only do these [street] names celebrate and commemorate great figures in black culture, they provoke our active participation in that history. What was important yesterday becomes a landmark today.” The symbolic power of street naming comes from its incorporation into everyday experiences rather than transcending them. Renaming a street for King allows the Civil Rights leader to become part of one’s personal and place identity. For many African Americans, this creates a sense of belonging in a region that has long alienated and marginalized them. By asking white residents and business owners to change their mailing address, proponents also seek to make King’s memory visible and important to a larger cross section of the public. El Dorado, Arkansas, courtesy of Charles R. Franklin.
Left: King’s status and the legitimacy of street naming ceremonies rose after the federal government established a holiday to honor him in 1983, fifteen years after Congress first proposed the holiday and after debate among African American leaders about the most appropriate date. Many petitions to name a street are brought before local governments immediately before or after the King birthday celebration in January. In Metter, Georgia, where the street naming ceremony took place on the Sunday before the 1996 King holiday, pastor John Leggett, who directed the street renaming campaign, began and ended the ceremony with prayer and the singing of church hymns. During the service, those in attendance read a litany of dedications, pledging themselves to peace, freedom, and equality. While King’s birthday remains controversial and often isn’t observed by local government and businesses, a named street provides a physically permanent memorial that requires community and municipal investment. Local officials (seated) at Metter’s naming ceremony, courtesy of Derek Alderman.

Right: Union Baptist Church (here) is one of the prominent landmarks along Martin Luther King Jr. Drive in Eatonton, Georgia. Churches are one of the non-residential establishments most frequently found having a King address—almost three times as often as expected for any other street name in America. Eatonton’s small-town (population under 7,000) struggle to name a street typified those in larger municipalities. Town officials refused to rename a thoroughfare but showed no hesitation in placing King’s name on a largely black residential street. One African American activist pushed for a major road visible to whites; another pushed for the renaming of the African American street for King, hoping to inspire and educate African American children by citing the value of connecting King’s legacy to the black church and other community institutions. Eatonton exposes a central tension in many street naming struggles: the desire to preserve the Movement’s racial identity and the need to educate the broader public. Photograph courtesy of Derek Alderman.
As the South reworks its cultural landscape to include the experiences of African Americans, new memorials may intersect or collide with older, competing visions of the past—sometimes literally, as in the case of streets named for Jefferson Davis and Martin Luther King in Selma, Alabama (here), as well as in Montgomery, where Jefferson Davis Avenue intersects with Rosa Parks Avenue. Multiple histories coexist within the southern landscape, and these street junctions ask whether antagonistic memories can occupy the same space. Thus, street signs can be popular targets for attempts to claim power over the legitimacy of certain versions of the past. In Dade City, Florida, vandals painted the name “General Robert E. Lee” over nine Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard signs, and in a single year, almost one hundred street signs with King’s name in Hillsborough County, Florida, were either spray-painted, shot at, or pulled completely from their poles. Photograph courtesy of Owen J. Dwyer.

In 1982, the Chattanooga city commission changed the name of Ninth Street to M. L. King Jr. Blvd, ending several months of heated debate. One of the major opponents to the name change was a white real estate developer who was building an office building on the western end of the street. He argued that he might not be able to rent space with a King address because of the “racial overtones” it would create. In response, municipal leaders initially refused to rename Ninth, prompting hundreds of African Americans to march in protest. In front of crowds cheering “hallelujah,” activists such as Reverend M. T. Billingsley (here) pasted street signs and utility poles with bumper stickers that read “Dr. ML King Jr. Blvd.” After this defiant demonstration and an emotional request from a coalition of black and white ministers, the city commission reversed its decision. Street naming often occurs through political struggle with activists using tactics honed during the Civil Rights Movement. Photograph courtesy of the Chattanooga Regional History Museum.
For many African Americans, streets have a connectivity that contributes to their symbolism, as explained in this editorial from the St. Petersburg Times: “Renaming a street is a uniquely appropriate way to honor King. Streets unite diverse neighborhoods. They touch all ages, all races, all economic levels, and the resident and the visitor equally. They link people and places that otherwise would remain insular.”

