

Branded: The Economic Geographies of Streets Named in Honor of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*

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Objectives. We investigate the economic geographies of streets named for Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK Streets), which are an increasingly common means by which various community members across the United States are attempting to commemorate the slain civil rights leader. It is our intent to characterize these negatively “branded” spaces in order to challenge some of the common perceptions about them and inform current and future MLK Street naming debates. *Methods.* We statistically analyze nonresidential establishments located on streets named for King in terms of scale (as measured by annual sales and employment) and industrial classification. To our knowledge, this is the first such analysis conducted at the national level. *Results.* Establishments located on MLK Streets do not systematically exhibit economic marginality. Establishments located on these streets do systematically exhibit unique local functions and industrial composition. *Conclusion.* In the absence of empirically-driven research, the negative stereotypes that surround MLK Streets have gone unchallenged and are proliferating. The research reported here calls into question a number of these stereotypes and should inform the public, city councils, and other local policy-makers, who are increasingly being faced with contentious MLK Street naming debates.

The Battle to Rename Broadway

The process of (re)naming streets for Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. has been described as a “growing landscape movement” (Alderman, 2006:216). During such processes, streets and other public spaces become sites of struggle for the commemoration—or contestation—of King’s legacy.

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In the winter of 2003, the landscape movement came to Middletown. According to reports from Muncie, Indiana's *Star Press*, "it began simply enough [in February of 2003], with a suggestion . . . but the suggestion sparked a controversy that included accusations of racism, heated public meetings, federal mediation and a national spotlight on the community's racial divide" (Roysdon, 2003b:1A). The suggestion, from African-American sanitation worker Randall Sims, was that Muncie's old MLK Jr. Boulevard was "out in the boondocks," and thus the city should rename Broadway as Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard (quoted in Roysdon, 2003b:1A). The controversy sparked by Mr. Sims's suggestion would beleaguer Muncie for years (cf. Yencer, 2003c; AP, 2004b; McBride, 2004). From the very beginning, the proposed Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard was a dividing line. On one side, street naming opponents such as Troy Inskeep, a Muncie car dealer, voiced the opinion that changing Broadway's name "is not the economically right thing to do" (quoted in Yencer, 2003a:1A). On the other side, street naming proponents like George Sanders, director of Muncie's Citywide Church Network, voiced the opinion that the renaming "is vital to our community economically, socially, and spiritually" (quoted in Yencer, 2003b:3A).

The debate intensified at a Muncie City Council meeting in mid-May 2003, which was reported as "another divisive debate between Broadway business owners, the African American community and even white residents who live on and near Broadway" (Yencer, 2003c:3A). At a packed City Council meeting two weeks later, a county government employee publicly stated that several street naming proponents were "acting like niggers" (quoted in Roysdon, 2003a:1A; Johnson, 2005). Also in May, the existing King Boulevard's street signs were defaced: King's name was replaced with "Koon" (Roysdon, 2003b). At the end of the month, the street naming controversy even factored into Muncie's mayoral race as the Democratic challenger, fire captain Dennis Tyler, challenged the Republican incumbent, Dan Canan, to sign an immediate executive order to rename Broadway, claiming "it is the moral thing to do" (quoted in Yencer, 2003d:1A).

In the fall of 2003, a federal mediator was dispatched to Muncie to help resolve the street naming controversy (AP, 2003; McBride, 2003). A 20-citizen coalition sat in closed-door meetings with mediator Anita Cochrane for three months (Yencer, 2003e). In December 2003, the mediation team drafted a legally binding agreement. By the agreement, "an ordinance will be drafted and presented to Muncie City Council for renaming Broadway in 2004. If defeated, city and community mediation teams will continue to advocate the change" (quoted in Yencer, 2003e:1A). But then, in August 2004, when the street naming ordinance was finally presented to the City Council for a vote, three City Council members abstained. The resulting 3–2–3 vote did not give a majority in favor of the name change. After nearly two years of debate, mediation, and apparent resolution, Broadway was still Broadway (AP, 2004a).

Finally, on Tuesday, August 24, 2004, reelected mayor Dan Canan issued an executive order to rename several blocks of Broadway as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard by 2007 (AP, 2004b). Incensed by the mayor's action and the impending name change, one white Muncie business owner reacted by publicly announcing the closing of his appliance business of 50 years. Like many business owners on Broadway, this outspoken entrepreneur expressed concern about the cost and inconvenience of an address change. Although such an argument appears, at face value, to have nothing to do with race or racism, it is often difficult to separate these claims from the emotional memories of past racial tensions. Indeed, at the same time that the aforementioned appliance store owner expressed concern that a new address could confuse customers and prevent them from finding 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. He was quoted as saying: "I swore then that I would not let the African American community—or anyone else—hurt my business again" (McLoud, quoted in McBride, 2004:1A).

The Broader Context and Question

Although Muncie's battle to rename Broadway for King has been particularly vociferous, it stands as just one of many examples of the contentious politics surrounding attempts to commemorate the legacy of the slain civil rights leader. King's name has been attached to a wide range of public buildings and spaces—schools, parks, libraries, and even the Martin Luther King Shoreline in Oakland, California. Yet, the most common form of commemoration has been to rename an existing street in his honor. To date, in fact, at least 777 cities across the United States have done so. Perhaps no historical figure in recent memory has come to hold such a dominant yet contested place within U.S. discussions of history and memory. The commemoration of King through street renaming is part of a larger movement on the part of African Americans to address the exclusion of their experiences and achievements from the national historical consciousness (Rhea, 1997). MLK Streets represent important conduits for African-American expression but, as illustrated in Muncie, not everyone agrees on the meaning and importance of commemorating the civil rights leader. Although seemingly ordinary in nature, street names are important "memorial arenas," public spaces for opening up political debate about King and his legacies as well as larger issues of race and power in America (Alderman, 2002).

Like Randall Sims, African-American leaders in many places seek to rename major roads, arguing that the naming of a smaller, less prominent street represents a degrading of King's historical importance and the legitimacy of all African Americans. The opposition expressed by certain business owners in Muncie to renaming Broadway is not at all unique. Commercial

interests are consistently the most vocal opponents to having their address changed, citing not only cost and inconvenience but also the potential stigma of having their street identified with King and, as they perceive it, the African-American community. In contrast to the eventual street renaming in Muncie, public resistance has kept many communities from renaming major thoroughfares and, consequently, King's name is frequently attached to relatively minor streets or portions of roads located entirely within poor and predominately African-American areas of cities (Dailey, 2005; Yardley, 1995; Towns, 1993). This has led, in turn, to the widespread belief that all MLK Streets are located in segregated, blighted locations, even though, as demonstrated in Muncie, this is not always the case. In essence, streets named for the civil rights leader have become what Schein (2003) has called "racialized landscapes," places "that are particularly implicated in racist practice and the perpetuation of (or challenge to) racist social practices." As Schein also suggests, racialized landscapes exert a normative power over people's perceptions and actions by making certain ideas about race and place appear to be normal or part of the natural way of doing things.

