

CHAPTER 11

Naming Streets for Martin Luther King, Jr.: No Easy Road

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A Street Fight in Chattanooga

In 1981 Reverend M.T. Billingsley asked the city commission of Chattanooga, Tennessee, to name a street after slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr.¹ Rev. Billingsley's request, which came on behalf of the Ministers Union he helped lead, took place just five days after King's birthday, which had not yet been made into a federal holiday, and less than a year after a controversial court verdict had incited civil disturbances in the city. An all-white jury had acquitted two of three defendants arrested in connection with the shooting of four black women. Ninth Street had been the location of the Ku Klux Klan-related shooting, and, not coincidentally, it was also the road that black leaders sought to rename for King. In addition, Ninth Street had long served as the city's black business district and was the site of a federally funded downtown redevelopment program.²

The street-naming request sparked several months of intense debate. One of the major opponents to the name change was a T.A. Lupton, a white real estate developer who owned a downtown office building on the west end of the street and was in the process of building another one there. Lupton argued that he might not be able to rent office space in a building

with a King address because of the “racial overtones” it might create. He supported the renaming of East Ninth Street but not West Ninth Street, implying that the civil rights leader’s memory would somehow be “out of place” there. He was quoted as saying, “West Ninth Street is not related to Dr. King. ... [It] is no longer a solid black street. ... It is no longer a residential street or rundown business street. It is a top class business street that can play a great part in the future of Chattanooga.”³ The developer went so far as to suggest that he would abandon or drastically alter his construction plans in the event that West Ninth was renamed.

Chattanooga’s city commissioners acquiesced to pressure from Lupton and other opponents, refusing to rename Ninth. As a compromise, the commission offered to establish a plaza in King’s memory. Street-naming proponents quickly dismissed this alternative and responded by organizing a march along Ninth Street in late April 1981. Armed with ladders and singing the civil rights anthem “We Shall Overcome,” more than three hundred African Americans defiantly—albeit temporarily—renamed the street by pasting street signs and utility poles with green bumper stickers that read “Dr. ML King Jr. Blvd.”⁴ After this protest and an emotional request from a coalition of white and black ministers, the Chattanooga city commission reversed itself in July and agreed to rename all of Ninth Street for the civil rights leader as of January 1982.⁵

Controversy over the street renaming continued even after the city commission’s decision. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) leaders would later encourage the boycott of a prominent Chattanooga hotel that had changed its mailing address from West Ninth to a bordering street, presumably to avoid being identified with Martin Luther King.⁶ In the end, the street renaming did not stop Lupton, and he went forward with construction plans; however, the resulting office tower and its companion building, the corporate headquarters of the Krystal hamburger chain, do not have a King street mailing address. Instead, a private drive was created and the buildings reside on—presumably with no irony intended—Union Square.⁷

The street fight in Chattanooga was not an isolated event but part of a growing landscape movement in America. In fact, when petitioning to rename Ninth Street, several black leaders in Chattanooga cited the fact that cities such as Atlanta and Chicago and even other cities in Tennessee had already honored King with a street-name change. More than 730 cities and towns in thirty-nine states and the District of Columbia had a street named for King by 2003 (see [Figure 11.1](#)).⁸ Commemorating King through street naming displays a strong regional concentration even as it is a national trend. Seventy percent of places with King streets are located



Figure 11.1 Distribution of streets named for Martin Luther King, Jr., 2003. Source: Compiled by the author, Matthew Mitchelson, and Chris McPhilamy.

in the seven southern states of Georgia, Mississippi, Texas, Florida, Louisiana, Alabama, and North Carolina. Georgia—King’s home state—leads the country with 105 named streets. Naming streets for King occurs throughout the urban hierarchy, from large cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and Houston to some of the country’s smallest places such as Cuba, Alabama (population 363), Pawley’s Island, South Carolina (population 138), and Denton, Georgia (population 269). Although street-naming struggles in metropolitan areas such as Chattanooga typically receive more publicity, it is worth noting that more than 50 percent of U.S. streets named for King are in places with a population of fewer than ten thousand people (see [Figure 11.2](#)).

Naming streets for King is widespread and often has been controversial. The practice and its controversies provide insight into the intersection of race and landscape in the United States. King-named streets reflect the increased cultural and political power of blacks and the liberalization of white attitudes even as they also are sites of struggle for African Americans. I have suggested in previous work that these streets serve as memorial arenas—public spaces for interpreting King’s historical legacy and debating the connotations and consequences of commemorating him.⁹ As evident in the Tennessee case, there can be significant differences in the extent to which people personally identify with King and wish to have their street associated with him and, as they perceive it, the black community. Despite the victory in Chattanooga, African Americans in many

