

# Street Names as Memorial Arenas: The Reputational Politics of Commemorating Martin Luther King Jr. in a Georgia County

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The public commemoration and representation of the past are socially constructed and contested processes. Sociologists Robin Wagner-Pacifici and Barry Schwartz pointed to this fact when they wrote that “Memorial devices are not self-created; they are conceived and built by those who wish to bring to consciousness the events and people that others are more inclined to forget.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, a study of heritage, according to Brian Graham and his colleagues, is not simply about uncovering or reconstructing the geographies of the past but involves understanding how contemporary use of the past is “a field of social conflict and tension, carrying differing and incompatible meanings simultaneously.”<sup>2</sup> And the ability of people to commemorate the past is often limited by competition and conflict with other social actors and groups who wish to memorialize a different interpretation or aspect of history. This potential struggle and contest over whose conception of the past will prevail constitutes the politics of memory.

Commemorative street naming is an important vehicle for bringing the past into the present, helping weave history into the geographic fabric of everyday life. Named streets, like any place of memory, can become embroiled in the politics of defining what is historically significant or worthy of public remembrance. I am interested in street names as “memorial arenas,” public spaces for representing the images of historical figures and debating the meaning and relative importance of these figures to contemporary society. Specifically, my work focuses on one of America’s most widespread yet underanalyzed commemorative practices—the naming of streets after slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK). As of 1996, 483 cities in the United States had attached King’s name to streets and of the 50 states, only 11 (or 22 percent) had no streets named after him.<sup>3</sup>

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King's commemoration is part of a larger movement on the part of black Americans to address the exclusion of their experiences from the national historical consciousness.<sup>4</sup> Although the past contributions of African Americans certainly do not begin or end with King, he has become the most widely identified symbol of the civil rights movement and black heritage in general. King's status rose when the federal government established a holiday to honor him in the early 1980s, and a 1999 Gallup public opinion poll revealed the national prominence of his reputation—34 percent of surveyed Americans named Martin Luther King Jr. as the most admired person of the century, placing him second only to Mother Teresa.<sup>5</sup> Yet, to say that King is a highly admired figure is not to say that his commemoration does not generate public debate. Indeed, the attaching of his name to streets and roads often evokes great controversy not only between blacks and whites but also within the African-American community. In part, this is because people—despite their general respect for the civil rights leader—interpret and personally connect with his historical legacy in different and sometimes competing ways.

The objective of this article is to explore the reputational politics of naming streets for Martin Luther King Jr. "Reputational politics" is an approach that focuses on the socially constructed and contested nature of commemorating historical figures and the discursive rivalries that underlie the memorialization of these figures. By way of case study, I visit Bulloch County, Georgia and examine the failed 1994 attempt by African Americans to have a new perimeter highway named for King. Black activists there struggled with military veterans, who sought to use street naming to publicly recognize their own sacrifices and achievements. Through newspaper editorials, speeches at local government meetings, and a name-suggestion campaign, outspoken veterans were successful in representing King's historical legacy as less important and less racially inclusive than their own commemorative cause. While this debate exposed traditional racial divisions within the county, it also displayed an interesting counterintuitive pattern—because of divided loyalties, many black men went on record in support of naming the perimeter highway for veterans rather than for King.

In this article, I use discourse analysis to examine how participants in the Bulloch County struggle viewed and represented the commemoration of Martin Luther King Jr. in multiple and competing ways, facing three important issues as they engaged in the reputational politics of commemorating King. The first was the *legitimacy of commemoration* or the politics of constructing the historical and political worth of remembering one figure or cause over another. The second was the *resonance of commemoration* or the politics of making a commemorated figure universally relevant or resonant to the various social groups that constitute the public. The third dimension was the *hybridity of commemoration*, which refers to the political complications that can arise when social actors, specifically African-American activists, have multiple and sometimes overlapping commemorative interests. Before presenting the case study, it is necessary to provide some basic background on street naming as a memorial arena, the notion of reputational politics, and the politics of commemorating King in America.

## Street Names as Memorial Arenas

Street naming is an important and contentious commemorative practice that has been largely ignored by geographers until recently when Maoz Azaryahu greatly broadened our understanding of its significance.<sup>6</sup> According to him, the naming of streets after historical figures and events is an important part of modern political culture because it not only provides spatial and semiotic orientation to the city but also participates in the naturalization or legitimization of a selective vision of the past. The seemingly ordinary and practical nature of street names makes the past “tangible and intimately familiar.”<sup>7</sup> Named streets are powerful memorial spaces because they inscribe a commemorative message into many facets of daily urban life such as through road maps, phone book listings, the sending and receiving of mail, the giving of directions, advertising billboards, and of course, road signs themselves. Signs, as suggested by some geographers, contribute significantly to the creation of a sense of place.<sup>8</sup>

