
A Street Fit for a King: Naming Places and Commemoration in the American South*

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The naming of streets after Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) is an important arena for African Americans as they rewrite the landscape of southern identity and commemoration. While less ornate and ostentatious than museums and monuments, MLK streets are powerful and highly contested cultural geographies because of their potential to connect disparate communities and incorporate a vision of the past into the spatial practices of everyday life. They reveal the importance of location, particularly intra-urban location, to public memorialization. Naming streets for King is a significant part of the nonmetropolitan South as well as larger cities and dependent upon the relative size of a city's African-American population. When estimating the intra-urban character of MLK streets within several southern states, findings suggest that they are located in census areas that are generally poorer and with more African Americans than citywide averages. Analysis reveals a geographic unevenness in the frequency of businesses having an address identified with King. When compared with the stereotypical American thoroughfare of "Main" Street, the address composition of MLK streets appears to be more residential in nature, although there is significant state by state variation. **Key Words:** street naming, Martin Luther King, commemoration, American South.

Introduction

African Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities are using direct political action to challenge and change the commemoration of the past within cultural landscapes, constituting what Rhea (1997) called the "race pride movement." Blacks in the southeastern US have taken a particularly active role in reconstructing commemorative landscapes—from calling for the removal of Confederate symbols from public places to the building of memorials and museums honoring the civil rights movement (Secrest and May 1989; Auchmuty 1993; Leib 1995; Cobb 1996; Sack 1996; Armada 1998; Davis 1998). Slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. occupies a controversial focal point in this new movement to recognize the historical achievements and struggles of African Americans. Controversy over memorializing King is not limited to the South but constitutes what Zerubavel (1996) called a "national mnemonic battle," as evident in past and ongoing debates over establishing and observing a holiday in his honor (*The Economist* 1983; Sigelman and Walkosz 1992; Potholm 1993; Alozie 1995; Mason 1998; *Chicago Defender* 1999).

An important dimension of the race pride

movement has been the naming of places after African-American figures in history (e.g., Blackmon 1992; Horswell 1993; Samuels 1996). As suggested by a growing number of scholars, place names participate in larger struggles over social and political identity and are used for resisting the hegemonic order as well as reproducing it (Cohen and Kliot 1992; Berg and Kearns 1996; Myers 1996; Gonzales Faraco and Murphy 1997; Herman 1999). Although largely neglected by scholars, the names attached to schools, businesses, streets and other features have an important place in the symbolic changes and struggles occurring within the American South (Jensen 1997; Alderman and Beavers 1999). This paper provides an empirical look into one of the most widespread of the region's new commemorative practices: the naming of streets after Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK).

While reflecting the increased cultural and political power of blacks and the liberalization of white attitudes, MLK streets are often sites of struggle for African Americans. Geography plays a central role in these struggles (Alderman 1996). Controversy often revolves around issues of determining which street in the city is most fit or appropriate to identify with King. Debate frequently arises over the confining of MLK

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streets to predominantly African-American areas of the city. African-American activists often argue that Martin Luther King's commemoration is important to all races and hence should be accessible—locationally and culturally—to larger and different publics. The naming of major commercial thoroughfares is also contentious, as many black leaders demand that King's name be placed on prominent and frequently traveled streets. The most vocal opposition often comes from businesses, citing—whether legitimately or not—the cost and burden of reprinting forms, stationery, address labels, and advertisements containing the address change. Some business and property owners have gone so far as to express concern about the economic impact of having their street identified with King and, as they perceive it, the black community.

Chattanooga, TN aptly illustrates how the issues of location, business, and race intersect with each other when naming a street after King. In January of 1982, the city changed the name of Ninth Street to M.L.King, Jr. Blvd., ending several months of debate over the issue (*Chattanooga Times* 1982). One of the major opponents to the name change was a real estate developer who owned a downtown office building on the west end of the street and was in the process of building another one there. The developer argued that he might not be able to rent office space in a building with a MLK address because of the racial overtones it might create. He supported the renaming of East Ninth Street but not West Ninth Street. Specifically, he was quoted as saying:

W. Ninth Street is not related to King . . . Ninth Street is no longer a solid black street as it was when I was a kid growing up. . . . It is no longer a residential street or a rather rundown business street. It is a top class business street that can play a great part in the future of Chattanooga. . . . When giving street names of this sort (M.L.King Jr., Blvd.) . . . it implies some overtones that, perhaps, are not acceptable in the fashion West Ninth Street is now being developed (*Chattanooga Times* 1981a, B1).