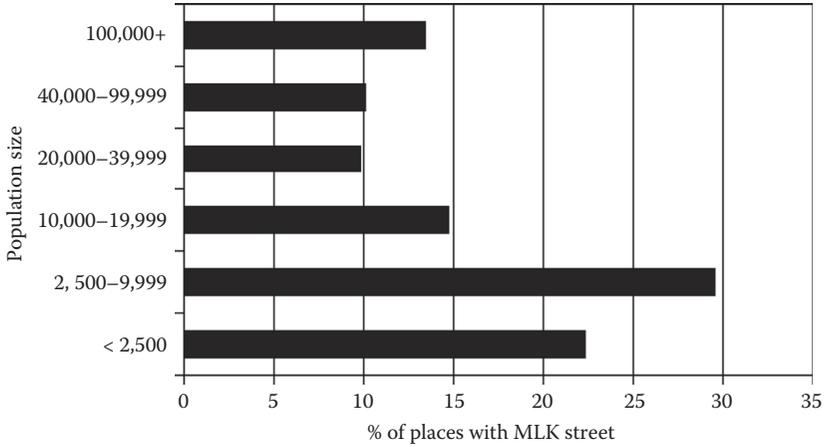


Figure 11.2 Distribution of streets named for Martin Luther King, Jr. by city population.

other cities have been unsuccessful in renaming thoroughfares that cut across business districts and connect different racial groups. King’s name is frequently attached to minor streets or portions of roads located entirely within poor, black areas of cities (see [Figure 11.3](#)).¹⁰ This has led, in turn, to the widespread belief that all King streets are this way, even though



Figure 11.3 Martin Luther King Circle in Phoenix, Arizona. The small cul-de-sac is invisible on some city maps. Until recently, the six homes on the street were owned exclusively by African Americans. Past attempts to rename a major road have met with resistance in a state that refused to establish a paid holiday in King’s honor until it lost hundreds of millions of dollars from convention cancellations and the National Football League’s decision to host the 1993 Super Bowl elsewhere. (Photograph by Keli Dailey, reproduced with permission.)

there are prominent roads bearing his name. As journalist Jonathan Tilove so keenly observed, “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, and a rueful rebuke of a people’s preoccupation with symbolic victories over actual progress.”¹¹ However, Tilove has found that King streets are important centers of black identity and community within America. Rather than a hollow gesture, street naming for many black activists is about gauging society’s relative progress in fulfilling the goals of the civil rights movement. For instance, when marching down Ninth Street in Chattanooga, black leaders characterized their street-naming struggle as an opportunity not only to celebrate King’s achievements but also “to test whether ‘equality’ and ‘justice’ for all are valid statements, or whether they have no meaning at all.”¹²

This chapter introduces King street-naming practice and explains why it is important and controversial. My intent is to identify (1) the political origins and historical development of the street-naming movement, (2) the symbolic qualities of street naming as a means of commemorating King, and (3) the political controversy and struggle that underlies street-naming practices. Streets named after King illustrate the important yet contentious ways in which race, place, and memory intersect through the American landscape. They provoke “fervent debate about the meaning of his [King’s] life and what kind of street would do him credit,” revealing important divisions between blacks and whites as well as social contests within African American communities.¹³

Origins of Streets Named after Martin Luther King

The movement to name streets after Martin Luther King originated squarely within black community activism. King’s commemoration is part of an ongoing effort on the part of African Americans to address the exclusion of their experiences and achievements from the national historical consciousness. According to Joseph Tilden Rhea, this movement goes beyond the country’s general embrace of multiculturalism. Rather, African Americans and other racial and ethnic groups are using direct political action to challenge and change the commemoration of the past within cultural landscapes, constituting what Rhea called the “race pride movement.”¹⁴ The race pride movement has had an impact on not just street-naming patterns but also other commemorative forms such as statues, museums, preserved sites, heritage trails, and festivals. Although less ornate or ostentatious than these memorials, street naming has become one of the most common and visible strategies for African Americans to

elevate public recognition of King as well as a host of other figures identified with the struggle for equal rights, such as Rosa Parks, Thurgood Marshall, Malcolm X, and Harriet Tubman. As author Melvin Dixon 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.”¹⁵

In the case of street naming, African Americans are not simply honoring the historical achievements of a single individual but seeking to establish the public legitimacy of all blacks. Commemorating King is inseparable from a broader consideration of racism and race relations, especially a desire to reverse the control historically exercised by whites over racial and ethnic minorities. Black activists envision being able to engage in commemoration as part of the democratization of society and the gaining of a greater political voice. For example, after Chattanooga’s city commission finally approved the renaming of Ninth Street for King, NAACP leader George Key concluded that the decision shows that “black citizens are full citizens of Chattanooga and have a right to be considered in what goes on in [the city].”¹⁶ As Karen Till argued, street-naming struggles such as seen in Tennessee “often reflect larger social (power) disputes about who has authority to create, define, interpret, and represent collective pasts through place.”¹⁷

Given the central role that black activists play in initiating the street-naming process, it is not surprising that a strong relationship exists between the likelihood of a city or town identifying a street with King and the relative size of its African American population (see Figure 11.4).