Street names are unique and potentially politicized memorials because of their geographic connectivity, their ability to touch diverse neighborhoods and social groups who may or may not identify with the person or event being memorialized.<sup>9</sup> Street naming is also controversial, according to Azaryahu, because, with the commemoration of one vision of the past, there is often a decommemoration of another. Brenda Yeoh, exploring the political nature of street naming, argues that the renaming of streets held an important place in Singapore’s attempt to build a sense of “nation” and “national identity” after independence. Yeoh characterized the removing of European street names and the reinscribing of streets to reflect Singapore’s multiracial character as a politically contested and negotiated process open to a multiplicity of meanings and interests.<sup>10</sup> Anthropologists J. Faraco Gonzales and Michael Dean Murphy have also addressed the importance of street names, particularly commemorative street names, to nation building. They explored how radical political transformations in 20th-century Spain brought dramatic changes in the names given to streets. For instance, with the establishment of the Second Republic in 1931, the Andalusian city of Almonte renamed its streets after “heroes of the Republic and noteworthy Spanish artists and intellectuals.” Local officials envisioned it as a way of educating “the town’s mainly illiterate populace about the wider world.”<sup>11</sup> Just six years later, a new fascist town council removed these names, replacing them with their own commemorations. Gonzales and Murphy—like Yeoh and Azaryahu—advocate an analysis of street naming that examines “the social, cultural, and political contexts in which toponymic change takes places.”<sup>12</sup>

America’s street-name landscape has long served as a place for debating the appropriateness of commemorative agendas. For example, in her study of early 20th-century Chicago, Amanda Seligman described the politics that surrounded the renaming of Crawford Avenue to Pulaski Road, after the Polish count and American Revolutionary hero. The name change sparked a 15-year debate between Polish-American civic activists and business owners located along the renamed street. In addition to citing the obvious financial costs of changing their

addresses, business owners saw the name “Crawford” as a more legitimate commemoration because “it honored a local founder [Peter Crawford], while [Casmir] Pulaski had no specific connection to the Chicago area.” Behind these arguments, according to Seligman, lurked “a sense that the name ‘Pulaski’ was too ethnic to represent West Garfield Parkers, who had largely shed their ancestors’ immigrant histories in favor of unhyphenated Americanism.”<sup>13</sup>

Despite controversies, street naming continues to be a strategy used by minorities to gain public recognition of their historical achievements. In fact, the U.S. has witnessed a flurry of commemorative street-naming campaigns led by racial and ethnic groups. Sociologist Joseph Tilden Rhea suggested that the movement to recognize the role of minorities in American history is not simply “because of a general drift toward cultural pluralism.” Rather, it is the result of direct political action by minority activists, who seek a greater identity within society by challenging white-dominated interpretations of American history and creating new representations of their past within cultural landscapes.<sup>14</sup> For example, in 1995, the city council of Fresno, California—responding to growing demands from the Latino community—approved the naming of a major commercial thoroughfare after deceased farm-worker leader Cesar Chavez. The name change drew considerable debate (even near-fights and boycotts) and the council eventually reversed its decision. While Anglos opposed the street-naming decision for a variety of racial, class, and cultural reasons, Ramón Chacón pointed specifically to the power of white agribusiness interests, who disagreed with and attacked Chavez’s historical association with unions and union organizing.<sup>15</sup> As evident in early 20th-century Chicago and late 20th-century Fresno, street names do function as arenas for remembering and representing historical figures, as well as gauging public identification with these figures. In naming streets for others, people actively interpret the historical legacies and reputations of commemorated figures and, in many instances, debate the social connotations and meaning of memorializing them.

Despite the historical and ever-increasing importance of the street name as a platform for elevating minority heritages, little attention has been paid to the role of blacks in commemorative street naming and place naming in general. Historically, the geographic literature on African Americans has focused more on residential patterns and social problems and less on their cultural and historical geographies.<sup>16</sup> There is ample evidence that African Americans view the naming of streets and other public places as a means of asserting their historical value and legitimacy within the country. Although Martin Luther King Jr. is the figure most frequently commemorated, communities have identified streets with other notable black Americans such as Rosa Parks (e.g., Montgomery, Alabama; and Detroit, Michigan), Harriet Tubman (e.g., Columbia, Maryland; Winston-Salem, North Carolina; and Knoxville, Tennessee), Malcolm X (e.g., Brooklyn, New York and Dallas, Texas), and Thurgood Marshall (e.g., Kingstree, South Carolina). As Melvin Dixon so 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.”<sup>17</sup>

## On the Importance of Reputational Politics

A critical analysis of King's commemoration requires not only recognizing the cultural importance of street names but also understanding the politics that surround the remembrance of historical figures. Heroes and other notable historical figures play an important role in public remembrance of the past. Sociologist Gary Fine discussed this very point when he wrote: "By shaping images of their leaders, social groups create social mnemonics to help audiences define events within a moral context."<sup>18</sup> Commemorative figures function as cultural systems; serving both as "models of society" that reflect how society shapes the past to serve its present interests and needs, and "models for society" that guide how society shapes its actions and attitudes through a comparison with the past.<sup>19</sup> The historical image of a person—whether a hero such as Abraham Lincoln, a villain such as Benedict Arnold, or enigmatic personalities such as John Brown and Joseph McCarthy—is a social product open to multiple and competing constructions and interpretations.<sup>20</sup> 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 struggle to define an individual's memorial legacy is what Fine has called "reputational politics." The historical reputation of a person is not simply made by the individual in question but also is used and controlled by social actors and groups who seek to advance their own commemorative agenda and divert the agendas of other parties.<sup>21</sup> According to Fine, custodial agents or "reputational entrepreneurs" carry out the shaping and control of historical reputations. The power to build and maintain the image of a historical figure in a certain way is the product of the entrepreneur's motivation (degree of self or group interest), narrative facility or clarity (the plausibility or believability of the reputational account or representation), and institutional placement (social position in relation to structures of power). Fine also 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."<sup>22</sup> In the politics of constructing and asserting the historical importance of commemorating one figure over another, reputational entrepreneurs engage in "discursive rivalries," the trading back and forth of statements and claims about the commemorative legitimacy and meaning of their respective heroes' reputations.<sup>23</sup> As this article hopes to illustrate, discursive rivalries over the meaning of historical figures do not simply appear out of thin air, but often accompany, revolve around, and participate in the production of memorial spaces and places.