When the Chattanooga city council refused to rename Ninth Street, 300 African Americans marched along the street. Armed with ladders and singing “We Shall Overcome,” they defiantly yet temporarily renamed the street by pasting street signs with bumper stickers that read “Dr. ML King, Jr. Blvd.” (*Chattanooga News-*

Free Press 1981). After this protest and an emotional request from a coalition of black and white ministers, the council reversed its decision and the entire length of Ninth Street was renamed for King (*Chattanooga Times* 1981b).

Despite the success in Chattanooga, journalists report that African Americans in the South have generally been unsuccessful in attaching King's name to prominent thoroughfares that cut through business districts and unite white and black communities (Townes 1993). For instance, one news reporter described Martin Luther King Drive in Jackson, Mississippi as a “boulevard of broken dreams” because crime, poverty, racial segregation, and physical deterioration dominate the street (Yardley 1995). The supposed inferiority of MLK streets has even found its way into the discourse of humor. As Chris Rock explained in his HBO comedy series, “if a friend calls you on the telephone and says they're lost on Martin Luther King Boulevard and they want to know what they should do, the best response is, “Run!”” (Page 1998, 28).

Scholars have devoted little attention to documenting the occurrence of MLK streets inside or outside the South. Nor have they spent much time determining the “place” of these named streets in the racial and economic geography of cities and towns. Stump (1988) is responsible for the earliest and, to date, only study to measure spatial variation in MLK street naming. While it was evident across the nation, he found that street naming was concentrated in the southeastern United States (Fig. 1). In addition to being over a decade old, Stump's data source (*National Five-Digit Zip Code and Post Office Directory*) excluded smaller places, thus limiting our understanding of MLK street naming as distributed across the southern urban hierarchy. Stump suggested that the popularity of MLK streets in the South was a function of the large black population living in the region. However, he neglected to examine the racial composition of cities involved in the naming process. By focusing so intently on the national and regional distribution of MLK streets, Stump also failed to consider the importance of intra-urban location and the types of streets identified with King.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to describe and analyze the emerging cultural geography of MLK



Figure 1: *Distribution of MLK streets in the US, 1987. Source: Stump (1988). Reprinted with permission.*

streets in the American South, and, in doing so, explore the locational embeddedness of commemoration. First, as way of background, I establish the analytical value of examining street names and outline their unique political and commemorative qualities. Street naming illustrates the importance of location and geography to the commemorative process. The remainder of the paper then documents, maps, and analyzes the geographic location, distribution, and characteristics of streets named after King. I employ census data sources and an electronic telephone directory, an underutilized tool in current place name research. After I identify national patterns in streets bearing King's name, my analysis shifts to eleven southern states, where street naming is examined in relation to the size and racial composition of cities. Finally, given the apparent importance of intra-urban location to the process of commemorating King through street naming, I estimate the residential and commercial character of MLK streets within southern cities and towns. In this process, two primary questions are addressed. First, how do census areas containing MLK streets compare to their respective cities in terms of racial and income characteristics? Second, how often are businesses and other non-residential institutions with an MLK street address found?

Getting Street Smart: The Importance of Location to Commemoration

Geographers have traditionally treated streets in geometric terms, often classifying and study-

ing them as arcs, flows, and networks. Recent literature suggests an alternative "reading" of streets, one that views them as important cultural and political arenas. "Streets are the terrain of social encounters and political protest, sites of domination and resistance, places of pleasure and anxiety" (Fyfe 1998, 1). Streets, and transportation in general, do not operate in a race and class-neutral society: a politics underlies their organization, use, and meaning (Bullard and Johnson 1997).

Street naming, particularly for commemorative purposes, represents an important and highly contested practice in the political and cultural geography of cities. For example, Yeoh (1996) defined the strong ideological place that street renaming held in Singapore's attempt to build a sense of national identity after independence. Perhaps Azaryahu (1997, 480) stated the importance of street names best: "In the jungle of modern cities, street names are more than a means of facilitating spatial orientation. Often they are laden with political meanings and represent a certain theory of the world that is associated with and supportive of the hegemonic socio-political order."