As part of landscape communication, street names are more than simply a means of facilitating spatial orientation and transportation (Azaryahu, 1997). They also function as symbolic texts within cities and are embedded in larger systems of meaning and ideology that are read, interpreted, and acted upon socially by people (Pinchevski and Torgovnik, 2002). As we suggest in this article, street names are involved in the "branding" of place. The term "brand" is often used to discuss the way cultural meanings and identities are attached to places, as spaces under the influences of capitalism are socially produced (Lefebvre, [1974] 1991) and marketed as desirable products for consumption (Morgan and Pritchard, 1998). Place names often play an important role in this place promotion (Zelinsky, 1989). Yet, the notion of branding can also refer to the creation of a negative place identity or the "othering" of certain landscapes, such as streets (cf. Massey and Jess, 1996). Indeed, the word *brand* can refer to a mark of disgrace, notoriety, and stigma even as it refers to a marketable trademark.

Within the semiotics of street naming, King's name has become associated with a particular, racially coded imaginary characterized by economic disadvantage and urban decay. Journalist Jonathan Tilove (2003:5-6) perhaps captured this imaginary best when he wrote: "It has become 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." As Tilove has also observed, these popularly held ideas often lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy in which cities respond to the potentially racial and negative overtones of naming a street for King by segregating his name within the African-American community, thus further reinforcing the material basis or reality of the stigmatization (Tilove, interviewed in McDermott, 2005). Yet, as Tilove discovered in traveling to many named streets across the country, MLK Streets are often important

centers of African-American identity and community even as they are also sites of African-American struggle. Moreover, he found anecdotal evidence of a social and economic vitality and diversity that cannot be easily reduced to a single stereotype.

It is our hope in this article to document, statistically, some of the vitality that Tilove observed and deconstruct some of the taken-for-granted economic assumptions that surround MLK Streets naming. Despite the increasing frequency of streets named for King and the locational controversies they generate, social scientists have devoted little attention to these new landscape features. Previous work in popular and academic circles has illuminated the complex political, cultural, and symbolic dimensions of MLK Streets naming, but we know far less about the specific economic character of these named streets (Tilove, 2003; Williams, 2003; Alderman, 2000, 2002, 2003; Stump, 1988). In this article, then, we present the first national, systematic analysis of the economic geographies of MLK Streets, using several geo databases to identify and analyze the frequency and type of non-residential development found along MLK Streets at different scales and relative to other popularly named streets. We use the word “geographies” rather than “geography” to recognize the plurality of experiences found along these streets. There is no one, monolithic “MLK Street”; rather, there are 777 individual streets.

Several major questions emerge in light of the potent stereotypes that surround MLK Streets and the opposition that affected businesses often pose to street naming: What is the likelihood of finding nonresidential establishments located on MLK Streets? What types of institutions have an address identified with the civil rights leader? Are there significant patterns in the type and scale of businesses on streets honoring King? How does the relative economic prominence of MLK Streets compare to other popularly named streets in the country? How does the nonresidential composition of MLK Streets compare to the nonresidential structure of their respective cities? Answering these questions will not only advance an intellectual desire to understand the nature of MLK Streets but also provide potentially useful information to communities as they debate the street naming process—helping activists, local elected officials, policymakers, and ordinary citizens to think about these streets beyond simple stereotypical constructions. Before moving on to present our article’s empirical results, it is necessary to discuss, in more detail, the process by which MLK Streets have become racialized and negatively branded.

The Racialized Landscapes of MLK Streets

Prior work on MLK Streets contributes to a growing body of literature concerning various street naming processes in other spatial and historical contexts (Azaryahu, 1986, 1997; Azaryahu and Kook, 2002; De Bres, 1990;

Light, 2004; Pinchevski and Torgovnik, 2002; Pred, 1990; Yeoh, 1992). Such work highlights the purposeful, politicized scripting involved in naming streets (i.e., public spaces), which necessarily engages any number of interconnected political, cultural, or economic forces. In the specific context of naming streets for King, what stands out is the way many of the namings are enmeshed in a complicated racial politics. Often, this stems from the complexities of King's historical legacy, and his iconic status as leader of the civil rights movement.

Given the important racial symbolism that is attached to King's name, it is perhaps not surprising that MLK Streets are frequently located within predominantly African-American neighborhoods, and are often associated with the "African-American part of town" in popular consciousness (Alderman, 2000). Take, for example, a recent article from the *Raleigh News and Observer*, which describes MLK Streets as "a designator."

If you're new to the area and want to find the African American community, says Lamont Griffis, owner of a barbershop that faces Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard in Raleigh, all you have to do is ask: Where's the Martin Luther King Jr. street?(Lee, 2004:1A)

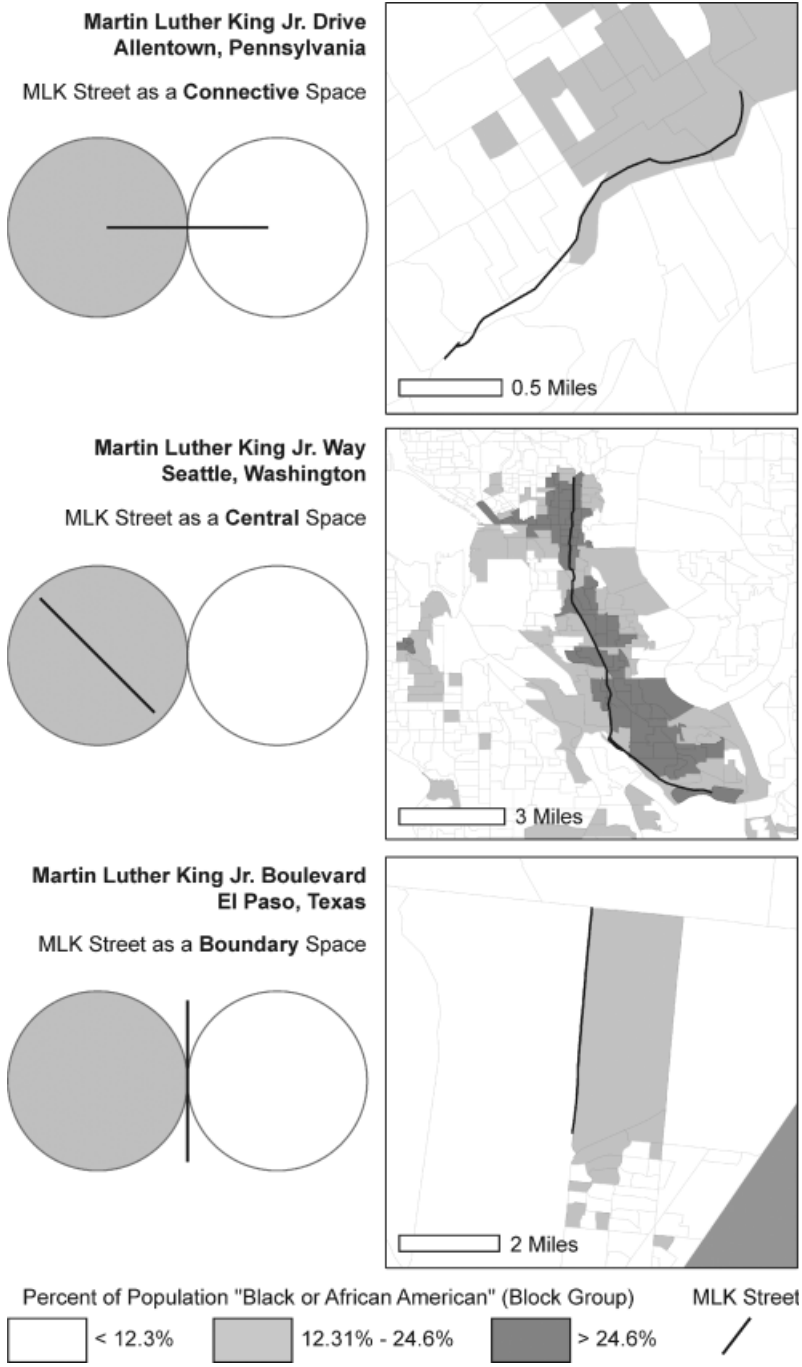
Jonathan Tilove suggests something similar, noting that many African Americans live their lives "from one MLK Streets to the next."