Geography is important to public commemoration, giving the past a tangibility and visibility. In the words of Azaryahu, "Memorial spaces in particular concretize heritage in terms of location."<sup>24</sup> And, as Kenneth Foote has observed, "The physical durability of landscape permits it to carry meaning into the future so as to help sustain memory and cultural traditions."<sup>25</sup> Foote also has noted that the commemoration of fallen heroes, martyrs, and great leaders has been the most common motive for designating a physical site as a "sacred" memorial space. For example, America's historic preservation movement began in the mid-19th cen-

tury as an attempt to “inspire in future generations the patriotism and notable character of the Founding Fathers.”<sup>26</sup> The house museum campaign—which converted residences such as Mount Vernon and Monticello into national memorial shrines—testifies to the important role that individual figures from the past have played in the production of popular history and popular historic spaces.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to providing a means of grounding and legitimating collective memories of the past, memorial spaces also serve as arenas for competing ideas and discourses about history.<sup>28</sup> Geographers have recently shown great interest in the politics of representing the past in the present and the importance of heroic spaces in shaping the contours of national identity.<sup>29</sup> Few, however, have explored the role that memorial spaces play in “reputational politics,” the struggle to define the cultural meaning and importance of specific historical figures.<sup>30</sup> A notable exception is the work of Foote, who recognized that the commemoration of an individual is shaped by debates “between defenders and detractors of the person’s reputation.” According to him, Martin Luther King Jr. is a classic example of a leader who did not receive “widespread popular acclaim immediately after death.”<sup>31</sup> As Roger Stump has pointed out, when comparing the commemoration of King and John F. Kennedy, King’s “importance is perhaps mitigated by the fact that he never held national office,” and that his social agenda “lacked the official approval of the electorate.”<sup>32</sup> The transformation of King into a national hero and the creation of memorial spaces in his honor has occurred only after decades of opposition and debate. In the next section, I briefly delve into the reputational politics of commemorating King in America.

### The Politics of Remembering King in America

As with other major figures in American history, public memory of King is the result of ongoing negotiation and debate within society. In King’s case, many of these debates have revolved around the designation of his birthday as a holiday, both at the federal and state level.<sup>33</sup> Before being passed in 1983, the federal holiday was the center of heated discussion in the U.S. Senate with opponents accusing King of being a communist and having extramarital affairs.<sup>34</sup> But even before the holiday proposal ever made it to the floor of the Senate it had traveled a long and arduous journey through a variety of political struggles. Passage of the holiday came 15 years after Representative John Conyers (D-Michigan) first proposed the idea in legislation and 13 years after Congress received an unprecedented 6 million signatures in support. Perhaps the most interesting of these commemorative struggles took place within the African-American community between members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the civil rights leader’s wife, Coretta Scott King. While the SCLC sought to honor their recently fallen leader through increased social activism and protest, Mrs. King placed more emphasis on establishing the King Center in Atlanta, Georgia and favoring calls to establish a holiday in her husband’s memory. The two parties even differed on when best to commemorate the civil rights leader—while the SCLC focused on April 4, the date of King’s death, the King family preferred January 15, the date of his birth.<sup>36</sup>

While King's annual commemoration is more accepted now than in the past, it remains a contested terrain in many communities. Ceasar McDowell has described the still controversial nature of the King holiday: Martin Luther King "may have spoken the common language of human dignity. But to many white people, he remains primarily a black man, and his birthday a black holiday, for black people."<sup>36</sup> African Americans in Memphis were outraged by a McDonald's restaurant calendar that labeled January 16, 1989 as "National Nothing Day."<sup>37</sup> In May of 2000, Jesse Jackson visited Wallingford, Connecticut, to mark a new state law forcing the town to observe the King holiday. According to news reports, Wallingford had been the only town in the state that still kept its offices open on the holiday. During his visit, Jackson confronted a group of white supremacists opposed to King's commemoration, citing the group as proof that there is "unfinished business" in the struggle for civil rights.<sup>38</sup> While more of the country's businesses are recognizing the holiday, only 26 percent give a paid day off to their employees.<sup>39</sup> Nor do African Americans all agree on how to observe King's birthday. For example, in 1998, a rift emerged in Houston's black community as two factions struggled over which one should organize and lead a parade to mark the MLK holiday. African-American leaders also disagreed about the extent to which the civil rights leader's memory should be "commercialized."<sup>40</sup>

Controversy over the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. has not been confined to the making and observing of holidays, however. In Memphis, Tennessee, black activist Jacqueline Smith has spent the last 14 years protesting the conversion of the Lorraine Motel—the site of the King assassination—into the National Civil Rights Museum. Her protest has been literally street politics in that she has lived, eaten, and slept on the sidewalk across the street from the museum.<sup>41</sup> She advertises the museum as the "National Civil Wrong Museum," distributes protest literature, and provides museum visitors with an alternative vision of how to commemorate King. According to Smith, "The best monument to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would be a center at the Lorraine offering housing, job training, free community college, health clinic or other services for the poor."<sup>42</sup> While Smith's protests take place outside the civil rights museum in Memphis, more subtle yet no less important struggles occur within civil rights museums and memorials. Owen Dwyer noted a tension in civil rights memorials over the commemoration of local, grassroots participants versus charismatic, national leaders such as King. According to Dwyer, King's prominence in these memorial landscapes—while consistent with the tendency of public historians to stress the importance of individual leaders—has led to historical neglect of lesser known civil rights activists, particularly women.<sup>43</sup> But it is not always King who is the focus of commemoration—in the case of the civil rights museum in Savannah, Georgia, local mobilization efforts are given much greater attention than King and the larger national movement. Arguably, this reflects the fact that African Americans in Savannah were able to carry out several successful protests in the 1960s without significant outside leadership. In some instances, they actually opposed King's direct involvement in these protests.<sup>44</sup> As this article will illustrate, black Americans connect with King's historical reputation in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways,

particularly when it involves weighing his reputation against other commemorative interests that are of equal or greater importance.