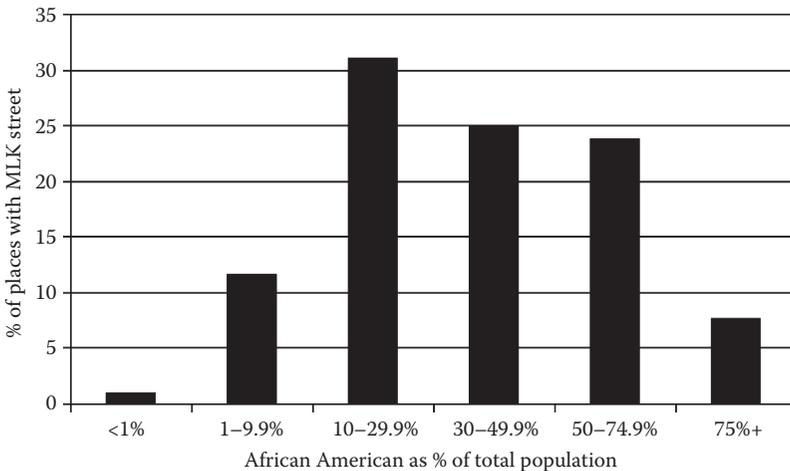


Figure 11.4 Distribution of streets named for Martin Luther King, Jr. by relative size of city’s African American population.

On average, African Americans constitute approximately 37 percent of the population in a location with a street named for King. More than a third of the time, African Americans make up 50 percent or more of the population in places with a street named after King. Street-naming campaigns are often conducted by local chapters of the NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization that King once led, and various other black-led community improvement associations and coalitions. The church is often an important participant in the naming process, as it has been in African American culture in general. Churches are one of the nonresidential establishments most frequently found on streets that bear King's name.¹⁸ In Chattanooga, it was a union of black ministers who spearheaded the renaming of Ninth Street. Ultimately it was this group's ability to form a coalition with white clergy in the city that helped sway the opinion of local elected officials. In the case of the small town of Metter, Georgia, a local black pastor led the movement to rename a street. The unveiling of Martin Luther King Boulevard took place on the Sunday before the 1996 King holiday, and the dedication service began and ended with prayer and the singing of church hymns. During the service, those in attendance read a litany of dedication, pledging themselves to the ideals of peace, freedom, and equality.

The race pride movement and the commemoration of King are relatively recent developments; however, they are not entirely new and, in some way, signal a return to an earlier American tradition. The United States has a long history of honoring patriot heroes and using commemorative symbols such as monuments, museums, and place names to focus public attention and identification with certain political values and visions of history. For instance, Zelinsky found that 25 percent of counties and 10 percent of streets in the United States are named after national notables or carry other patriotic references.¹⁹ Although the growing movement to memorialize King and other civil rights leaders represents a return to honoring inspirational heroes, we should not forget that earlier patterns of commemoration were almost entirely devoted to honoring white historical figures such as presidents and the country's founding fathers. Streets named for King challenge the country's dominant historical memory in that they ask citizens to view the past and its heroes in much more diverse terms, ones that specifically address experiences common to being black in America. In their book *Presence of the Past*, historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen found significant racial differences when surveying Americans about how they value and identify with the past. Perhaps it is not surprising that African American respondents are much more likely

than whites to cite the assassination of King as an event in the past that has most affected them.²⁰

The contributions of African Americans certainly do not begin or end with King, but he has become the most widely identified symbol of the civil rights movement and black heritage in general, sometimes at the historical neglect of lesser known activists, including women.²¹ King memorializing began after his assassination in 1968, but such efforts did not receive immediate widespread approval.²² Four months after the civil rights leader's death, the city of Chicago, Illinois, renamed South Park Way, perhaps making it the country's first street named after King. Although the road stretches for several miles, it does not leave the city's predominantly African American South Side. On South Park Way, an African American church chose to use one of its side streets as an address rather than be identified with the civil rights leader. The pastor at the time, Reverend Joseph Jackson, was a conservative opponent of the civil disobedience campaign and a "bitter rival of King's in national black Baptist circles."²³ In 1972 officials in Montgomery, Alabama, approved and then quickly rescinded a measure to rename a street for King. The White Citizens Council—an organization that King battled during the city's famous bus boycott—opposed the name change because white-owned businesses and a white Masonic lodge were found on the street and the street was not located entirely in the black community.²⁴ It was not until 1976 that Atlanta, Georgia—King's hometown—placed his name on a street. Commercial interests opposed the naming of a street in his honor, though without success.²⁵ Today, Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, on the west side of the city, is the location of significant economic development and a major landmark in the city's tourism industry.

