

“A Summer Up North”

At 15, Martin Luther King Jr. joined a work expedition to a Connecticut tobacco farm. The experience was life-changing.

*Young King: The Making of Martin Luther King Jr.*

By Lerone Martin Amistad, 432 pp.

By David J. Garrow *Wall Street Journal*, May 4, 2026, p. A15.

A fundamental tension has always underlain the history of the Civil Rights movement, much as it did contemporaneous news coverage. While Southern black reporters, such as Trezzvant W. Anderson and Emory O. Jackson, grasped the organic roots of the emerging activism, national-outlet newsmen, largely clustered in Atlanta, primarily covered “the movement” by following Martin Luther King Jr. as he traveled to protest locales across the country.

The ensuing history often mirrored this divide. Books focused on King’s life and federal-government actions. It wasn’t until 1980, for instance, that J. Mills Thornton III, now a professor emeritus of history at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, unearthed the origins of the 1955 bus boycott in Montgomery, Ala. As Mr. Thornton revealed, it was Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, a professor of English, who initiated the protest following Rosa Parks’s arrest. To avoid repercussions at her job at Alabama State College, however, Robinson passed public leadership of the protest over to black ministers, including King. Montgomery would mark King’s arrival on the national stage.

Now Lerone Martin, a Stanford professor and senior editor of the Martin Luther King Jr. Papers Project, offers a rich if overlong retelling of King's life prior to Montgomery. "Young King" features two prominent strengths. First, Mr. Martin zeroes in on the summer of 1944, when a 15-year-old King, about to enter Morehouse College at a remarkably young age, joined fellow students on a three-month work expedition to a Connecticut tobacco farm.

Forty years ago my own "Bearing the Cross" devoted only three sentences to that summer, noting how King, a preacher's son, became the group's "devotional leader." Later accounts, including Patrick Parr's original treatment, "The Seminarian" (2018), and Jonathan Eig's comprehensive "King: A Life" (2023), benefited from a pair of superb Connecticut newspaper articles, published in 1989 and 1991, that provided fuller details on that period in King's life.

Mr. Martin deftly and powerfully emphasizes how this brief experience of living in a largely nondiscriminatory environment "left the deepest impression" on the young King. Weekend trips into nearby Hartford, where no venues imposed racial segregation, contrasted with everything King had seen in his native Atlanta, and with the discriminatory conditions he had endured on his rail journey northward. At times "Young King" goes too far—Mr. Martin spends 11 pages describing the segregated Atlanta train station from which King departed—but younger readers unfamiliar with the dehumanizing realities of pre-1964 Southern segregation may

appreciate the ensuing 24 pages that the author devotes to railroad practices during that era.

In his 1948 application to seminary, King specified “the summer of 1944” as the time he decided to become a minister, so it’s entirely fair for Mr. Martin to highlight those months in Connecticut as “life-altering.” But to claim a “psychological and spiritual transformation” and cite “transformative experiences with white women”—friendly conversations—overstates the facts.

“Young King” also trustingly relies on two paragraphs from an often-undependable 2020 biography of Malcolm X to describe how a then 19-year-old Malcolm Little was in that same Connecticut region that summer, supposedly helping to sell suits to the young black farmhands. Based solely upon a single 1994 interview claiming a precise 50-year memory, such a tale can mislead writers who fail to appreciate how unreliable human memory can be. As documents obtained by Mr. Parr for his revelatory “Malcolm Before X” (2024) show, Malcolm actually spent that summer in New York City, working both at Jimmy’s Chicken Shack in West Harlem and at the Lobster Pond on 42nd Street, where the future firebrand was condescendingly described by the proprietor as “a bit unstable and neurotic but under proper guidance a good boy.”

The second strength of “Young King” is its compelling account of King’s courtship of Coretta Scott in the early 1950s. By then King was a doctoral student at Boston University, and while Mr. Martin offers

a fulsome account of King's undergraduate years at Morehouse, he badly underplays King's more influential subsequent experiences, first at Crozer Theological Seminary and then at Boston University. Such omissions allow the author to avoid any mention of the extensive plagiarism that marred much of King's coursework and especially his doctoral dissertation—offenses first discovered by the King Papers Project more than 35 years ago.

As King's courtship of Coretta proceeded, in late summer 1952 he invited her to Atlanta to meet his family. One evening, King failed to return home and instead spent the night at the house of a previous flame. "I knew I had been mistreated," Coretta recounted to an interviewer decades later. Unfortunately, it would not be the last such time.

Two months after King's 1968 death, Ella Baker, who had clashed with King while mentoring younger activists, memorably declared that "the movement made Martin rather than Martin making the movement." King certainly would have endorsed that view, for in private his own deep sense of humility—as phone conversations memorialized in FBI wiretap transcripts document—meant that he never embraced the image and stature that news coverage and the Nobel Peace Prize accorded him.

Many of us who have written about King have taken Baker's maxim to heart, yet there is no question that "Young King" chooses to stand in acute tension, if not explicit opposition, to our rejection of "great

man” hagiography. With the release of the remaining, long-sealed FBI microphone and wiretap recordings of King scheduled for early next year, it is plain error to further elevate a courageous but deeply imperfect man to a pedestal he never sought.

Mr. Garrow’s books include “Bearing the Cross,” a biography of Martin Luther King Jr.