The notion of connectivity is particularly relevant to the Civil Rights leader’s reputation as a champion for integration. However, it is the power of street names to touch and connect disparate groups — some of which may not identify with King — that also makes the practice controversial. Austin’s Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard (here), formerly 19th Street, is a major east-west artery that runs past the University of Texas and across the traditional racial dividing line of Interstate Highway 35. Achieving this commemoration involved extraordinary sacrifice. The renaming of 19th, which occurred in 1975, drew intense public debate, particularly from the predominantly white western end. City council members would have probably reversed their decision if not for the sacrifice of J. J. Seabrook, the president of Austin’s historically black Huston-Tillotson College, who died of a heart attack while pleading with the city council to keep King’s name on the entire street. Photograph courtesy of Jim Pell.
The most vocal opposition to street renaming often comes from affected business and property owners, who cite the cost of changing their address, leading some cities to dedicate streets or portions of streets to King rather than full-fledged renaming. This was the case in 2007 when the city-parish council of Lafayette, Louisiana, dedicated Willow Street for King. Lafayette already had a street named for the Civil Rights leader, but two members of the council argued that the road was not prominent enough. The debate became so heated that protests were carried out in front of City Hall, and one council member was arrested and fined for defacing public property after he carved “Dr. Martin Luther King Jr!” into his council desk. Lafayette’s mayor proposed the dedication of Willow as a political compromise. Some activists argue that dedicating streets does not carry the same dignity as renaming — nor does it require the larger white community to interact with and invest in memorials to the Movement. Indeed, even when the cost of an address change is not at issue, white citizens in some cities have opposed having honorary King signs placed in their neighborhoods in an attempt to maintain racial boundaries. In Lafayette, it rained heavily during the dedication ceremony, forcing attendees under tents, where they prayed, held hands, and sang. Photographs by Leslie Westbrook, courtesy of The Daily Advertiser.
Marches, such as this one in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in 2005, often accompany street naming dedication ceremonies. Roads and transportation have long played an important tactical and symbolic role in African American struggles for Civil Rights. In supporting the controversial proposal to rename Chapel Hill’s Airport Road, a thoroughfare, white city councilor Sally Greene expressed what she saw as the historical and political meaning behind commemorating King along the region’s roadways: “Under Jim Crow laws, blacks had a hard time just making a road trip. They had to pack their own food, even their own toilet paper, for they didn’t know if they would find a restaurant that would serve them or even a gas station where they could use the bathroom. . . . Then came Dr. King and the [Montgomery] bus boycott and the push for the public accommodation law. . . . Mobility, the freedom to travel the public roads without fear and with the assurance that you get what you needed—these were the basic goals for King. Thus, I can’t think of a better way to honor Dr. King than with a road renaming.” Photograph courtesy of Derek Alderman.
Once renamed, streets frequently serve as parade and protest routes for African Americans and other activist groups seeking to associate themselves with King’s memory and message. The Coalition Against Racism marched along Martin Luther King Jr. Drive in Greenville, North Carolina (here), in January 2006 as part of King Holiday observances. The city renamed West Fifth Street Martin Luther King Jr. Drive in 1999. African American leaders originally sought to rename all of Fifth Street—not just part of it—but residents and business owners on the eastern end strongly opposed the proposal. (King’s namesake marks an area that is predominantly black whereas East Fifth is mostly white.) More recent attempts to rename all of Fifth Street have failed and in February 2007, a group of white municipal leaders voted to rid themselves of the divisive issue by naming the city’s bypass for the Civil Rights leader and reverting King Drive back to the name West Fifth Street. As a result, African Americans in Greenville bore the expense and inconvenience of changing their address twice, to ensure, in effect, that white property owners on East Fifth Street would not have to do so. Shifting King’s name from the downtown to the outskirts of town also removes an important platform for marches. While King challenged segregation, his legacy is often fixed at a scale that reinforces contemporary racial boundaries and thus allows many white southerners to “bypass the dream.” Photograph by Greg Eans, reprinted with permission of The Daily Reflector newspaper.
Opponents of King Street naming often argue that African Americans should honor a local figure rather than a person without a direct historical connection to the community, but there are numerous towns and cities that can brag of having hosted Martin Luther King. Between 1957 and 1968, King traveled over 6 million miles and spoke 2,500 times. Proposals to rename roads elicit stories of local activists who marched with King or simply met him, and renaming ceremonies often coincide with the anniversary of the Civil Rights leader’s visit to a city. However, as street naming proponents also suggest, King’s impact is universal and not confined just to those places where he slept, preached, or marched. A stone monument along Martin Luther King Road in Pawley’s Island, South Carolina, reads: “Honoring a world citizen [King] who never walked this road but whose life’s works helped all those who do.” Photograph courtesy of Derek Alderman.
Despite suggestions to the contrary, the commemoration of Martin Luther King Jr. does not always overshadow the honoring of local figures. In Savannah, Georgia (here), King Boulevard is the address for the Ralph Mark Gilbert Civil Rights Museum, named after the “father” of the city’s Civil Rights struggle. The close proximity of the museum to King’s name creates an ironic memorial landscape. During the Civil Rights demonstrations of the 1960s, black leaders in Savannah—including Gilbert—tried to bar King from preaching in the city. They feared that his presence might anger municipal officials and disrupt an already successful protest movement, and perhaps undermine their authority. It is not surprising, then, that the Gilbert museum says little about King but focuses largely on local activists and struggles. In death as in life, King remains outside of Savannah’s Civil Rights story. What appears to be a harmonious coupling of national and local historical figures actually reflects competing historical visions of the Movement and its drivers. However, though the city sought to avoid an association with King in the 1960s, that aversion has waned. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard is the focus of major urban development, one of the main boundaries of Savannah’s famous historic district, and the address for the city’s visitor’s center, which hosts millions of tourists every year. Photograph courtesy of the Savannah Morning News.
Left: Streets named for King become connected to other memorial forms, historical figures, and political causes. Freedom Corner Monument sits at the intersection of Martin Luther King and Medgar Evers boulevards in Jackson, Mississippi. The parallel commemoration of King and Evers, both martyrs for the Movement, obscures the old tension between the country’s largest Civil Rights organizations: King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the NAACP, which fought for primacy across the South. More recently, the site has played host to a different kind of Civil Rights struggle. In 2001, a group led by a black city council member burned a state flag at Freedom Corner as a protest against the Confederate battle emblem on Mississippi’s official banner. Photograph courtesy of Elizabeth Hines.