King's status rose when the federal government established a holiday to honor him in 1983, although passage of the holiday came fifteen years after first being proposed in Congress and after debate among black leaders about the most appropriate date to observe.²⁶ There are indications that the King holiday has helped propel the street-naming movement. It is difficult to know exactly when many of the country's cities and towns named a street for King; however, a preliminary survey of Georgia municipalities revealed that only 13 percent of responding communities named a street before the King federal holiday was signed into law by Ronald Reagan. More than a third of responding cities said they had renamed a street between 1984 and 1989. The remaining 52 percent of street naming in Georgia occurred after 1990.²⁷ In many instances, local King holiday celebration commissions organize street-naming campaigns. Many petitions to name a street are brought before local governments immediately before or after the King holiday in January. Although the holiday made King an

officially recognized icon and gave further legitimacy to commemorating him, it was perhaps what the holiday could not offer African Americans that most inspired their requests to rename streets. Unlike the holiday, which comes just once a year, a commemorative street name provides a physically permanent memorial that is present all the time. The King holiday remains controversial. Some local governments still refuse to recognize it, and only 26 percent of the country's businesses give a paid day off to their employees.²⁸ Consequently, naming a street represents a more concrete way for communities to display their commitment to King's memory and ideals. African Americans are also pursuing street naming because of its symbolic qualities.

Symbolism of Streets Named after Martin Luther King

The seemingly mundane practice of street naming invokes intense emotional response. The attraction of commemorative street naming to African American communities is multifaceted, and commemorating Martin Luther King in the urban landscape transcends an immediate concern with simply naming roads to symbolically mediate myriad questions of race and racism in American life. King street-naming practices mark concerns for and debates about political meaning, power and resistance, historical representation, social justice, public space and infrastructure access, urban diversity, and community memory and identity. These debates extend beyond African American communities, to open up often long-standing American cultural, political, social, and economic tensions.

As Maoz Azaryahu suggested, "Street names are more than a means of facilitating spatial orientation. Often they are laden with political meanings and represent a certain theory of the world that is associated with and supportive of the hegemonic socio-political order."²⁹ In other words, street names, along with other forms of memorialization, participate in legitimizing a selective vision of the past, making historical representations appear to be the natural order of things. Places named after historical people or events are important symbols within a country's political culture and often are manipulated by state leaders or elites to reconstruct national identity.³⁰

The power of street naming means that it also can be used by historically subordinate or marginalized groups as a form of resistance to challenge prevailing ideas about their identity and importance within society.³¹ Black activists often are aware of the counterhegemonic potential of naming streets for King. A street-name change symbolizes a shift in the racialized balance of power between whites and blacks as well as racial progress within communities. Such feelings were expressed in Statesboro, Georgia, in 1994 when citizens were asked to submit their views on whether

a major perimeter highway should be named: “I want to convey my personal suggestion to name the road Martin Luther King Parkway. I agree that this naming would affirm an important segment of our ... [city] and county population and would be a healing and unifying act.”³² Some black activists in Statesboro conceptualized naming the perimeter for King as an ideological weapon against an oppressive white cultural structure. For instance, the local NAACP leader argued that several of the city’s existing streets were named after racist whites and that local leaders had never asked members of the black community if these streets bothered them. He added, “We need a street that honors a man that symbolizes something different about race. Dr. King stood for equality.”³³ In this respect, the naming of streets is conceptualized by some blacks as an antiracist practice, a way of inscribing a new vision of race relations into the American landscape.

African Americans have sought access to several mediums of public commemoration, but street naming has proved to be especially important. Symbolically, street naming is the latest chapter in a long line of African American struggles for social justice in the area of mobility and transportation. Streets do not operate in a race- and class-neutral society; a politics underlies their organization, use, and meaning.³⁴ Although transportation racism is usually understood in terms of the inequity found in highway spending, road improvements, and mass transit planning, it also can refer to the barriers that confront racial and ethnic minorities as they seek to define the symbolic identity and meaning of roads as public spaces. From the Underground Railroad to the Freedom Riders, black communities have long looked to movement and transportation as conduits for challenging and changing the racial order. Sally Greene—a white city councilor in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and a supporter of renaming the city’s Airport Road for King—expressed the strong connection she saw between street naming and the larger history of African American struggles for equality:

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 bus boycott and the push for the public accommodation law. ... Mobility, the freedom to travel the public roads without fear and with 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 naming.³⁵

Aside from the specific historical experiences of African Americans, commemorative street naming is, in general, an important vehicle for bringing the past into the present. The seemingly ordinary and practical nature of street names makes the past tangible and intimately familiar. Because of its practical importance, street naming inscribes its ideological message into many practices and texts of everyday life.³⁶ Yvonne Aikens, who pushed to have a street named for King in Tampa, expressed this point well:

A street touches more people than if they had just named a building after him downtown. ... People who wouldn't go to a building or a park named for King drive on a major thoroughfare such as Buffalo (now Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd.) for business or personal reasons. ... They see the name at intersections, on signs pointing to the road, on maps. It pops up on addresses, letters, business cards, constantly keeping King's name before the public. ... More people come in contact with it.³⁷

By all indications, it appears that Tampa's King Boulevard is a highly visible point of contact for the public. It extends for more than fourteen miles, connects with two interstate highways, and serves as an address for more than 550 nonresidential or business establishments.³⁸

The power and politics of commemorative street naming lie in its dual and simultaneous existence as historical referent and form of spatial identification. A street name's practical nature does not necessarily lessen its symbolic function. Rather, the commemorative importance of street names comes from their status as markers of location. Public commemoration is not simply about determining the appropriateness of remembering the past in a certain way but a struggle over where best to place that memory within the cultural landscape.³⁹

The symbolism of location in commemorating King was perhaps no more apparent than in Brent, Alabama, when blacks protested attaching King's name onto a road leading to a garbage dump. Reverend W.B. Dickerson petitioned the city council to rename another, more prominent street, and said, "We want [Martin Luther King Street] up where people can really see it."⁴⁰ Similarly, in March 2002 African American activist Torrey Dixon petitioned the city council of Danville, Virginia, to rename Central Boulevard, a major commercial thoroughfare. Though unsuccessful, he considered the boulevard an "appropriate street" because its central location and high volume of traffic would ensure that many people would see King's name. Dixon even refused to rename an alternative street that had a strong historical connection with King's visit to Danville in 1963

because he claimed it was a “low class neighborhood.”⁴¹ These situations affirm Johnson’s suggestion that the location not simply is the “incidental material backdrop” for memory but plays an active role in constructing the meaning of commemoration.⁴² As Jonathan Tilove observed, “To name any street for King is to invite an accounting of how the street makes good on King’s promise or mocks it.”⁴³

For many African Americans, streets have a geographic connectivity that contributes to their symbolism. This was made clear in one editorial: “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.”⁴⁴ The notion of connectivity is particularly relevant to commemorating King. For instance, African American activist Allen Stucks envisioned Martin Luther King Boulevard in Tallahassee, Florida, in terms of King’s goal of racial integration: “Rev. King was about togetherness. . . . If his name was going to be on a street in Tallahassee, it had to be on one that connected one neighborhood to another. And it had to be one you could find without having to wiggle through the black community.” In the case of King Boulevard in Tallahassee, the street “connects one of the nation’s oldest historically black universities to the entire city. It traces through black neighborhoods, white neighborhoods, businesses, parks and cemeteries.”⁴⁵ The street named for King in Austin, Texas, also crosses racial lines, the result of the passionate yet fatal lobbying of J.J. Seabrook. He died of a heart attack while pleading with the city council not to restrict the named street to the black community.⁴⁶ Street naming is a potentially powerful form of commemoration because of its capacity to make certain visions of the past accessible to a wide range of social groups. However, it is this potential to touch and connect disparate groups—some of which may not identify with King—that also makes street naming controversial.

The symbolic meaning of streets named after King is also about how they connect with a larger memorial landscape, including other named places, historical markers, murals, and monuments. Found along Martin Luther King Jr. Drive in Asheville, North Carolina, is a recreational park that also bears the civil rights leader’s name. The centerpiece of the park is a life-size statue of King leading two small children. It is not uncommon for King to be remembered alongside other historical figures (see Figure 11.5). Streets named after King and Malcolm X intersect in Dallas, Texas (as well as in Harlem, New York), creating an interesting moment for reflecting on the similarities and differences in how these two leaders worked for civil rights. At the Martin Luther King Memorial Gardens in Raleigh, North



Figure 11.5 Freedom Corner Monument at the intersection of Martin Luther King and Medgar Evers boulevards in Jackson, Mississippi. Streets named for King do not exist in a symbolic vacuum but become connected to other memorial forms, other historical figures, and other political causes. In 2001, for example, a group led by a black city councilman burned a state flag at Freedom Corner in calling for removal of the Confederate battle emblem from Mississippi's official banner. (Photograph by Elizabeth Hines, reproduced with permission.)

Carolina, a bronze statue of King overlooks a major road bearing his name. Next to the statue is a marble fountain inscribed with the names of civil rights leaders from the Raleigh area, creating a place where visitors can interpret the interweaving of national and local civil rights movements. Yet bringing national and local civil rights histories together can create contradictory landscape formations. For instance, the Ralph Mark Gilbert Civil Rights Museum in Savannah, Georgia, is located on Martin Luther

King Jr. Boulevard even though African American leaders—including Gilbert—tried to bar King from preaching in the city in the 1960s. They feared that the civil rights leader's presence would antagonize Savannah authorities and disrupt an already successful protest movement.⁴⁷ It is not surprising that the Gilbert museum says little about King but focuses largely on local activists and struggles. Roger Stump suggested that streets named for King are “public symbols of community values, attitudes, and beliefs, revealing the character of both the figure commemorated and the community that has honored him.”⁴⁸ As symbols, streets named for King often are contested sites that erupt through the political tensions underlying the remembrance of King along America's roadways.