Commemorative street naming is a powerful and controversial practice because it not only participates in the construction and reification of a selective vision of the past but also incorporates that version of history into the spatial practices of everyday life (Azaryahu 1996, 321). Because of its practical importance, street naming inscribes its ideological message into many texts of urban life. Yvonne Aikens (1990, B1),

who pushed to have a street named for King in Tampa, FL, expressed this point well:

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

The power and politics of commemorative street naming lie in its dual and simultaneous existence as historical referent and spatial designation (Azaryahu 1996). A street name's practical function does not necessarily lessen its symbolic function. Rather, the commemorative and political importance of street names come from their importance as markers of location. As suggested in a growing body of literature, public commemoration is not simply about determining the appropriateness of remembering the past in a certain way; it is also a struggle over where best to locate or place that memory within the cultural landscape (Charlesworth 1994; Johnson 1994, 1995; Alderman 1996; Azaryahu 1997; Till 1997; Johnson 1999).

The importance of location in commemorating King through street naming is perhaps no more apparent than in Brent, AL, where blacks protested the attachment of King's name onto a road leading to a garbage dump. Reverend W.B. Dickerson, who petitioned the city council to rename another, more prominent street, was quoted as saying: "We want [Martin Luther King Street] up where people can really see it" (Yarbrough 1992, A3). The situation in Brent affirms Johnson's (1995, 51) suggestion that geography is not simply the "incidental material backdrop" for memory but plays an active role in constructing the meaning of commemoration. As Johnson (1995, 63) also asserted, ". . . geographers are just beginning to examine the relationship between the memorialization of the past and the spatialization of public memory."

While participating with memorials, monuments, and museums in the spatialization of memory, the street name has a unique locational dynamic. As suggested in this editorial, streets have a connectivity that contributes to

their commemorative power and politicized nature: "Renaming a street is a uniquely appropriate way to honor King. Streets unite diverse neighborhoods. They touch all ages, all races, all economic levels, and the resident and the visitor equally. They link people and places that otherwise would remain insular" (*St. Petersburg Times* 1990a, 2). The notion of connectivity is of particular symbolic relevance to the commemoration of Martin Luther King. For instance, African-American activist Allen Stucks envisioned Tallahassee's Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard in terms of King's goal of racial integration: "Rev. King was about togetherness . . . If his name was going to be on a street in Tallahassee, it had to be on one that connected one neighborhood to another. And it had to be one you could find without having to wiggle through the black community'" (quoted in Ensley 1999, 1A). In the case of Tallahassee's MLK Boulevard, the street "connects one of the nation's oldest historically black universities to the entire city. It traces through black neighborhoods, white neighborhoods, businesses, parks and cemeteries" (Ensley 1999, 1A). In another example of how King's commemoration is represented and understood through the connectivity and accessibility of city streets, Jim Marshall (1999, B6), then mayor of Macon, GA, stated:

Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard is Macon's "front door," the primary entranceway to Macon's historic downtown. It begins at Exit 2 of I-16, crosses the Ocumulgee River on the Otis Redding Bridge and continues for several miles . . . Macon lies at the heart of Georgia. Macon's Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard leads to the heart of Macon—a fitting tribute to a man whose courage and lessons changed the hearts of many Americans.

As evident in the preceding statement, the locational power of MLK streets is also about how well they connect with existing commemorative and historic spaces. In Eatonton, GA, for example, Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive runs parallel and in close proximity to Alice Walker Drive, named for the prize-winning author and area native. While consisting of largely black residences, both streets work together to create a spatial network of African-American memory, connecting local and national history.

In conclusion, the dynamics behind com-

memorative street naming are similar to those behind establishing and observing a holiday. Holidays, like streets, extend into the lives and geographies of people who may not identify with the commemorated person (Gallagher 1995). Of course, because of racial and economic segregation in cities, not all streets unite diversity in the way described in the preceding quotations. As suggested by many observers, it is often difficult to name streets for King that cut across and connect diverse elements of the city. However, this statement gives us keen insight into why African Americans in the South and throughout the nation are choosing commemoration through street naming and, more importantly, pushing for the naming of large, prominent streets: it is the potential of streets, through their location, to touch and connect disparate social groups that makes naming so controversial.