Like holidays, museums, and other memorials dedicated to King's memory, street names serve as important arenas for debating how King is best remembered.<sup>45</sup> For example, in Americus, Georgia, city officials did not rename a portion of U.S. Highway 19 until black community leaders planned a boycott of city businesses. The controversy in Americus was made worse by the comments of an assistant fire chief, who said that he did not oppose naming half of the street for King if the other half was named for James Earl Ray, the man convicted of assassinating the civil rights leader.<sup>46</sup> African Americans in Milwaukee protested and marched against the city's decision to restrict the naming of Martin Luther King Jr. Drive to the boundaries of the black community, a common complaint among black activists across the nation.<sup>47</sup> 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 South's ongoing struggles over identity and memory. In a single year, almost 100 street signs with King's name in Hillsborough County, Florida were either spray painted, shot at, or pulled completely from their poles.<sup>48</sup> In 1990, a debate erupted in Portland, Oregon when the city council voted to rename Union Avenue after King. Over two dozen people picketed and heckled the street-naming ceremony and more than 50,000 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 change 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.<sup>49</sup>

Despite the growing frequency and controversial nature of commemorating King, scant attention has been devoted to examining how individual communities debate and struggle over the street-naming issue. The case study presented in the remaining pages provides an opportunity to fill this void and analyze some of the issues that shape the "reputational politics" of defining the historical importance and social relevance of King's memory.

### Commemorating King in Bulloch County, Georgia

Although the historical significance of King is certainly not limited to one state, Georgia serves as a useful context within which to study his commemoration. As of 1996, Georgia had the largest number of places (72) with a street named after him.<sup>50</sup> Further, since King was born in Atlanta, which is now the location of a national historic site that recounts his life and work, he recently was recognized as "Georgian of the Century."<sup>51</sup> Despite these strong historical connections, African Americans across Georgia have faced significant controversy and opposition when attempting to attach King's name and memory to streets and roads.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps no location illustrates this fact better than Bulloch County, where black activists carried out two unsuccessful street-naming campaigns. In

this article, I focus on the first of these two campaigns. By examining where street naming has failed rather than succeeded, we can perhaps gain greater insight into the challenges that confront African Americans as they engage in the politics of redefining public representation of the past, particularly King's meaning and importance within contemporary society.



**Figure 1.** Bulloch County, Georgia.

Bulloch County is located approximately 70 miles west of the Atlantic Ocean. It lies between the two population centers of Macon, in central Georgia, and Savannah, on the coast. Statesboro is the county seat, the location of Georgia Southern University, and the setting for many of the political struggles described in this article. According to 2000 U.S. Census data, Statesboro has a population of 22,698 while Bulloch County's population is 55,983. Although not constituting a majority, African Americans have a significant presence in both the city

(with 41 percent of the population) and the county (29 percent). Bulloch is an important case study in the sense that it affords us the opportunity to analyze the “reputational politics” of commemorating Martin Luther King Jr. within a predominantly rural county. According to sociologists Bruce Williams and Bonnie Thornton Dill, persistent inequality characterizes African Americans in the rural South, and they found that the exclusion of southern blacks is most pronounced at the county level, the scale of analysis of this study.<sup>53</sup> Journalistic reports, however, have tended to focus on urban areas where the naming of streets after King is perhaps best represented, although the practice is also common in non-metropolitan areas.<sup>54</sup> At least in the case of Georgia, there is strong historical evidence that there are stark differences between black activism in rural and urban areas.<sup>55</sup>

On February 1, 1994, a special committee of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) requested that the Bulloch County Board of Commissioners name the then-unfinished perimeter road after Martin Luther King Jr. Although some suggestions had been made in passing, this constituted the first formal request to name the highway. Because the road would run through both the city (Statesboro) and the county, a joint perimeter-naming committee was organized. Then, at a county commission meeting a month later, a representative of the local American Legion officially requested that the road be named “Veterans Memorial Parkway” in honor of area military veterans.<sup>56</sup> Recognizing the politically contested nature of naming the perimeter road, the joint city-county naming committee asked citizens to mail in name suggestions. From these suggestions, the committee would recommend two names (a primary and a secondary suggestion) to be considered by both the city and county governments. Yet, as the committee pointed out and as was eventually realized, a high number of suggestions would not guarantee that one particular road name would be favored over another.<sup>57</sup>