When Dock Jackson—who played a role in naming the MLK [Street] in his hometown of Bastrop, Texas, where he is on the council, and in nearby Elgin, where he is the park director—arrived at Oklahoma City on business and needing a haircut, he simply headed to Martin Luther King [street] and found Robert Gates's barbershop. When barber Gates travels to a new place, he does the same. "When I don't know where I'm going, I'll find MLK."(Tilove, 2003:8)

MLK Streets naming controversies often hinge upon the nature of the street with relation to a variety of racialized residential and economic geographies. Each municipality varies in the degree and the format of these racialized spaces. Some MLK Streets controversies stem from the proposed street's size and length, or its prominence within a city's socioeconomic hierarchy of roads (Alderman, 2003). However, Alderman (2000) also cites the potential of streets to connect disparate and disconnected social groups, which are persistently segregated along racialized lines in the United States (cf. Massey and Denton, 1993; Hoelscher, 2003; Holloway, 2000), as a frequent cause of controversy. If we think about the potential spatial formats that MLK Streets might be part of in a more or less segregated environment, three hypothetical possibilities arise (Figure 1). As an essentially linear place, MLK Streets are capable of connecting, being contained by, or dividing neighborhoods and other places within a city. Though these relationships are explicitly spatial and fundamentally geometric, the existing spatial manifestations of race and racism also result in the negotiation of symbolic

FIGURE 1

MLK Streets Potential Relationships to Racialized Residential Spaces



and social relationships as the MLK Streets label is “placed” upon these landscapes.

The Economic Branding of MLK Streets

In many of the debates surrounding MLK commemoration, the politics of race are intertwined with a powerful economic symbolism that generates potent stereotypes (cf. Wacquant, 1997). MLK Streets, in other words, have resonated in popular imagination not only as African-American vernacular spaces, but also as spaces of crime, ruin, and desolation (Tilove, 2003). An oft-cited comedy routine by Chris Rock, for example, suggests that anyone lost on any MLK Streets should do one thing: “Run!” (Alderman, 2000; Tilove, 2003). In similar fashion, the National Center for Public Policy Research argues that “all across African American America, there are Martin Luther MLK Streets, avenues, drives and boulevards and each has one major thing in common . . . they all lead to the most crime-ridden parts of town” (Wilson, 1998). In city after city, newspaper accounts highlight similar problems. For example, “[Martin Luther King Jr. Drive] and its residents have trouble shedding a seedier image, one of drugs and prostitution” in Greensboro, North Carolina (Schlosser, 2004:A1). In St. Louis, Missouri, “the boarded windows and crumbling sidewalks turned Martin Luther King Drive into an ugly, jagged scar through the city’s midsection” (Moore and Smith, 2004:B1).

All this has a significant impact on the ways economic issues feature into debates about MLK Streets. From one perspective, renaming a street will entail some measure of cost for residents and business owners, who must deal with the mundane but important practicalities of a new street address on their stationery, billing forms, business cards, and advertising. Indeed, this cost is frequently cited by business owners as a reason for opposing an MLK Street renaming. In Jacksonville, North Carolina, for example, we hear “it would be a major cost, we have sales receipts and invoices to last four or five years . . . we would have to reprint everything” (NeNittis, 2004). In Dunedin, Florida “[business owners] cited the economic impact that changing the street name would have on their businesses” (Scott, 2003). According to an MLK Street name opponent in Covington, Ohio’s controversy:

I don’t care if they were going to name it after Billy Graham or the pope. That’s a big expense. You’re going to have all your documents changed; all the businesses are going to have their letterheads changed. And what’s it going to [cost] to change those big signs up there on I-75? (Rutledge, 2004)

Although these costs undoubtedly exist, we wish to argue that there is also a more symbolic economic narrative in play in discussions about MLK Streets, arising from the kinds of characteristics ascribed to them as

“African-American spaces.” The street name itself, in other words, carries a particular kind of economic value or signification.

This kind of symbolic value has been discussed by other researchers (Fernie et al., 1997), who suggest that certain streets become “branded” because of their name. For example, in the United States, Wall Street in New York City and Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills are symbols of economic prestige. In London’s Mayfair District, there is a seemingly inexplicable high concentration of designer retail fashion shops on Bond Street. In instances like these, the street name is analogous to an *en vogue* corporate brand name. The authors explain:

A Bond Street address carries a cachet not enjoyed by neighboring streets . . . it cannot be said that there is anything peculiar about Bond Street. It’s not the main street nor is it pedestrianized. It doesn’t have any particular attractions along its length and it isn’t close to the main tourist attractions in London. Yet, for some reason, it is seen as a key “branded” street to international fashion houses. (Fernie et al., quoted in Wrigley and Lowe, 2002:195)

In the case of MLK Streets, however, it would appear that the brand, far from being *en vogue*, carries instead a negative imaginary, one enmeshed in the complex politics of race. As an unnamed MLK Streets naming proponent argued all too well, “when it’s white against African American, you’re talking about property values” (quoted in Corcoran, 2003). This certainly appears to have been the case in Zephyrhills, Florida, where “a business owner told local newspapers that property values would fall, saying streets named after Dr. King were a guarantee of economic blight” (Goodnough, 2004:A1). Similarly, Alderman (2000:673) has documented the MLK Streets controversy of Chattanooga, Tennessee, in which a real estate developer stated that renaming Ninth Street as M.L. King Jr. Boulevard would hinder his ability to lease office space, because the MLK Streets label “implies some overtones that, perhaps, are not acceptable in the fashion West Ninth Street is now being developed.” In other words, there appears to be a stubborn, racialized economic “branding” of MLK streets, resulting in the common perception that “virtually every Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard in America is a street of abandoned buildings, abandoned businesses, abandoned people, abandoned dreams” (Danky, quoted in Carson, 2003:408).