The Politics of Streets Named for Martin Luther King

The symbolic work of naming streets for Martin Luther King perhaps most often takes place through highly public debate and controversy. Just the very naming of streets after King can have unforeseen consequences and can spark political opposition. In 1987 citizens in San Diego, California, and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, voted to revoke the renaming of streets for King. Both cities later placed his name on smaller roads.⁴⁹ When the city council in Portland, Oregon, voted in 1990 to rename Union Avenue after King, more than two dozen people picketed and heckled the street-naming ceremony and more than fifty thousand people signed a petition opposing the name change. Because of this backlash, Portland voters were to be given a chance to vote on an initiative in an upcoming primary election that would have changed the name of the street back to Union Avenue, but before the election was held, a county circuit judge ruled that placing such an initiative on the ballot was illegal.⁵⁰

The landscapes of commemorating King can serve as flashpoints around what sociologist Gary Fine called “reputational politics” and provide a mechanism for identifying and fixing political positions and for opening up political debate about King and his legacies, as well as for larger issues around race and power. The historical image of a person is a social product open to multiple and competing constructions and interpretations. There can be any number of different discourses or common ways of thinking and talking about a person and his or her contribution to society. The historical reputation of a person is used and controlled by social actors and groups who seek to advance their own commemorative agenda and divert the agendas of other parties. Fine recognized that the “control of history may be contentious, and the claims of one group may be countered by another that wishes to interpret the same ... person through a different lens.”⁵¹

Naming streets after King as reputational politics highlights any number of contemporary political issues revolving around race. These issues range from representations of King, his legacy, and his legitimacy to questions about King's resonance within African American communities and in American life more broadly. They often extend to expose basic racial and political tensions about urban economic vitality and urban apartheid, and they often work through a politics of scale to join local and national interests. The landscapes of streets named for King are politically charged and often are sites of political struggle.

Reputational politics often arise first when African Americans seek to establish the very legitimacy of commemorating King. City officials in Americus, Georgia, did not rename a portion of U.S. 19 until black community leaders planned a boycott of city businesses. Part of the controversy stemmed from the comments of a white fire official. He supported naming half of the street for King if authorities named the other half for James Earl Ray, the man convicted of assassinating the civil rights leader.⁵² In Dade City, Florida, vandals painted the name "General Robert E. Lee" over nine Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard signs, an incident symptomatic of the American South's ongoing struggles over identity and memory. 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.⁵³ Not long after officials in Mankato, Minnesota, named a small street for King, "an unidentified motorist mowed down both of ... [the city's] new MLK street signs while shouting racial epithets at some passing children."⁵⁴

In addition to legitimacy, the politics of constructing King's historical reputation through street naming is also a struggle over resonance. One of the largest obstacles facing African Americans is the prevailing assumption, particularly among whites, that King's historical relevance is limited to the black community. In Statesboro, Georgia, African Americans tried, unsuccessfully, on two occasions to have a major road identified with King. In their first attempt, black activists struggled with local veterans over naming a new perimeter highway. Veterans succeeded in representing their memorial cause as inclusive of all races and groups of people. In contrast, they depicted the commemoration of King as socially divisive, suggesting that his memory did not resonate with whites. Outspoken black leaders countered by asserting the universal importance of King's legacy. They reminded the public of his war on poverty and economic inequality—issues of great concern not only to blacks but to all Americans.⁵⁵

In representing the street-naming issue as divisive, some whites have suggested that King—because of his legacy as a peacemaker—would not

have wanted his commemoration characterized by racial conflict. For example, street-naming opponents in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, argued this point when they called on black leaders to rename a park, library, or school for King rather than the controversial Airport Road. Black supporters such as Michele Laws countered with King's own words: "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience but where he stands in times of challenge and controversy."⁵⁶ These attempts by some whites to represent the civil rights leader's image as nonconfrontational is, according to Michael Eric Dyson, part of a larger national amnesia about King's true legacy. According to Dyson, most of America chooses to remember King as the "moral guardian of racial harmony" rather than as a radical challenger of the racial and economic order.⁵⁷ In this respect, the politics of street naming are not just about black Americans establishing the legitimacy and resonance of King's achievements but also about wresting away control of his historical legacy from conservative whites, who have appropriated his image to maintain the status quo rather than redefine it.