Bulloch County residents mailed in 2,196 suggestions that offered more than 100 different names. Of the suggestions submitted, 1,680 (or 77 percent) wanted the perimeter named “Veterans Memorial.” Over 18 percent of submissions suggested naming the road after Paul Nessmith, a farmer and former state representative currently living in the county. (Nessmith would later be eliminated from consideration because he was not deceased.) Only 72 (or 3.3 percent) of suggestions called for naming the perimeter for Martin Luther King Jr. Behind King in the number of suggestions was Bulloch Memorial Parkway with seven (or .32 percent) of suggestions. There appeared to be concerted support for having the perimeter’s name serve as a memorial in some way since the memorializing of veterans and King combined assumed almost 80 percent of submitted suggestions. An additional 12 suggestions requested that the word “Memorial” be included in the road’s name more generally, as in the cases of Bulloch Memorial Parkway, Memorial Scenic Parkway, and Memorial Parkway.<sup>58</sup>

At first glance, the low number of suggestions submitted for naming the perimeter for King would indicate indifference on the part of the African-American community. Although blacks accounted for more than 25 percent of the county’s population at this time, little more than 3 percent of submissions called

for the perimeter to be identified with King. But the low number may reflect, instead, the manner in which the suggestion campaign was advertised. From all indications, the call for road name suggestions was announced only a few times in the local newspaper. Rather than interpreting these mail-in results as showing weak support for King, it may be more useful to see them as showing very strong, mass-organized support for memorializing veterans. In fact, the vast majority of the suggestions for “Veterans Memorial” came in as form letters. As will be discussed later, King’s weak following in the suggestion campaign may also be indicative of the extent to which African Americans battled a divided loyalty between commemorating King versus military veterans. Nevertheless, the low quantitative support for King should not divert our attention away from the qualitative value of analyzing the efforts and comments of individual “reputational entrepreneurs” and the “discursive rivalry” that took place between African Americans and veterans over defining King’s historical legacy and the appropriateness of naming a road for him.

After the June 1, 1994, deadline for the submission of suggestions, the perimeter-naming committee members reduced the 100 suggested road names down to five. These suggestions were placed on a line ballot and ranked one through five in order of committee members’ preference. The committee then submitted the two highest-ranking names to the city and county governments for a vote. The committee preferences from highest to lowest were Bulloch Memorial Parkway, Veterans Memorial Parkway, University Parkway, Bulloch Heritage Parkway, and Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway. Preference for Memorial Parkway, University Parkway, and Bulloch Heritage Parkway perhaps reflected attempts to sidestep the controversial decision of choosing a memorial either to veterans or King. For example, County Commissioner Bird Hodges, a member of the perimeter-naming committee, supported the name “Bulloch Heritage Parkway” because this appellation would serve a “memorial umbrella” for all causes and heroes without elevating one over the other. Despite the numerical results of the original mail-in suggestion campaign, the naming committee chose to recommend the names Bulloch Memorial and Veterans Memorial Parkway to the Statesboro City Council and the Bulloch County Board of Commissioners.<sup>59</sup> Thus, despite a disagreement between city and county officials and last-minute lobbying on the part of African-American leaders, the new perimeter highway was eventually designated Veterans Memorial Parkway.<sup>60</sup>

### Discourse Analysis of Commemorative Street Naming

The analysis that follows is the result of research in newspaper and government archives and interviews with several participants in the previously described street-naming controversy. Written suggestions submitted by Bulloch County citizens for naming the perimeter highway are specifically analyzed. The interpretation of these suggestions was inspired, in part, by the work of Lawrence Berg and Robin Kearns, who read and interpreted objections submitted to the New Zealand Geographic Board about the reinstatement of Maori place names. They conducted

what they termed a “discourse analysis” of these public comments, identifying the importance of race, culture, and nation as discursive constructs. According to them, discursive constructs “provide taken-for-granted frameworks of meaning within which people construct their understanding of everyday relations.”<sup>61</sup>

My analysis here focuses on the comments of those involved in the Bulloch County street-naming struggle as a means of identifying multiple and competing discourses about King as an historical figure, his reputation or legacy, and the resonance of this legacy to contemporary social life. In doing so, I hope to expose how common-sense beliefs about King’s memory are represented and made socially important through the public dialogue about street naming. As pointed out by Berg and Kearns, a discursive approach is characterized by an absence of a single set of codified procedures, a single way of reading texts, and a single truth to be discovered. However, this type of analysis requires close and skillful reading and interpretation. Through a careful reading of the Bulloch County debates, I was able to discern the presence of at least three factors that affected the “reputational politics” of commemorating Martin Luther King Jr. through street naming: the legitimacy of commemoration, the resonance of commemoration, and the hybridity of commemoration. Although I discuss these issues strictly in the context of Bulloch County, they may have applicability and bearing to any study that examines the social process of memorialization.

### The Legitimacy of Commemoration

Dydia DeLyser has discussed how authenticity is not an inherent condition or quality but a notion that has different meanings to different people in various social and spatial contexts.<sup>62</sup> Historical legitimacy—while often represented as a universal and objective standard—is similarly open to competing constructions. In the case of naming a street for King in Bulloch County, the first and perhaps most obvious barrier was the belief held by opponents that memorializing Martin Luther King Jr. was less important or less legitimate than other competing historical figures or commemorative causes. Specifically, supporters of naming the perimeter for King found themselves in a struggle with the local chapter of the American Legion. While carried out on many fronts, local newspaper editorials were a common platform for struggles to determine the primacy of commemorating King versus veterans. Often dismissed as unrepresentative of public opinion, letters to the editor are one of the most frequently read features of newspapers and “can, under certain conditions, provide an accurate gauge of public thinking on controversial issues.”<sup>63</sup>