Right: This broken street sign in Woodland, Georgia, speaks to the degraded and poor conditions along some of the South’s Martin Luther King streets. Woodland’s memorial to King is a small residential road off of State Highway 41 that runs through the county’s housing authority and beside a wastewater treatment plant located alarmingly close to some homes. Many of the political dynamics that allow noxious sites to be located in poor, minority communities also lead to the marginalization of King’s memory. Opponents of street renaming frequently invoke similar arguments: it’s O.K. to honor him but “not on my street,” an interesting corollary to the more famous NIMBY (“not in my backyard”) mantra heard in many communities. Opponents also commonly argue that property values drop on a King street, although there is no evidence to substantiate this. Rather than causing poverty, King’s name is sometimes placed in areas already struggling. The renaming of blighted and obscure streets can be yet another reminder of continued racial inequality, what one reporter has called a “Boulevard of Broken Dreams,” or in the case of Woodland, a “Dream Turned Upside Down.” Photograph courtesy of Derek Alderman.
Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue (!) in Marianna, Florida (here), is a small stretch of road with just a handful of residences. Standing at the street’s junction with Highway 276, one can see its terminus less than a tenth of a mile away. Some proponents of street naming relish the opportunity of having their address identified with King and hence have no problem affixing his name to a small street within an African American neighborhood, believing, too, that having any street renamed for the Civil Rights leader is better than to have no street renamed at all.

While some King streets in the South are commercial thoroughfares, well over 85% are “neighborhood roads,” understood to be small, residential streets.” Feeling that smaller, less visible streets restrict the public impact and importance of King’s image, some outspoken African Americans have sought to find the Civil Rights leader a more central place within cities. In 2001, a local NAACP chapter in Clearwater, Florida, called for the removal of King’s name from a narrow, three-block street that extended only 500 feet, and their campaign resulted in the renaming of a larger road. Photograph courtesy of Derek Alderman.
Some Martin Luther King streets enjoy commercial prominence, such as Tampa's King Street, which extends over fourteen miles, connects with two interstate highways, and serves as home to over 500 non-residential addresses. King's namesake in New Bern, North Carolina, is a numbered U.S. Highway and the location of over 200 businesses, including a shopping mall (above), Wal-Mart, car dealerships, and a Pepsi bottling plant. (Pepsi-Cola was invented in New Bern.) The skyline behind King Boulevard in Charlotte, North Carolina (below), shows its proximity to the city's corporate landscape and centrality to future growth. Martin Luther King is one of three streets bordering the site of the much anticipated NASCAR Hall of Fame — an interesting juxtaposition given the cold reception many African Americans show stock car racing. But perhaps NASCAR can use the association with King as it pursues a diversity initiative among fans and tries to shed its Confederate flag-waving image. Photographs courtesy of Matthew Mitchelson (above) and E. Arnold Modlin Jr. (below).
The supposed inferiority of Martin Luther King Streets has even found its way into the discourse of humor. Comedian Chris Rock famously declared in his HBO comedy series, "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!’" Rock’s satire means to prompt his audience to question and change the status quo, but his words have been used by street naming opponents to fuel assertions that having a King address is disadvantageous. Still, businesses of all sorts sit along MLK streets, including Archibald’s Bar-B-Que in Northport, Alabama. George Archibald Jr. (above) and his sister run the business, which is famously featured on The Southern BBQ Trail: A Southern Foodways Alliance Documentary Project and in many food reviews. Photographs courtesy of Amy C. Evans.
In challenging some of the overly negative imagery that surrounds Martin Luther King streets, we should not deny the real struggles and hardships that face people who live, work, and travel there. Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast and displaced thousands of poor African Americans living in the B. W. Cooper Housing Project on Martin Luther King Boulevard in New Orleans. A month after the storm, these apartments remained largely abandoned, and few residents have returned. Well before Katrina, the Cooper apartments, once more popularly known as the Calliope Projects, had suffered deterioration, gang wars, drug trafficking, and intense violence, and Katrina simply exposed and exacerbated long-standing patterns of inequality and hyper-segregation. Jonathan Tilove argued: “To name any street for King is to invite an accounting of how the street makes good on King’s promise or mocks it.” The suffering associated with New Orleans’s King Boulevard prompts us to consider how the Civil Rights Movement, both in terms of how it has changed society and how it is remembered, is an evolving and unfinished project. Photograph courtesy of Rob Walker.
NOTES


2. Tilove, Along Martin Luther King, 5–6.


12. Tilove, Along Martin Luther King, 122.