The National Distribution of MLK Streets

One useful, yet largely unexplored, resource for identifying street naming patterns is electronic telephone directories, which are available online as well as on CD-ROM (Alderman and Good 1996). Using the 1996 *PhoneDisc PowerFinder* database of address records, a nationwide search was conducted for streets named in honor of Martin Luther King. As listed in the *PhoneDisc* database, the names attached to streets varied. In the majority of

cases, street addresses contained King's full name (Dr. Martin Luther King, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Martin Luther King). However, a significant number of streets were listed as simply having MLK and ML King in their names. All conceivable name scenarios were explored.

In total, 483 towns/cities in the US were found to have a named street as of 1996. Figure 2 shows the general location of these streets. MLK streets appear most prevalent in the southeastern US, particularly in the eastern portion of Texas, along the Mississippi River, along the Gulf region, and in what has been termed the "Black Belt" regions of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. However, there are other noteworthy concentrations in California, the north central states of Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Kentucky, and the Middle Atlantic States of New Jersey and Maryland. Naming streets after King is evident across the nation with the exceptions of parts of the New England and West Mountain/Great Plains regions.

In 1996, sixty-seven percent of the nation's MLK streets were located in the six southern states of Georgia, Mississippi, Texas, Louisiana, Florida, and Alabama. When the states of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas were included, the South accounted for 77% of MLK streets. This group of eleven southern states constitutes the study area for this paper's remaining analyses.¹ Georgia and Mississippi led the country with 72 and 65 MLK streets respectively in 1996. When cities with MLK streets as a percentage

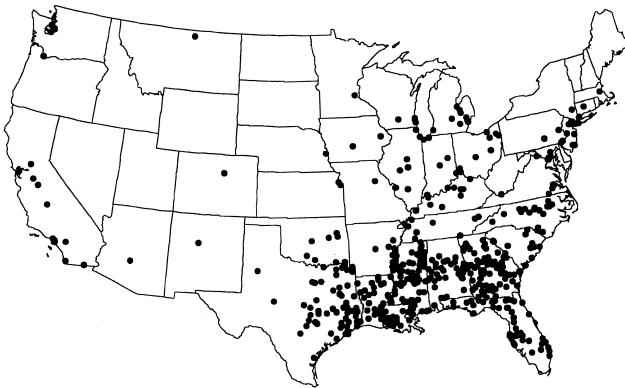


Figure 2: *Distribution of MLK streets in the US, 1996. Source: compiled by the author using PhoneDisc PowerFinder (1996).*

of total census-defined places are examined,² Mississippi leads the nation with the highest rate of street naming (20% of places) followed by Louisiana (13%), Georgia (12%), Alabama (7.4%), Florida (6.2%), and Texas (4.2%). Surprisingly, relative to other southern states, street naming has a rather small presence in South Carolina (3.2% of places), Arkansas (1.6%), Tennessee (2.1%), North Carolina (2.8%), and Virginia (1.4%). While MLK street naming is pronounced in the South, the rate of the movement is not consistently strong throughout the entire region.

MLK Streets along the Southern Urban Hierarchy

In order to examine how MLK street naming might vary by city size within the South, place-based population data were collected from the 1990 US Census for the eleven aforementioned southern states. Figure 3 compares the percentage share of the region's MLK streets within certain population ranges to the percentage share of all places within these same population ranges. When compared to the region's overall urban hierarchy, MLK streets appear to be overrepresented in every population category except the less than 2,500 people category, which is the smallest population range. More than 60% of southern cities with a MLK street have populations of 9,999 or less. The largest share of MLK streets (41%) is found in

places with populations ranging from 2,500 to 9,999. In fact, the median population size of places with a street named after King is 4,909 for Alabama, 5,595 for Georgia, 5,526 for Louisiana, and 4,570 for Mississippi. While MLK streets are clearly underrepresented in the lowest population size range, this should not negate the fact that 20% of all places with an MLK street have populations of less than 2,500. This underrepresentation may result from several factors, ranging from low levels of political/social power of African Americans at this spatial scale to the fact that such places, because of their small size, lack a large enough base of roads from which to name or rename. In summary, while MLK street naming is well represented in larger cities, the toponymic practice is not limited to these areas but is, in fact, a significant part of the cultural landscapes of the nonmetropolitan South.