After the initiation of the mail-in suggestion campaign, school board member Charles Bonds (an African American) attempted to establish the legitimacy of naming the perimeter after King. In a May 22, 1994, letter to the editor, he reminded readers that King had been awarded a Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 for his non-violent campaign against racism. In building a reputational account of King’s legacy of equality and justice, Bonds also pointed to the moral authority and

public image that Bulloch County stood to gain (or lose) in deciding whether or not to commemorate the civil rights leader:

Isn't it ironic that we, the citizens of Bulloch County, have minimized and viewed as mediocre what Dr. King has done for our country in fostering equality? His fight for equality and justice has not only led to racial equality but human equality. South Africans, blacks, coloreds, whites, Indians, and others have come to grips with the recognition of the importance of equality and justice....Can't we dedicate a minuscule portion of our county's constructions in memory of Georgia's and the world's greatest citizen?...Name the new bypass "The Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard" and let visitors and newcomers to our fine community know that we value equality and justice for all who may drive on the named highway.<sup>64</sup>

In a letter to the editor a week later, local veteran Edgar Godfrey reacted to Bond's comments, calling into question the legitimacy of King's dedication to peace rather than equality:

If his [Bond's] criteria is to honor this road with the name of someone who has been designated as a "peacemaker," let us honor the truly great peacemakers of our locality—the veterans who gave their lives or endured great physical hardship to preserve our continued peace and freedom. As a former combat infantryman, I salute the veterans of all races and propose that the new perimeter road be named "Veterans Memorial Parkway" in their honor.<sup>65</sup>

What is perhaps most evident in Godfrey's statement is the implication that King is somehow not "truly great" or somehow less worthy of commemoration than war veterans. Ray Hendrix, leader of Bulloch County's American Legion chapter articulated this belief much more firmly, when he lobbied the city council to name the perimeter for veterans. Hendrix proved to be an especially powerful "reputational entrepreneur" in not only legitimizing the cause of veterans but also delegitimizing King's commemoration. For example, Hendrix was quoted as saying: "I respect Dr. King's accomplishments but the soldiers and sailors who fought for America's freedom helped make it possible for Martin Luther King to be a great man."<sup>66</sup> In Hendrix's statement is an attempt to represent the achievements of King as not only subordinate to, but also dependent upon, the historical legacy of veterans.

In the reputational politics of representing King's commemoration as less important, Hendrix further connected the legitimacy of his memorial cause to the idea that area veterans had long been overlooked in terms of public recognition:

We've [veterans] supported everything in this county. Veterans of Bulloch County do volunteer work, support scouting, support other community programs and nothing has ever been dedicated on behalf of the veterans. Veterans of this county include all citizens, represent all people, and naming the road Veterans' Memorial Parkway is the least you can do.<sup>67</sup>

As seen here, the politics of memory engage not only marginalized social groups such as African Americans contesting the hegemonic order for power to reconstruct collective memories of the past. The politics of memory also involve competition with other groups, such as veterans, who also perceive themselves as “subordinate” to the prevailing commemorative powers. Indeed, several mail-in suggestions submitted to the perimeter-naming committee expressed the sentiment that honoring veterans represented a justifiable cause. As these two supporters of “Veterans Memorial Parkway” wrote:

I am writing in support of this idea [naming Perimeter for veterans], as we know there are many veterans who served our country that have never gotten the recognition they deserve. This would certainly be a fitting tribute to everyone who has served in the uniform of our country.

As you know, we have thousands of veterans living and working in the Statesboro/Bulloch County area. Many of them served our country at a very unpopular time.... I believe this would be a fitting way to finally say “Thank You.”<sup>68</sup>

Running throughout these statements is a belief that naming the perimeter could correct an unequal relationship between veterans and the larger community. But supporters of Martin Luther King Jr. also used this type of argument. Although writing in very subtle terms, the author of the following mail-in suggestion defined the legitimacy of naming a road after King in terms of its ability to inscribe a new vision of race relations into the landscape:

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 Statesboro and county population and would be a healing and unifying act.<sup>69</sup>

The implication here is that attaching King’s name to the perimeter highway will “unify” and “heal” the rift between African Americans and the larger city and county population. In order for street naming to facilitate such healing, people must personally identify with the social group and their commemorative cause. Building public identification with the past is not simply a matter of defining the legitimacy of a commemorative movement. As argued in the next section, it is also a matter of resonance.

## The Resonance of Commemoration

In struggling to name streets, African-American activists confront the barrier that not everyone feels that King’s commemoration has resonance or relevance in their lives. Resonance, as Michael Schudson has pointed out, is a key factor in shaping the ultimate power of a cultural object.<sup>70</sup> The extent to which the reputation of a figure resonates with the public determines, in large measure, the cultural

influence of that historical representation and the population who will have their identity defined by this commemoration. Events in Bulloch County illustrate how variation in public identification with King affected the struggle to rename a street after him.