Is this “brand” an empirical reality? In the work reported in the following pages, we investigate the economic geographies of streets named for Martin Luther King, Jr., attempting to characterize these branded spaces, to deconstruct some of the mythology that attends them, and, in so doing, to inform current and future MLK Streets debates.

Data and Methods

To investigate the economic geographies of MLK Streets, we used InfoUSA’s (2003) American Business Disc (ABD), which contains information

TABLE 1
 Classification Scheme for Selected Establishment Characteristics

	Annual Sales	Employment
Low	< \$500,000	1 < 5 employees
Medium low	\$500,000 < \$1 million	5 < 10 employees
Medium high	\$1 million < \$5 million	10 < 50 employees
High	\$5 million or more	50 employees or more

on approximately 12.5 million nonresidential establishments, including both businesses and noncommercial establishments (i.e., establishments that perform no sales function, such as churches and schools). We extracted data for all establishments in the United States found to have an MLK Streets address (e.g., MLK Boulevard, Martin Luther King Avenue, or MLK King Drive), including geographic identifiers, industrial classifications, and operational-scale characteristics (e.g., sales levels and employment size categories). Table 1 provides an explanation of these ordinal variables.

To assess the economic vitality of MLK Streets, we drew comparisons with both streets named for John F. Kennedy (JFK Streets) and Main Streets. We follow other researchers (Stump, 1988; Alderman, 2000) in choosing JFK Streets because President Kennedy rose to prominence at roughly the same time as King, and like King became an iconic figure after his assassination. Kennedy also provides an interesting comparison because of the persistence of “race” as a central issue in many MLK Streets controversies (Alderman, 2000, 2003). If “whiteness” (Kobayashi and Peake, 2000) is privileged in the context of street naming (i.e., spatial production), then we would expect JFK Streets to occupy relatively privileged positions within their respective host economies.

Main Street provides a useful comparison because it is both frequent and relatively “neutral,” in the sense that its naming is not the result of a commemoration. The ABD contains 515,478 establishments with a Main Street address. Because the ABD limits extractions to 50 establishments per query, we employed a random, 17 percent sample of establishments on Main Street, by choosing every sixth establishment from an alphabetically sorted list. In several instances, national frequencies were available from the ABD and in those cases comparisons between establishments on MLK Streets and all establishments in the United States (i.e., the approximately 12.5 million establishments on every street contained in the ABD) were made.

At a second scale of analysis, we wished to examine the relative economic vitality of MLK Streets in the contexts of their hometowns. For each Census-defined place containing MLK Streets, we collected information about all establishments located in the place, thus allowing for place-level comparisons.

Place-level characteristics were gathered from a number of different sources, such as American FactFinder at the U.S. Census website, and Geolytics's (2001) CensusCD. After reconciliation of an assortment of place name discrepancies, and some aggregation (e.g., Brooklyn was aggregated into New York City), the place-level database contained 535 unique places where MLK Streets establishments could be observed. Note that this place-level aggregation was not performed for establishments located on JFK Streets or Main Streets. Hence, comparisons between MLK, JFK, and Main Streets will be confined to the national scale.

Prior research (Stump, 1988; Alderman, 2000) suggests that many MLK Streets are exclusively residential in nature (meaning that these streets would not show up in the ABD). Therefore, our final task in the data-collection process was to acquire information on those MLK Streets that possess no businesses. To this end, the authors consulted a second data source: ArcGIS StreetMap USA (Environmental Systems Research Institute, 2001), which houses shapefiles of U.S. roadways originally developed by Geographic Data Technology, Inc. Adding these residential MLK Streets to MLK Streets observed in the ABD results in a total of 777 places with observable MLK Streets. This number should be regarded as a minimum estimate because a few errors of omission are undoubtedly present.

Results

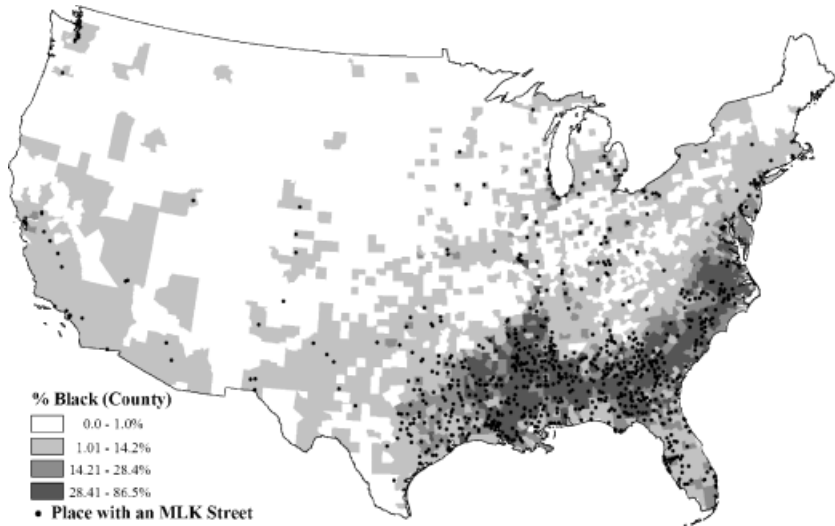
The Distribution of MLK Streets

The basic spatial distribution of the 777 MLK Streets in the United States is revealed in Figure 2. (Please note that there are no MLK Streets in either Alaska or Hawaii.) Most of these streets (85 percent of the total) are found in the South. Georgia alone is home to 117 MLK Streets. This region's concentration (and Georgia's in particular) are unsurprising given Dr. King's strong ties to the region and the state's, and the region's, unique racial history. These southern MLK Streets are an important part of re-negotiated commemoration in the South (Alderman, 2000). Of the 242 exclusively residential MLK Streets, 203 (84 percent) are found in the South. So, while the number of southern MLK Streets is quite large, the mix of residential/commercial MLK Streets is regionally invariant.

Alderman suggests that "if street naming is a movement led by African Americans, we might expect to see a relationship between the frequency of MLK Streets and the relative size of a city's African American population" (2000:677). That same article reported that, indeed, MLK Streets naming was most common in places with relatively large African-American populations. Replicating Alderman's inquiry, Figure 2 exhibits the strong spatial correlation between relatively large African-American population concentrations at the county level and places with MLK Streets. Our current

FIGURE 2

The Distribution of MLK Streets and African-American Residents



project finds that more than half of African-American U.S. citizens reside in places with an MLK Street. Of course, this correlation reinforces Alderman’s notion that African-American communities generally lead the naming movement to commemorate King. This correlation also goes a long way toward explaining the high density of MLK Streets in the South.