MLK Streets and Relative Size of African-American Population

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 black population. In order to understand the relationship between street naming and the relative size of a city's black population, data were collected on the racial composition of places in the South with an MLK street. The population of the av-

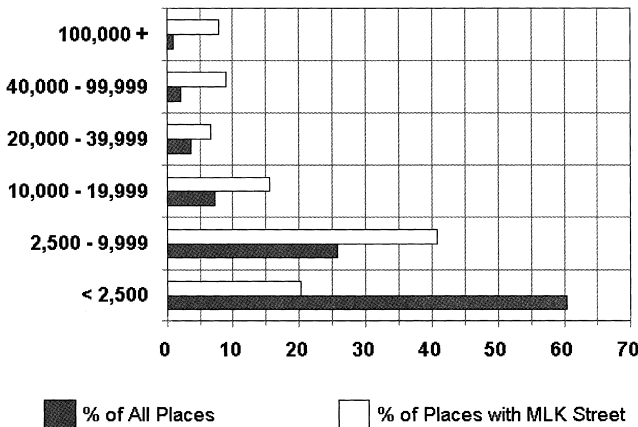


Figure 3: *Distribution of MLK streets in the South by city population size.*

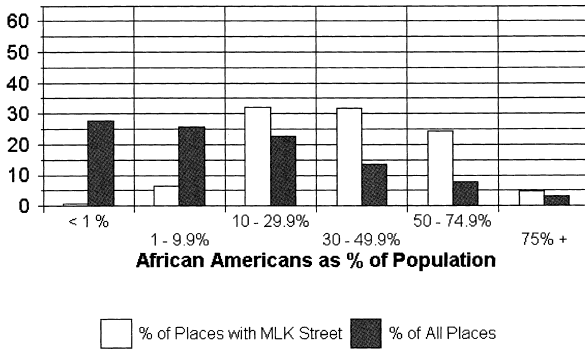


Figure 4: Distribution of MLK streets in the South by relative size of city's African-American population.

erage town/city in the eleven examined southern states is almost 18% African-American. For places with an MLK street in these same states, the African-American population, on average, constitutes about 39% of the local population. Figure 4 examines more closely MLK street naming as distributed among southern towns with similar racial composition. There appears to be an abundance of street naming in all places except where African Americans are less than 10% of the total population. MLK streets are scarce (but still exist) in places in which less than 1% of the population is black. More than 65% of MLK streets in the eleven southern states are in cities where 10% to 49.9% of the population is classified by the census as black. When compared to the relative size of the black population in all places, MLK street naming appears to be most overrepresented in places where the African-American population is at least 30% of the total population.

The Intra-Urban Context of MLK Streets

As established earlier, naming streets after King often revolves around issues of intra-urban location—that is, determining where King's memory is best situated or placed within the city's larger social and economic geography. Despite the importance of these issues, two geographic questions remain unanswered empirically. First, are MLK streets generally located in poor, African-American areas of the city, as suggested by numerous journalists and activists? Second, given the opposition that affected businesses of-

ten pose to street naming, what is the likelihood of non-residential establishments having an address identified with the civil rights leader?

The Residential Character of MLK Streets

The purpose of this section is to describe the residential characteristics of areas on, and surrounding, streets named after King. Specifically, I collected race and income related-data from the 1990 US Census for census areas containing MLK streets and then compared these values with figures for their larger respective cities. The *Tiger/Census Tract Street Index* (Ver. 2) was used to identify census tracts and block numbering areas (BNAs) that contain a street or portions of a street named after Martin Luther King, Jr. Two hundred and twenty census tracts and BNAs in 117 southern cities were identified as containing a MLK street. These census areas were unevenly distributed across nine of the eleven southern states under examination. No named streets were found in the database for Arkansas or Virginia. The *Tiger/Census Tract Street Index* provides census tract/BNA information for more than 74 million individual residential addresses in 3,076 of the 3,141 US counties, representing roughly 70% of all addresses in the country. Coverage within counties ranges from as poor as 10% to better than 90%. Street address information within the digital index is accurate as of April 1, 1990, which greatly limits our ability to locate and identify the census tracts of more recently named streets.

