

We now know that the movement to memorialize the Reverend, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., through the naming of streets did not begin in Chicago. It did not even begin in America. The first street signs in King's honor were actually raised in Germany, just two weeks after he was laid to rest. It was months before Mayor Richard J. Daley and members of the Chicago city council designated a memorial; and only after conspiring together to block a proposal from black community leaders for a more prominent cross-town expressway in the civil rights leader's name. In a move that has ever since been criticized as creating the blueprint for geocultural black confinement in cities across America, Daley and the council opted instead to rename a street located entirely within the city's already hyper-segregated black community. In his book, *Along Martin Luther King*, Jonathan Tilove writes, "To name a street after King is to invite an accounting of how that street makes good on King's promise or mocks it." The legacy left by Chicago's city leaders is not one of honor, but one of political expediency, dishonesty, and mockery. Our city leaders now stand on the edge of two promises; I contend that keeping both will ensure the history books of tomorrow tell a story of Jonesboro future generations can be proud of.

Academic interest in MLK memorialization has increased significantly in the last twenty-five years. The number of books, articles, and documentaries on the subject – now well into the hundreds of thousands – grows daily. Diligence has dispelled many myths once associated with MLK street renaming campaigns. We now know that there is no causal link between naming a street in memory of Dr. King and economic downturn on that street. The most reliable statistics indicate that MLK streets (when *appropriately* designated) are on par with most Market and Main Streets in America. We know that (when *appropriately* designated) they boost tourism, attract industry, and connect local generations over time in an ongoing project of unity. But knowing is just the start.

Researchers have produced countless detailed accounts of how Dr. King memorialization has been (mis)handled in cities across the US. As UT Knoxville geographer Dr. Derek Alderman states: "Depending on the location and spatial extent of these streets, they can represent an expansion of African American influence and cultural expression or a reinforcement of the boundaries that have traditionally constrained black identity." What determines success or failure for each city, then, is how closely the final outcome meets well-known standards for success. An *appropriately* designated King memorial should be a prominent thoroughfare with good infrastructure and extensive space for development; it should extend beyond traditionally black communities, connecting them symbolically and materially with traditionally white communities. Read that again. Our city has already promised the people of Jonesboro a street (not a trail) in honor of Dr. King. Johnson, Ave. is the only option that meets all these standards.

Success stories are few and far between, but they are well-celebrated in the history books. With each new city's struggle, new data, new narratives, and new controversies inevitably draw attention and renewed interest from researchers, reporters, and writers. What we are doing in Jonesboro, AR at this very moment is no small local matter. It will not forever fly under the radar. As our city struggles over designating an *appropriate* memorial, we must be wise enough to see beyond our own personal biases and temporary discomforts. We must consider the future histories we are now committing ourselves to. We now know that the distance between black community leaders' vision of a street named after King and commitment to that vision from Mayors and city council members does not create an empty vacuum. Rather, that distance becomes fertile soil for historians, journalists, and rhetoricians to harvest and reproduce, over and over again, the details of what actually happened. For far too many American cities, that space contains a dream again and again deferred, wherein the whole history of black cultural, economic, and geographical dispossession and oppression (from slavery to the struggle for an appropriate place in local public memory) ultimately resides. That space is an affront to decency, a poison to our souls, and we will find no rest or unity there. As Tilove writes, "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." I look forward to a day when seeing King's name on a major thoroughfare in Northeast Arkansas tells those who live here we are home and those who visit they are welcome.