The importance of resonance to the commemoration was evident in comments presented earlier. As veterans Godfrey and Hendrix suggested, each of their respective suggestions would represent a wider population than if the road were named for King. Godfrey, for example, stated that he wanted to name the perimeter in such a way as to honor “the veterans of both races.” Hendrix, in advocating “Veterans Memorial Parkway” stated that veterans “represent all people.” These comments imply that naming the perimeter after King is a symbol that resonates only with African Americans. In contrast, naming the perimeter in honor of veterans, they insist, is a biracial or multicultural symbolic project. The idea that the commemorative cause of veterans cuts across race and other lines of identity was articulated very well in an anonymous suggestion to the perimeter-naming committee:

To be fair and impartial to all peoples, I suggest we go with the name of “Veterans Memorial Parkway.” This name would be all inclusive of males, females, all races, color, creeds, and all wars and skirmishes. With this name no one could claim they have been left out or not considered, for all families have, or have had a veteran in their family at some time.<sup>71</sup>

Thus, “Veterans Memorial Parkway” was represented as a “one commemoration-fits-all” type of naming, one that would unify rather than divide the city and county’s population. Of course, the implication, then, is that naming the perimeter after King would not offer such unity. The widespread nature of this belief was further substantiated when I interviewed a Statesboro city planner, who also serves as a pastor in one of the county’s African-American churches:

**Alderman:** Why did the city council vote to name the perimeter for veterans rather than for MLK?

**City Planner:** Members [of the city council] felt veterans represented a larger community than King. However, Dr. King stood for everyone, fighting for the poor. Poverty knows no race.<sup>72</sup>

The reputational politics of commemorating King through street naming are shaped by a prevailing assumption that his historical relevance is limited to the black community and that streets named for him represent only African Americans. As illustrated in the city planner’s comments, however, African Americans counter by emphasizing the universal importance of King’s legacy. In his own case, he builds a class-based reputational account of the civil rights leader, reminding us how issues of poverty and economic inequality dominated the last years of King’s life and career. For blacks in Bulloch County as well as across the country, the politics of commemorating King are about building an image of the civil rights leader that resonates across racial boundaries. Another anonymous letter

sent to the perimeter-naming committee put forth the idea that King's importance was not limited to one race or even one country:

I think that Martin Luther King had profound effects on *all of America*. He was an inspirer and friend whose love helped to change the *attitudes of the world*. He has enlightened so many lives with his on-living dream. I think the road should be named MLK Drive. Having the Drive named such would express the thanks he deserves [emphasis in original].<sup>73</sup>

In the struggle to define the public resonance of commemorating veterans over King, even timing played an important role. The deadline for submitting perimeter-name suggestions to the Bulloch County government ended on June 1, 1994, only a few days after Memorial Day. More importantly, however, June 6, 1994, marked the 50th anniversary of "D-Day." The local newspaper carried veterans-related articles in the weeks preceding and coinciding with the D-Day anniversary. One of the anonymous suggestions submitted to the perimeter-naming committee on May 30, 1994, reflected how the naming of the perimeter was considered in close relation to the veterans' holiday:

As we have participated in our local observation of Memorial Day and seen it celebrated nationwide, what better tribute we can pay the memory of those who have served and died than to name this road in their honor? *It seems a right time* [emphasis added].<sup>74</sup>

It is quite possible that the Memorial Day celebration and the anticipation of the D-Day anniversary expanded the resonance of honoring veterans due to the power of holidays to focus briefly, but intensely, public attention and identification. In this instance, street naming has to be examined within the larger commemorative genre that it shares with holidays. Of course, African Americans have used this same relationship to their own commemorative advantage. For instance, the original request by African Americans to name the perimeter after King took place on February 1, 1994, only two weeks after the celebration of the King federal holiday.

### The Hybridity of Commemoration

Berg and Kearns have suggested that the positions and identities of cultural actors involved in place naming are often ambiguous, complexly intertwined, and sometimes contradictory.<sup>75</sup> Gillian Rose made a similar argument when she contended that a conventional dualistic analysis of hegemony fails to consider how the moments of domination and resistance are open and hybrid.<sup>76</sup> As these scholars suggest, there can be hybridity and interdependence in people's geographic interests, thus leading to some rather unexpected political formations. The politics of naming Bulloch County's perimeter road cannot be understood without considering the multi-positionality of African Americans within the debate to memorialize Martin Luther King Jr. versus military veterans. King's memory, while

certainly important, was not the only commemorative cause that African Americans had an interest in pursuing.

In many of my informal conversations with African-American leaders in Bulloch County, the right of veterans to be commemorated through street naming was rarely criticized or refuted, although many asserted the greater necessity of memorializing King. Some African Americans found themselves in a difficult ideological position both as supporters of honoring King and veterans themselves. According to a local American Legion leader, many black men signed letters of support for naming the perimeter for veterans.<sup>77</sup> Further, women accounted for the majority (or 66 percent) of the non-anonymous suggestions sent to the naming committee and many of the suggestions came from women's organizations such as The Negro Business & Professional Women Club and the Rain or Shine Social Club. Historically, women have often taken a leading role in commemorative campaigns. However, the weak presence of suggestions sent by men may be indicative of the commemorative tug-of-war in which African-American veterans found themselves.

This issue of commemorative hybridity was brought into sharper focus during an interview with an African-American pastor who had spoken in support of naming the perimeter highway for Martin Luther King Jr. at county commission and city council meetings. He described the difficulty in "placing" himself within the debate over commemorating veterans versus King:

**Alderman:** How did you feel about the perimeter being named for veterans instead of King?

**African-American Pastor:** I wanted King's name on the perimeter road but I couldn't feel bad about honoring veterans....When they named the perimeter for veterans, I was touched. I am a veteran and I have people [family] who were killed in war....We walk around this country free because somebody died. When you come up with something for veterans, there are not many people who are going to fight that, even though you want the other part [King's commemoration]....We should honor those who sacrificed so much.

**Alderman:** When you see Veterans Memorial Parkway, do you identify with it?

**African-American Pastor:** You believe it! And not just me. A lot of black veterans identify with it. You are not going to find a young man who served [in the military] who doesn't.