Table 1 summarizes the findings of the analysis. Overall, census areas with an MLK street

Table 1 Comparison of Racial and Income Characteristics, MLK Census Areas vs. Respective Cities

	STATE (Number of Census Tracts/BNAs Containing MLK Street)									
	AL (18)	FL (27)	GA (35)	LA (32)	MS (17)	NC (13)	SC (4)	TN (12)	TX (62)	TOTAL (220)
African-Americans as % of population										
Average for MLK census areas	64	56	79	65	63	82	64	58	59	65
Average for respective cities	41	15	43	39	40	26	38	14	15	28
Percent of MLK census areas > city	83	89	97	88	82	100	100	100	87	90
Total per capita income										
Average for MLK census areas	8,453	9,209	7,789	7,528	7,679	8,672	8,335	8,579	7,524	7,999
Average for respective cities	9,802	12,700	12,006	9,542	9,105	14,565	10,896	12,034	13,006	11,916
Percent of MLK census areas < city	72	78	86	59	53	92	50	83	92	79
Black per capita income										
Average for MLK census areas	7,091	6,634	6,470	4,447	5,076	7,564	6,335	7,266	6,357	6,214
Average for respective cities	6,513	6,698	6,666	5,004	5,130	8,692	5,539	6,928	7,858	6,760
Percent of MLK census areas < city	44	63	60	72	47	69	0	42	81	64
White per capita income										
Average for MLK census areas	11,517	9,978	9,415	12,112	11,292	12,674	11,958	9,139	8,187	10,072
Average for respective cities	12,935	14,789	20,757	14,489	13,822	18,793	16,113	13,657	16,342	16,124
Percent of MLK census areas < city	78	78	86	59	59	92	75	83	94	80

have a significantly larger proportion of African Americans than we would expect from city averages. Specifically, the average MLK census tract/BNA is 65% African American, while the city average is 28%. While this figure points to the location of MLK streets in predominantly African-American parts of the city, it really masks the intensity of this pattern. For instance, 198 (90%) of the 220 census tracts examined had a higher proportion of blacks than their respective cities. Seventy-six (or 35%) of examined census tracts had populations that were 90% or greater African-American. In fact, four census tracts reported as entirely (100%) black. Nonetheless, MLK streets were located in 67 census tracts/BNAs where whites were the majority. This finding prompts us to consider that, while MLK streets in the South are generally located in majority African-American areas of the city (specifically, two-thirds of the time), they are not completely removed from the white community. However, because the coverage of census tracts/BNA is much larger than one street, this still does not disqualify the possibility that the population on these specific streets is indeed largely, if not all, African-American. One hundred percent of MLK census areas in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee have a larger proportion of African Americans than their respective cities. Georgia follows with 97%.

The average total per capita income for an MLK census tract is \$7,999, which is significantly lower than the average city per capita in-

come of \$11,916. This would indicate that MLK streets are located in generally poorer areas of the city. Indeed, 173 (or 79%) of the 220 census tracts/BNAs examined had per capita incomes lower than their respective city's per capita income level. What is less clear from Table 1 is the difference in per capita income for blacks in MLK census areas as compared to overall city averages. Per capita income for African Americans living in census areas containing a street named after King is \$6,214, slightly lower than the average city per capita income for blacks of \$6,760. In the case of Alabama, South Carolina, and Tennessee, per capita income for African Americans in MLK census areas is actually higher than citywide levels of black income. While this evidence may suggest little difference in the income of blacks whether they live in a census tract/BNA with a MLK street or not, it is important to keep in mind that the majority (141 or 64%) of the examined MLK census areas do have black per capita incomes lower than the income level of blacks across their respective cities. In addition, 43 (or 30%) of those 141 census tracts/BNAs have black per capita incomes that are at least \$2,000 lower than the citywide figure for African Americans. The hypothesis that MLK streets are located in generally poorer areas of the city is further substantiated by the marked difference in average per capita income for whites living in MLK census tracts when compared to the average citywide income level for whites.