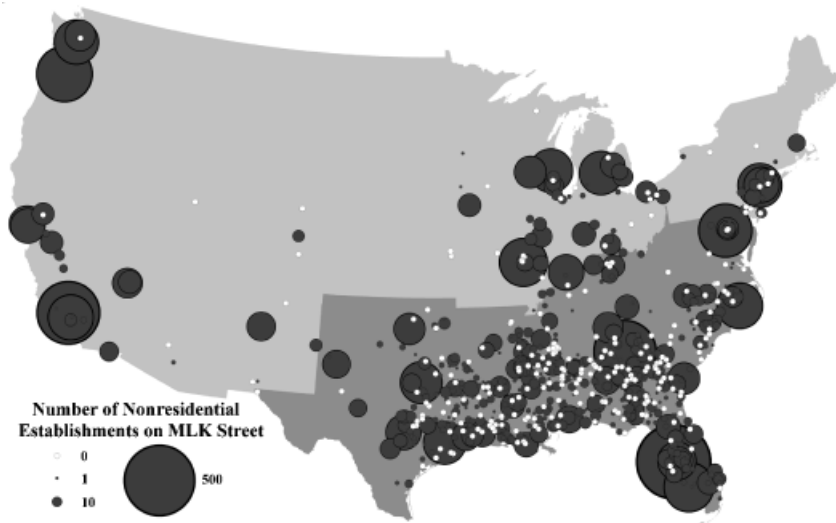
In general, those states without MLK Streets have relatively small African-American populations (e.g., Montana, Idaho, Vermont, and Maine). Conversely, states with relatively large African-American populations have relatively large numbers of MLK Streets (e.g., Georgia, Mississippi, Texas, and Florida). Across the United States, the association between the number of MLK Streets and the percent of the total population categorized as “Black or African American” by the 2000 Census is both strong and positive; the correlation coefficient for these two variables is 0.695. As a predictor then, states’ (percent) African-American population accounts for 48.3 percent of the variation exhibited in states’ number of MLK Streets, which is significant ($R^2 = 0.483$ and $p < 0.000$).

The Number of MLK Establishments

Analysis revealed 10,933 establishments distributed among 535 commercial MLK Streets. At least by the measures examined in this study, the

FIGURE 3

Variation in the Number of Establishments on MLK Streets



economic prominence of these commercial MLK Streets varies greatly. For example, as Figure 3 demonstrates, there is considerable variation in the absolute number of establishments found on MLK Streets. In the South, where MLK Streets are most frequently located (i.e., 85 percent of the total), this variation is particularly noteworthy. Considering only MLK Streets with at least one establishment, the coefficient of variation for the number of establishments in the South (272.5 percent) is nearly double that same measure for the rest of the country (152.9 percent).

In absolute terms, there are some really large southern MLK Streets and there are some really tiny ones as well. These streets range from Tupelo's (MS) MLK Circle, which is less than one-tenth of one mile in length and has no commercial establishments, to Tampa's (FL) MLK Boulevard, which is the nation's longest at 14 miles and home to well over 500 commercial establishments. By this measure then, the MLK naming process in the South provides a much wider range of outcomes than is the case in the remainder of the country. In addition, there is no significant relationship between city size and MLK Streets size in the South. For example, we can find the eighth largest MLK Street in the country in the 1,627th largest city, that is, New Bern, North Carolina. By contrast, outside the South, city size generally dictates the size of MLK Streets. This may simply reflect greater variation in racialized urban spaces of the South, where some municipalities are coping with institutionalized civil rights and commemoration better than others within the context of local history, culture, and agency.

FIGURE 4

The Relative Prominence of MLK Streets (Number of Establishments)

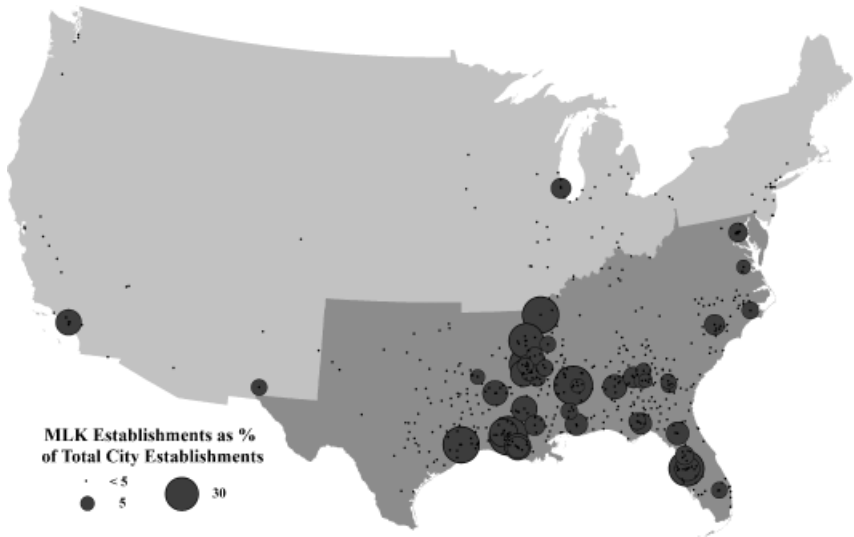


Figure 4 illustrates the relative importance of each place’s MLK Streets. The absolute number of establishments is not the only means by which to quantify a street’s prominence. In the vast majority of cases (91.4 percent), establishments located on MLK Streets represent a small portion (less than 5 percent) of all establishments in their respective host cities (see Figure 4). However, establishments on MLK Streets in nearly 50 places account for more than 5 percent of their host city’s total establishments. Again, the South is widely variant in this particular measure of the outcomes of the MLK naming process. By this relative measure of prominence, places found throughout the Mississippi Delta have many of the most prominent MLK Streets. For example, MLK Drive in Grand Coteau (LA) is home to 25 of that town’s 66 business establishments (i.e., 38 percent). Note that outside the South, MLK Streets are not as relatively prominent within their host communities. In fact, only three cities’ MLK Streets account for more than 5 percent of that city’s total establishments. These are Lynwood (CA), Las Cruces (NM), and Oak Lawn (IL).