In the struggle to elevate the historical reputation of King, black activists often engage in a "politics of scale."⁵⁸ On one hand, African Americans seek to extend the geographic and social reach of King's importance within cities. They suggest that his significance is not limited to the black community and hence seek to name major thoroughfares that cut across and unite different racial communities. On the other hand, opponents attempt to place spatial boundaries around the people and locations that will be associated with the commemorative naming. They interpret the civil rights leader strictly as an African American advocate and seek to confine his name to areas that do not seem to directly touch the lives and geographies of the white community. This was evident in Chattanooga when opponents argued that King's name did not belong on the western part of Ninth Street because it was no longer a "black" street and might subsequently harm white-led economic development. In resisting these efforts to segregate King's memory, street-naming proponents asserted the cross-racial legitimacy of memorializing the civil rights leader. In making the argument for renaming all of Ninth Street, U.S. representative Parren Mitchell, a former chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, explained, "All groups want monuments and symbols of their race. But with King, of course, it was more than a matter of race—it was the impact he had on this nation and this world."⁵⁹

Many black communities see the naming of a prominent, highly visible street as a reflection of the importance that a community places on King. The naming of large, racially diverse streets allows African Americans to

educate the entire community about the contributions of King. In contrast, renaming a smaller, less prominent street represents a restriction of King's image and its potential to reshape the public's historical consciousness. The rescaling of King's memory was certainly in the minds of NAACP leaders in Clearwater, Florida, when they persuaded local officials to remove King's name from a three-block stretch of road and rename a three-mile length of road that cuts through a variety of residential neighborhoods and the city's historically African American business district. As one activist contended, "If King is going to have a road named after him, it should be more significant. It should traverse different areas of the city, different boundaries."⁶⁰ Not all African American communities are successful in naming streets (or portions of streets) that reach beyond the geographic boundaries of the black community. A study in 2000 of streets named for King in the southeastern United States found them to be located in largely African American areas of cities.⁶¹ More recent research for the nation as a whole suggests that neighborhoods intersected by these streets have a significantly larger proportion of African Americans than their respective cities.⁶²

When African American activists seek to remember King on prominent thoroughfares, they often encounter harsh opposition from owners and operators of businesses along the potentially renamed street. Businesses most often cite the financial burden of changing their address as printed on stationery, advertising, and billing statements. Some opponents such as in Zephyrhills, Florida—whose city officials voted to dedicate rather than rename a street for King in 2004—expressed fear that property values would drop as a result of being located on a street named for King.⁶³ There is no evidence to suggest that street naming brings a decline in property value or loss of business, as suggested by the white developer in Chattanooga. In fact, several streets named for King in this country are the focus of significant redevelopment efforts, such as Indianapolis, Indiana; Jersey City, New Jersey; Savannah, Georgia; Miami, Florida; and Seattle, Washington. King's memory does not necessarily cause poverty and degradation along streets. Rather, his name is often placed in poorer areas as a result of public opposition to naming more prominent places. Although resistance from business interests has significantly limited the scale of King's commemoration, large numbers of commercial establishments can be found on several streets named for the civil rights leader (e.g., Tampa, Florida; Los Angeles, California; Washington, D.C.; Portland, Oregon; and New Bern, North Carolina) (see [Figure 11.6](#)). Analyzing the almost eleven thousand nonresidential establishments in the United States that have an address on a street named for King, Matthew Mitchelson found



Figure 11.6 An example of commercial development along Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard in New Bern, North Carolina. Contrary to the prevailing vision that streets named for King are always found in poor, economically marginalized areas, the street in New Bern is the center of significant nonresidential development such as national chain stores, a shopping mall, a Wal-Mart, car dealerships, and two soft-drink bottling plants (Pepsi and Coca-Cola). (Photograph by Matthew Mitchellson, reproduced with permission.)

these establishments to be on par with national trends in terms of annual sales volume and number of employees. However, he also found that these streets are “less industrially diverse than other places” and “host a disproportionately high number of establishments traditionally categorized as ‘black businesses,’ such as beauty parlors and barber shops, small retail grocery stores, and funeral parlors.”⁶⁴

In arguing against street-naming proposals, business and property owners consistently attempt to represent their opposition as not racially motivated but simply a matter of cost and convenience. And in some cases, such as in Chattanooga, whites interpret the evoking of King’s image by blacks as an attempt to create racial overtones. At the same time, black proponents almost always point to this opposition as racist in nature. As pointed out by Blauner, whites and blacks often “talk past each other” because they define racism differently. According to him, “Whites locate racism in color consciousness and its absence in color blindness.”⁶⁵ They tend to see anti-black racism as a thing of the past, supposedly ending with segregation, lynching, and explicit white supremacist beliefs. The African American

public, according to Blauner, defines racism much more in terms of power and how certain underlying structures and institutions maintain racial oppression even in the absence of explicitly stated prejudicial attitudes. Rather than being a thing of the past, racism from the black point of view continues to exist and has taken on a much more insidious form, as evident in the unwillingness of white entrepreneurs to change their addresses.