Overall, whites living in census areas with a MLK street average a per capita income of \$10,072, which is higher than the per capita income for blacks across the city and within MLK census areas but lower than the average city income for whites of \$16,124. Specifically, 177 (80%) of census tracts/BNA have a per capita income for whites lower than the white income level for their respective city. Ironically, at this level of analysis, MLK streets appear to be associated more with lower incomes among whites than among African Americans, which may suggest a closer analysis of class dynamics as they interact with race relations.

These findings should be approached with caution. These census tract/BNA-level data are not at the geographic level of the actual street, and hence we risk false generalizations. Additionally, there is a certain amount of colinearity in the variables examined here. Nevertheless, the findings provide insight into the intra-urban residential context of MLK streets, an insight missing from previous studies and discussions.

The Nonresidential Character of MLK Streets

This section pursues a finer resolution of analysis and examines the frequency of nonresidential institutions found along MLK streets. Using the 1996 *PhoneDisc PowerFinder* database, I determined the number of residences and businesses with an MLK address. *PhoneDisc* defines a "business" broadly as any nonresidential enterprise, including traditional commercial enterprises, associations, schools, physicians, and government organizations. As of 1996, there were 3,564 businesses with MLK addresses in the eleven southern states under examination.

However, these establishments were distributed across the region unevenly, with 1,598 (or 45%) concentrated in five Metropolitan Statistical Areas: Tampa MSA (689), Atlanta MSA (388), Dallas MSA (188), Houston MSA (168), and Fort Myers MSA (165). The states of Florida and Texas alone accounted for 53% of the South's nonresidential MLK addresses found in the database, although they claim only 27% of the region's named streets. In contrast, I found no business addresses in 137 (or 38%) of the 373 southern cities with a MLK street. One hundred and sixty-one (or 43%) of cities in the database had one to three businesses located on these streets. Rather than being as frequent as the number of 3,564 may suggest, the median number of non-residential addresses per city with a MLK street was two.

As a way of estimating the relative extent of nonresidential development along named streets, I calculated the ratio of residences versus businesses with an MLK address. For the nation as a whole, in 1996, there were 2.1 times more residences than businesses located on streets named after King. Within the eleven southern states under examination, the ratio increased to 2.4. Table 2 provides a state by state breakdown of the residential to nonresidential ratio. Only three southern states had MLK streets with a ratio of residence to business smaller than the national norm. Florida had the lowest ratio, with 1.1 more residences with an MLK address than businesses with one. Arkansas's ratio was the second smallest, although the state claimed only 39 residences and 33 businesses located on its eight MLK streets. MLK streets in Texas were also very commercial in nature, with a

Table 2 *Residence to Business Composition of MLK Streets and "Main" Streets, 1996*

State (# of Streets)	MLK Street Address			"Main" Street Address		
	Residential	Business	Ratio	Residential	Business	Ratio
Alabama (35)	811	149	5.4	6,356	3,828	1.7
Arkansas (8)	39	33	1.1	7,114	5,882	1.2
Florida (47)	1,057	935	1.1	8,827	5,418	1.6
Georgia (72)	1,742	744	2.3	7,457	6,524	1.1
Louisiana (51)	1,306	316	4.1	8,566	4,513	1.9
Mississippi (65)	1,299	208	6.2	5,155	3,958	1.3
N. Carolina (17)	480	129	3.7	17,202	13,606	1.3
S. Carolina (11)	74	11	6.7	9,117	9,107	1.0
Tennessee (8)	172	78	2.2	13,167	8,856	1.5
Texas (54)	1,664	958	1.7	25,426	23,739	1.1
Virginia (5)	17	3	5.6	11,967	11,102	1.1
Region	8,661	3,564	2.4	120,354	96,533	1.2

Source: Compiled by author from PhoneDisc PowerFinder (1996).

ratio of 1.7 to 1.0. Georgia and Tennessee had ratios close to the regional norm, although Georgia had far more named streets and businesses located on such streets. Six southern states had ratios of residence to business larger than the regional ratio of 2.4. South Carolina had the largest, with 6.7 times more residences located on MLK streets than businesses. However, South Carolina had only eleven named streets, with 74 residences and eleven businesses located on them. MLK streets in Mississippi, Alabama, and Virginia were much more residential in nature than the national or regional norm, with ratios of 6.2, 5.4, and 5.6 to 1.0 respectively. Louisiana followed these states with 4.1 times more residences than businesses, and North Carolina with 3.7 times more residences than businesses.