The Scale of MLK Business

We now turn to our fundamental empirical question: Are the nation’s MLK Streets economically marginalized places? As indicated earlier, given

TABLE 2

Comparative Analysis of Economic Indicators Between Establishments Located on MLK Streets and Three Other Places

	MLK Street		JFK Street		Main Street		United States	
	Freq.	Percent	Freq.	Percent	Freq.	Percent	Freq.	Percent
<i>Annual Sales</i>								
Low	4,273	50.3	4,260	50.2	40,917	57.5***	5,662,601	50.9
Medium low	2,080	24.5	1,936	22.8*	14,235	20.0***	2,522,057	22.7***
Medium high	1,682	19.8	1,695	20.0	12,939	18.2***	2,268,740	20.4
High	461	5.4	591	7.0***	3,120	4.4***	668,203	6.0*
<i>Employment</i>								
Low	6,522	61.2	5,767	61.9	54,380	65.2***	7,935,492	63.5***
Medium low	1,955	18.3	1,660	17.8	15,342	18.4	2,245,821	18.0
Medium high	1,713	16.1	1,463	15.7	11,680	14.0***	1,855,941	14.8***
High	469	4.4	432	4.6	1,976	2.4***	465,680	3.7***

*Chi-square statistic (direct comparison to MLK Street) significant at 0.05 level.

***Chi-square statistic (direct comparison to MLK Street) significant at 0.001 level.

popular conceptions, we expect to find a negative correlation between the MLK label and the level of economic development. To answer this question we will consider annual sales and employment as proxies for the amount of business that an establishment conducts. Hence, this section is designed to address the differences and similarities found in two business attributes (i.e., annual sales and employment). We analyze these variables at two spatial scales (i.e., the United States and at the place level). Ultimately, this section statistically analyzes economic attributes of establishments located on MLK Streets and, in so doing, responds to the stereotype that MLK Streets are less economically vital than those found in other types of urban places.

We begin by examining size characteristics of MLK Streets establishments across the nation. Here, size is taken as a measure of economic vitality. Table 2 displays a summary of chi-square tests used to identify differences in annual sales and employment frequencies between establishments on MLK Streets and establishments on JFK Streets, Main Streets, and the total United States. Note the relative uniformity of both frequency distributions in all cases. MLK Streets are actually scaled much like other selected categories of space. Focus is placed on the low-sales category as a reflection of marginality. There is no statistically significant difference between the percentage of low-sales establishments on MLK Streets (50.3 percent) and the percentage of low-sales establishments in the total United States (50.9 percent) or on JFK Streets (50.2 percent). Further, relative to MLK Streets, there is a statistically significant overconcentration of low-sales establishments on Main Streets (57.5 percent), which suggests that at the national level, Main Streets—not MLK Streets—might be the most economically

marginalized places studied here. At the other end of the sales spectrum, when compared to JFK Streets and the total United States, establishments on MLK Streets do appear to hit a numerically small, but statistically significant, “ceiling” in terms of annual sales. Compared to establishments on MLK Streets, the percentage of high-sales establishments is 1.6 percent greater on JFK Streets and 0.6 percent greater across the total United States.

When compared to establishments on JFK and Main Streets and the total United States, establishments on MLK Streets exhibit relatively high employment. For example, of the four streetscapes examined, MLK Streets exhibit the lowest concentration of low-employment establishments, and the differences between low-employment establishments on MLK Streets and compared to both Main Streets and the total United States are significant. Further, MLK Streets exhibit the highest concentration of medium-high, and the second highest concentration of high-employment establishments of the comparison groups. Again, the differences between medium-high and high-employment establishments on MLK Streets compared to Main Streets and the total United States are significant. Interestingly, despite the apparent annual sales “ceiling” on MLK Streets when compared to JFK Streets establishments mentioned above, there are no statistically significant differences in employment among establishments on these two streets. With no equivalent ceiling on employment levels, the constrained nature of sales could indicate that the productivity of MLK establishments is more limited than is the case in other analytic categories.

Looking at the previously reported national results is useful in that it addresses existing generalizations about MLK Streets that have appeared in national publications and broadcasts. The aggregate comparisons made here suggest that MLK Streets are not marginalized and that the correlation between the MLK label and the level of economic development of these streets is not negative. However, our analysis of MLK Streets also requires attention to specific places. Therefore, we created place-level measures to consider the relative prominence of MLK Streets when compared to the remainder of their respective hometowns. For example, one measure of relative economic concentration could be calculated by taking the percentage of low-sales establishments found on MLK Streets and dividing that by the percentage of low-sales establishments found in the rest of that host city. There are three possible benchmark outcomes for this measure. First, the percentage of low-sales establishments on this hypothetical MLK Street might be overrepresented, resulting in a concentration value that is greater than one. Second, the percentage of low-sales establishments on this MLK Street might be underrepresented, resulting in a concentration value that is less than one. Third, the percentage of low-sales establishments on this MLK Street might be roughly proportional to that found in the remainder of the city, resulting in a concentration value that is very close to one.

Like a location quotient, this relative concentration statistic is extremely sensitive to scale. For example, the MLK Street in Hickory, Mississippi, has

only one establishment. Thus, the percentage of any attribute on Hickory's MLK Street will either be 0 (0 percent) or 1 (100 percent). To mitigate this volatility without prohibitively decreasing the sample size, only MLK Streets with at least 10 establishments were selected for this place-level analysis. Of the 535 commercial MLK Streets found in the United States, 173 have at least 10 establishments, with 124 of these located in the South and 49 in the remainder of the country. A t test was used to compare MLK Streets establishments and other establishments in their hometowns (Table 3).

If MLK Streets are economically marginalized within their respective host cities, then the establishments located on MLK Streets should exhibit an overrepresentation of low-sales and low-employment coupled with an underrepresentation of higher-sales and higher-employment categories. After observing the resulting statistics, as shown in Table 3, there is in fact a statistically significant overrepresentation of low-sales establishments on MLK Streets relative to their hometowns. However, this overrepresentation is relatively small. On average, the relative concentration of low-sales establishments on MLK Streets was only 6.7 percent higher than the rest of the city. All other differences in annual sales between establishments on MLK Streets and the rest of the hometown are statistically insignificant and, furthermore, all other 95 percent confidence intervals include zero difference in low-sale concentration (i.e., proportional representation).

Similarly, if an MLK Street is economically disadvantaged, relative to other areas in its hometown, then establishments located on MLK Streets should exhibit an overrepresentation of low-employment establishments and an underrepresentation of establishments in the three higher employment categories. However, this is not the case. Though it is true that MLK Streets exhibit a slight underrepresentation of establishments in both the low and medium-low employment categories, neither t statistic is significant. MLK Streets' relative concentration of establishments in the medium-high employment category, on the other hand, is larger than the rest of the hometown, and is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Certainly, there is no hint of systematic marginalization in any of the results thus far. In fact, MLK Streets exhibit the greatest mean difference in their overrepresentation of the high-employment category. On average, the relative concentration of MLK Streets establishments in the high-employment category is 17.4 percent larger than the rest of the hometown. This overrepresentation of large establishments is consistent with results found when comparing establishments located on MLK Streets to establishments located on JFK Streets, Main Streets, and the total United States. Hence, we conclude that MLK Streets frequently host relatively large establishments that, on average, are not marginal in terms of either employment or sales.