These comments illustrate how the politics of naming streets after King were complicated by the fact that some reputational entrepreneurs found themselves caught in the middle of two commemorative campaigns with which they identified and which they perhaps supported.

In the case of the pastor I interviewed, the reputational politics of naming the perimeter became so hybrid and intertwined that he saw similarities in both com-

memorative causes, drawing strong connections between King's quest for justice and the role of veterans in fighting for freedom. On this point he said:

Dr. King wanted justice and he gave his life for it. That is what the soldier was fighting for. If that man Hitler had won, we wouldn't have any justice. That's why I went [to war]. I went because I wanted my children to live in a free country. And that's what he [King] was doing. It's the same thing. Rather than being a war in a foreign country, it was some one working for peace right here in the U.S.

The pastor did not recognize the potential contradictions of comparing King's efforts to achieve peace—based on a philosophy of non-violence and passive resistance—with the efforts of veterans to win peace through violent warfare. Nor does he mention King's controversial opposition to the Vietnam War. Instead, he creates a reputational account that finds commonality in King's death for freedom and the personal sacrifice of military veterans, making an analogy between the fight for civil rights in the U.S. to the fight in Europe to topple Hitler. Regardless of whether these comments are representative of other African Americans or not, they provide keen insight into how one black veteran interpreted and represented the meaning of King's legacy and reputation in the face of choosing between two commemorations near and dear to his heart. From a political standpoint, the representation of King as another soldier in the war against injustice and oppression proposes problems for the extent to which African Americans can represent the civil rights leader's legacy as more legitimate and more resonant than the memory of military veterans. It is perhaps important to recognize that the reputational politics of memorializing King, or any historical figure for that matter, is a path-dependent process, in which commemorative images of the past are constructed and realized dialogically in the context of other memorials.<sup>78</sup>

## The Second Time Around

It is difficult, if not impossible, to end this paper with a "conclusion." For historical geographers, there is still much research left to do. The events in Bulloch County are not necessarily indicative of struggles found in all communities that pursue the commemoration of King through street naming, and this case study should be seen as illustrative rather than representative. My purpose has been to raise some questions about issues that, for the most part, require additional investigation in variety of empirical contexts. Despite being neglected by many scholars, street names serve as important arenas for social actors and groups to actively interpret the past, define historical reputations, and debate the relative value of remembering one commemorative cause over another. In taking a second look at street names as memorial arenas, more geographers should recognize the central role that historical figures and reputational politics play in the production and consumption of memorial landscapes. Discursive rivalries over the meaning and reputation of historic figures such as King give insight into the conditions under which commemorative spaces are constructed and struggled over socially.

The issue of commemorative street naming is also far from being over for African Americans in Bulloch County, Georgia. Three years after their struggle with military veterans, black leaders again pursued the naming of a street after Martin Luther King Jr. Like the first attempt, this one also proved unsuccessful. The second naming campaign resurrected many of the same questions faced by activists in 1994: How is the politics of memorializing King a struggle to establish the historical legitimacy and cross-racial resonance of the civil rights leader while also recognizing the potential overlap in commemorative interests between blacks and other competing social groups? In their second time around, however, African-American leaders encountered at least three additional issues that shaped the “reputational politics” of naming a road for King—location, economics, and race.

Rather than competing for the right to name a new road, African-American leaders in 1997 faced the challenge of choosing a street to *rename*. They chose a large commercial thoroughfare (Northside Drive), resisting calls from whites and blacks to rename a smaller street largely within the black community. In the eyes of many of these activists, the renaming of a prominent road was appropriate given the historical importance they placed on King and his achievements. In contrast, renaming a smaller, less-visible street represented a degradation of King’s commemorative image. Clearly, location played a key role in defining the historical reputation of the civil rights leader and the social importance of his commemoration.

In contrast to the first street-naming attempt, African-American activists in 1997 encountered great opposition from non-residential and business interests. In fact, several business owners along Northside Drive circulated a petition that completely disrupted plans to name the street for King. While these owners cited the economic cost of changing their addresses, they also expressed fear that having a MLK address would hurt business activity because customers might see their commercial establishments as being located in a “black” part of the city. Whatever the motivations or stated reasons, opponents weighed or appraised the reputation and image of King in direct relation to how it might affect economic development and the flow of capital along the road in question.

Race-based interpretations of King’s importance certainly played a role in the failure of the first street-naming attempt in Bulloch County. Yet, participants in the second debate addressed the issue of racism much more explicitly. When a local leader of the NAACP officially proposed that Northside Drive be renamed, he represented King’s commemoration as a way of correcting a long-standing imbalance in power between blacks and whites in the county. In asserting the legitimacy of King to the public, this same activist cited examples of local roads that bore the names of white figures from the past. Ironically, claims of racism did not come just from blacks in Bulloch County. Some outspoken whites represented the second street-naming proposal as a racist act by African-Americans, equating it to what they saw as other preferential, “color-conscious” practices such as affirmative action.<sup>79</sup> Although there is a danger in analyzing King’s commemoration through street naming in strictly racial terms, there are certainly instances in which racism and ideas about race play important roles.

Further examination of these factors and others discussed in this article will greatly advance our understanding of how the American public values, debates, and commemorates popular and politicized historical figures, such as Martin Luther King Jr. Although less ornate or ostentatious than monuments and museums, street names provide valuable glimpses into these public debates over history. Commemorative street names—like the roads they identify—traverse numerous social actors and groups—all of which hold different and sometimes competing interpretations of the past and its meaning to them.

## Acknowledgements

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