In characterizing the racism that African Americans encounter when attempting to honor King, we might find it worthwhile to interpret business opposition to street naming as a form of “rational discrimination.” According to Bobby Wilson, in his analysis of black activism and struggle in the postmodern era, the overt racism of Eugene “Bull” Connor has been replaced by a “rational discrimination” in which businesses and corporations use the pursuit of profit or cost savings as justification for not investing in African American people and places.⁶⁶ Such a position can deny the sometimes-structural impediments to equality. In addition, this “rational” form of discrimination is sometimes driven by the emotional memories of past racial tensions. For instance, in Muncie, Indiana, Ed McCloud responded to the changing of his address from Broadway to Martin Luther King by closing his appliance business of fifty years. Although McCloud expressed concern about customers not being able to find his store, he did admit vividly remembering when one of his earlier stores had been set on fire by rioters following King’s assassination in 1968. McCloud added, “I swore then that I would not let the black community—or anyone else—hurt my business again.”⁶⁷

Struggles to construct the importance and meaning of King’s reputation are not simply interracial but also within the African American community. Embracing different political goals, African American leaders sometimes disagree with each other over which street to name in honor of King. Even in Chattanooga, where black leaders formed an impressive coalition, one could find evidence of the street-naming issue being viewed in multiple and sometimes competing ways by African Americans. One particularly outspoken activist wished to see King’s name on a street in a “better part of town,” contending that much of Ninth Street was characterized by crime and marginal economic activity. NAACP leader George Key countered by asserting that a renamed Ninth Street “would be a symbol to let young blacks know that there is something in Chattanooga they can identity with ... to have the feeling that Chattanooga cares about its black people.”⁶⁸ In Eatonton, Georgia, two African American leaders had a more visible competition—one lobbied for the naming of a major highway that ran the length of town whereas the other persuaded local officials to name a residential street within the black community. Whereas the

activist advocating for the thoroughfare emphasized using King's memory to challenge and expand the historical consciousness of whites, the other activist emphasized how the naming of the residential street would focus and inspire African Americans.⁶⁹ Street naming is a negotiated process in which even black participants must balance between allowing the importance of King's commemoration to transcend the black community and keeping it within symbolic reach of African Americans.

Concluding Remarks

Like the civil rights movement they commemorate, streets named after Martin Luther King symbolize both black empowerment and struggle. Jonathan Tilove put it best when he wrote that these streets are the "geopolitical synthesis of black insistence and white resistance."⁷⁰ Of course, as I have tried to demonstrate, these streets also provoke us to go beyond monolithic conceptions of "the" black community and to comprehend in fuller terms historical consciousness, geographic agency, and political activism among a diversity of African American interests. Similarly, these street-naming practices reveal that in every racialized struggle, the lines of opposition are not always or necessarily drawn along the demarcations of the black-white binary. As a rapidly growing movement that touches people in intimate and potentially controversial ways, the naming of streets for King provides a glimpse into where the country is in terms of race relations. Depending on the ultimate location that these streets take, they can symbolize the expansion of African American cultural expression and influence or simply a reentrenchment of the boundaries that have traditionally constrained black power and identity. Although named streets commemorate the civil rights movement as a completed part of the country's past, they speak, perhaps more important, to the still unfinished nature of King's dream of racial equality and social justice.

Notes

1. An expanded discussion of the street fight in Chattanooga and the ongoing American movement to build civil rights memorials can be found in Owen Dwyer and Derek H. Alderman, *Civil Rights Memorials and the Geography of Memory* (forthcoming). I am indebted to Ronald Foresta for first making me aware of the street-name struggle in Chattanooga.
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4. Jeff Powell, "Blacks 'Rename' Ninth Street," *Chattanooga News-Free Press*, April 19, 1981, A1.
5. Pat Wilcox, "City Reverses, Renames Ninth Street for King," *Chattanooga Times*, July 15, 1981, A1.
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7. Jonathan Tilove, *Along Martin Luther King: Travels on Black America's Main Street* (New York: Random House, 2003).
8. Identification of the number of streets named for Martin Luther King, Jr. was carried out in summer 2003 by Matthew Mitchelson, Chris McPhilamy, and Derek Alderman by performing street-name lookups in www.mapblast.com, www.melissadata.com, and *American Business Disc* (InfoUSA). A more comprehensive data collection by Mitchelson found 777 places in the United States with streets named for King. Matthew Mitchelson, "The Economic Geography of MLK Streets" (master's thesis, East Carolina University, 2005).
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23. Tilove, *Along Martin Luther King*, 20.

24. Roger W. Stump, "Toponymic Commemoration of National Figures: The Cases of Kennedy and King," *Names* 36 (1988): 203–16.
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