The basic comparisons of places found across the country reported above do obscure a fundamental geography. There is significant regional variation in the test results. At least two features of this regional variation are worthy of mention. First, there are substantial regional differences in the relative

TABLE 3

T Test Results for the Relative Concentrations of Economic Variables Exhibited by Establishments Located on MLK Street, Compared to the Rest of that Place's Establishments

	Mean Difference	SD	t	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower	Upper
<i>Annual Sales</i>					
Low					
All MLK Streets	0.07*	0.42	2.13	0.00	0.13
South	0.11**	0.42	2.93	0.04	0.18
Non-South	-0.04	0.40	-0.70	-0.15	0.07
Medium low					
All MLK Streets	-0.02	0.64	-0.37	-0.11	0.08
South	-0.08	0.57	-1.62	-0.18	0.02
Non-South	0.15	0.79	1.30	-0.08	0.37
Medium high					
All MLK Streets	-0.04	0.62	-0.80	-0.13	0.06
South	-0.03	0.64	-0.46	-0.14	0.09
Non-South	-0.06	0.55	-0.82	-0.22	0.09
High					
All MLK Streets	-0.09	1.12	-1.09	-0.26	0.08
South	-0.22*	0.97	-2.53	-0.39	-0.05
Non-South	0.23	1.39	1.16	-0.17	0.63
<i>Employment</i>					
Low					
All MLK Streets	-0.02	0.23	-0.89	-0.05	0.02
South	-0.02	0.23	-1.07	-0.06	0.02
Non-South	0.00	0.22	0.06	-0.06	0.06
Medium low					
All MLK Streets	-0.05	0.51	-1.19	-0.12	0.03
South	-0.05	0.54	-0.93	-0.14	0.05
Non-South	-0.05	0.41	-0.81	-0.17	0.07
Medium high					
All MLK Streets	0.12*	0.70	2.29	0.02	0.23
South	0.19*	0.72	2.91	0.06	0.32
Non-South	-0.05	0.60	-0.56	-0.22	0.12
High					
All MLK Streets	0.17	1.36	1.68	-0.03	0.38
South	0.08	1.28	0.71	-0.15	0.31
Non-South	0.41	1.53	1.86	-0.03	0.85

** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

concentrations of the low-sales category. Outside the South, there is no statistically significant overrepresentation of low-sales establishments on MLK Streets relative to their hometowns. It is as if these MLK Streets were randomly selected from the population of all streetscapes in the non-South.

In the South, however, there is a statistically significant overrepresentation of low-sales establishments found on average MLK Streets. On average, Southern MLK Streets host 11 percent more low-sales establishments than do their hometowns. Second, high-sales establishments in the South appear to be both substantially and significantly underrepresented on MLK Streets, whereas MLK Streets found in the rest of the country exhibit an extremely large overrepresentation of high annual sales establishments (41 percent) when compared to their respective hosts. So, to the extent that MLK Streets can be said to be economically disadvantaged, this would appear to be limited. If the economic marginalization of this form of commemoration (i.e., streets named for King) is taking place in the United States, it seems to be limited to the U.S. South. The expected negative correlation between the MLK label and the level of development on MLK Streets can be found in the American South. There certainly are exceptions to this rule, however (e.g., Tampa and Atlanta). Unequally developed, racialized spaces are a hallmark of historic southern economic development and this appears to be an outcome of contemporary development processes as well.

The Business Composition of MLK Streets

To this point, we have focused our attention on the scale of MLK Streets' "business economy." However, the mission of these MLK establishments varies considerably. Not all establishments perform a sales function and the social and cultural value of "economic" activity on MLK Streets extends beyond the simple volume of business transactions. In this section, we examine the compositional character of MLK Streets economies by focusing on the kinds of businesses found on those streets. Specifically, we use a number of techniques to test the general hypothesis that MLK Streets have a significantly different business composition than JFK and Main Streets, the total United States, and the remainder of their hometowns. Once again, this hypothesis is based, in part, on the common negative economic stereotypes applied to MLK Streets. Given that MLK Streets generally do at least as much business volume as other places (with the exception of sales in the South), that is, similar scales, then perhaps it is the nature of the economic activity that contributes to MLK Streets' negative image. As we will see, there are in fact a number of significant differences between MLK Streets and the selected comparison groups. These economic differences indicate that MLK Streets do in fact constitute a unique economic geography, although not necessarily one characterized by disadvantage or marginality.

There are 40 Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) categories (InfoUSA was still employing SIC codes instead of the NAICS in their 2003 business inventory) that occur within at least 30 establishments on American MLK Streets. This "basket" of business types includes establishments that range from the health services available in any one of 19 hospitals located on MLK

TABLE 4
Representation of Selected Establishments on MLK Street

Establishment Type	Frequency (MLK)	% (MLK)	Location Quotient (MLK and Total U.S.)
Government offices	590	5.40	5.74
Funeral directors	107	0.98	4.97
Bail bonding	44	0.40	4.27
Barbers	148	1.35	3.21
Retail liquor	84	0.77	3.06
Churches	768	7.02	2.37
Social service & welfare	140	1.28	2.36
Retail grocery	208	1.90	2.31
Convenience stores	186	1.70	2.07
Beauty salons	392	3.59	1.88
Cleaners	78	0.71	1.85
Attorneys	169	1.55	0.39
Real estate	68	0.62	0.40
Accountants	43	0.39	0.43
Insurance	90	0.82	0.45
Dentists	102	0.93	0.58
Banks	47	0.43	0.62
Nonprofit organizations	46	0.42	0.69
Gift shops	45	0.41	0.72
Hotels/motels	46	0.42	0.75
Retail florists	43	0.39	0.98
Total	3,444	32.00	n/a

Streets to environmental establishments such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services building on Dr. Martin Luther King Place in Louisville, Kentucky. This “basket” of the most frequently occurring business types to be found on MLK Streets is significant because it highlights the functional diversity of the nation’s MLK Streets, a diversity that is frequently omitted from popular commentary and criticism. This diversity also suggests, as did the lack of scalar differences, that these commemorative spaces have not been relegated to as marginalized a position as is commonly thought.

Considering only those business types (SIC codes) with an MLK frequency of at least 30, Table 4 displays the most over- and underrepresented establishment types located on MLK Streets. Compared to the United States in general, we observe a general overrepresentation of consumer services (e.g., barbers, retail grocery, and beauty salons) and an underrepresentation of producer services (e.g., insurance, real estate, and accountants) on American MLK Streets. At least some of these establishment types carry common social stigmas that are consistent with the negative branding of MLK Streets. In addition, consider the social stigmas that are likely attached to the following overrepresented establishment types: bail bonding, retail liquor, and

social services and welfare establishments. Also note, however, that together these three relatively overrepresented establishment categories account for less than 2 percent of all MLK Streets establishments. In absolute terms, there are more gift shops (45) than bail bonding establishments (44), more insurance offices (90) than retail liquor stores (84), and more attorney offices (169) than social service and welfare establishments (140). Yet the overrepresentation of some of these business categories on MLK Streets does hint at the predatory sorts of locational strategies used by some economic activities such as payday lenders in targeted central city areas (Graves, 2003).

Churches and government offices (i.e., church and state) are two of the most overrepresented establishment types found on the nation's MLK Streets. The economic importance of these establishments to their hometowns, while perhaps less obvious than retail and service-oriented establishments, is significant. Though these particular establishment types perform no sales function (NSF), they typically do employ a significant amount of labor in relatively high-paying jobs. For example, in 2004 the U.S. federal (government) civilian payroll alone was more than \$148 billion, and included more than 2.7 million employees (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2005) at an average annual salary of \$54,814. The absence of a sales function does not confine an establishment to economic marginalization within its hometown. Certainly, establishments are important because they employ people. In addition, many of these NSF establishments possess significant symbolic and cultural value within their respective communities.

Across the United States, NSF establishments are dramatically overrepresented on MLK Streets, accounting for one in five establishments. Of the 10,933 establishments located on MLK Streets, there are 2,437 NSF establishments. Chi-square tests suggest significant differences ($p < 0.001$) between the NSF frequencies found on MLK Streets (22.3 percent) and the NSF frequencies found on JFK Streets (11.3 percent), Main Streets (17.0 percent), and in the total United States (13.6 percent). The high proportion of NSF establishments on MLK Streets also represents a pronounced departure from what is observed in those streets' respective hometowns. Whereas nationally MLK Streets exhibit a relatively small overrepresentation of low-sales establishments compared to their hometowns (a mean difference in proportion of only 0.07), those same streets exhibit a substantial overrepresentation of NSF establishments (a mean difference in proportions of 0.70). In other words, the proportion of NSF establishments on MLK Streets is, on average, 70 points larger than the proportion found in the rest of the respective host city.

Unlike the regional variation in scalar considerations that were reported earlier, there is little regional variation in the relative concentration of NSF establishments. A disproportionate share of NSF establishments are found on MLK Streets regardless of region. The mean differences, between MLK and host city, for this test are substantive and significant ($p < 0.001$) in the South (0.68) and the non-South (0.73). It should be noted here that MLK

TABLE 5

Top 10 SICs for MLK Street Establishments with No Sales Function (NSF)

No Sales Function (NSF) Establishment Type	Frequency on MLK Street	Percent of NSF Establishments on MLK Street
Churches	768	31.51
Government	590	24.21
City	186	7.63
County	183	7.51
State	147	6.03
Federal	74	3.04
Schools	207	8.49
Associations	51	2.09
Nonprofit organizations	44	1.81
Youth organizations & centers	36	1.48
Clubs	34	1.40
Police departments	27	1.11
Religious organizations	23	0.94
Housing authorities	21	0.86
Total	1,801	73.90

Streets NSF establishments have a greater concentration in medium-high and high-employment categories than MLK Streets establishments that do perform a sales function. In general, these NSF establishments are large. Although NSF establishments account for just over 22 percent of all MLK Streets establishments, NSF establishments account for nearly half (46.1 percent) of MLK Streets 469 high-employment establishments. Schools and government buildings are generally large establishments in terms of employment. This does suggest that the private-sector activities located on MLK Streets are appreciably smaller in general and that the lack of difference in scale that was noted earlier may be an artifact of this basic compositional distinction.

Despite their relative abundance, NSF establishments on MLK Streets are concentrated in relatively few SIC codes (Table 5). Again, MLK Streets are frequently host to both church and state, which together account for more than half of all NSF establishments on American MLK Streets. For street naming activists, the “visibility” of churches and schools on a potential MLK Street is often an important consideration—particularly those establishments that engage and employ a large number of people. At the same time, it may also be that streets with a smaller proportion of private-sector owners face less political opposition in the naming process. Church and state are probably more receptive to such a name change than is the for-profit sector, which would more frequently have concern for the immediate cost of the name change and a longer-term concern for the MLK label’s potential impact on reduced land values and local disinvestment.

Discussion

As we noted at the outset of this article, MLK Streets are frequently subject to a sociocultural process of negative “branding” that identifies them both as “African-American space” and as landscapes of economic marginalization. This brand can be found in a variety of contexts: on coffee tables and in comedy clubs, in newspapers, and in people’s everyday conversations. As such, the collective imagining of MLK Streets can also have material effects, influencing consumer behavior, investment decisions, and the complex, racialized politics of commemoration, as the case of Muncie so clearly illustrates. What is remarkable about all of this is that the prevailing impression about MLK Streets has never been empirically validated. It has been our task, of course, to redress this by examining the economic character of the nation’s 777 MLK Streets. We found that the negative branding of MLK Streets is largely mythical; in much of the country, there is no real difference between what we find on MLK Streets and other categories of urban space. Along the way, we have made several important observations.

First, and most significantly, establishments located on MLK Streets *do not* systematically exhibit economic marginality in terms of sales and employment levels. Compared to JFK and Main Streets and the United States in general, MLK Streets tend to employ more people, and do not demonstrate a disproportionate concentration of low sales as one would expect given the economic image that is contained within the MLK brand. These findings are also consistent when comparing MLK Streets establishments to other establishments in their respective hometowns. Second, however, MLK Streets do systematically display economic differences when compared with other American streets, in terms of their function and their industrial composition. For example, MLK Streets host disproportionately high numbers of churches, government offices, and schools. These establishments are unlike for-profit establishments in both form and function. Further, these sorts of establishments are almost always symbolically important within their host communities, and they also provide an economic importance through employment levels that are consistently higher than establishments on other streets and across the remainder of their hometowns.

MLK Streets do not occur in abstract neoclassical economic spaces, but are places where people live and work. This is why the MLK Streets naming process is such a potentially emotional process and why it affects communities such as Muncie, Indiana so deeply. This is especially the case in the South, the one region where we witness some correlation between the MLK Street label and the level of economic development. In the South there is much greater variety in the outcomes of these naming processes and the frequency of economic marginality seems to be a bit greater.

Ultimately, the precision of the columns and rows of a database pale in comparison to the lived realities of the people, places, and streets that the numbers are intended to represent. Qualitative efforts, such as those of

Alderman (2003), whether academic in nature or designed to directly engage the larger community, appear most capable of helping us understand the particularities and the peculiarities of individual places in the MLK Streets naming process. The United States' 777 MLK Streets were born of 777 sociopolitical negotiations in specific places. Each of these places offers a unique economic landscape, valued in various ways by residents, workers, and business owners. In the end, we should strive to elucidate as many of the 777 MLK Streets stories as possible in order to inform and aid communities in the future as they grapple with the process of commemorating Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. with a street name.

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