In order to provide a way of comparing the commercial composition of MLK streets relative to another street found in many cities, I calculated the ratio of residences to businesses located on “Main” streets in each state, which is also presented in Table 2. These streets, by name, denote streets of central importance—the notion of a “main” street is a central fixture in American urban culture and society. In some instances, however, a city’s main thoroughfare is not literally “Main” Street but a street of some other name, such as “Broad.” Nevertheless, when compared to the stereotypical American thoroughfare of “Main” Street, MLK streets appear to be much more residential in nature. For example, the ratio of residences to businesses on MLK streets in Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi exceeded “Main” street ratios of residences to businesses by as much as 3 times, 2 times, and 4 times respectively. The exceptions appear to be Arkansas and Florida, whose ratio of residences to businesses on MLK streets was actually lower than the ratio for their respective state’s “Main” streets. Overall, MLK streets in southern states were twice as residential as those states’ “Main” streets, although varying greatly from state to state. The similarity (or dissimilarity) of MLK streets to “Main” streets may be an indication of the relative prominence or prestige of these named streets.

Concluding Remarks

African Americans—who are migrating back to the South and are more likely to identify

themselves as southerners than in the past (Cobb 1996)—are reshaping public representation of the region’s past and their relative importance within that past. The commemoration of Martin Luther King, Jr. plays a pivotal role in the historical reconnection of black southerners to the American South. While fighting for such universal ideals as racial equality and social justice, the civil rights movement was initially about establishing a more equitable place for blacks within southern society. Although eventually a figure of national and international importance, King began his career as a southern pastor and activist. As evident in the words of Alice Walker, the civil rights leader is remembered for helping black southerners restore their sense of place and identity: “He (King) gave us back our heritage. He gave us back our homeland, the bones and dust of our ancestors. . . . He gave us continuity of place, without which community is ephemeral. He gave us home” (quoted in Cobb 1999, 129-30).

The naming of streets after Martin Luther King is an important arena for African Americans as they rewrite the landscape of southern identity and commemoration. While less ornate and ostentatious than museums and monuments, MLK streets are powerful and highly contested cultural geographies because of their potential to connect disparate communities and incorporate a vision of the past into the spatial practices of everyday life. They reveal the importance of location, particularly intraurban location, to public commemoration. The politics of commemorating King in the American South are not simply struggles over convincing the public of his historical legitimacy.³ Rather, street naming is about how collective memories and representations of MLK are constructed and realized through various geographic contexts. By establishing the unique nature of street naming as a form of commemoration, I have hopefully provided the rationale for more work, not only on the toponymic commemoration of King, but also on other street naming patterns that would otherwise have been neglected.

MLK streets provide windows into, not only the importance of the person being commemorated, but also society’s relative progress in fulfilling the civil rights leader’s “dream” of racial equality and social integration. On the one hand, these streets do reflect empowerment

among blacks. The presence of so many such streets across the South's urban hierarchy and in places where blacks have a significant presence is perhaps evidence of this. However, as poignantly pointed out in a recent newspaper article evaluating named streets as symbols of unity and equality, "[h]is [King's name] is on streets just about everywhere . . . everywhere except the white part of town. . . . The geographical reality of King's asphalt legacy is more about boundaries than about bridges" (Osinski 1999, A1). When one attempts to define the intra-urban context of King's commemoration within several southern states, findings suggest that MLK streets are located—whether by choice or by force—in census areas that are generally poorer and with more African Americans than citywide averages. However, income levels for African Americans in MLK census areas are not low across the board, prompting us to reconsider the widely held belief that named streets are in the most depressed parts of southern cities and towns.

While MLK streets are less commercially oriented than some may wish, they are not totally devoid of business and other nonresidential enterprises. However, analysis did reveal unevenness in the geographic frequency of businesses with an MLK address. When compared with the stereotypical American thoroughfare of "Main" Street, the address composition of MLK streets appear to be much more residential in nature, although there is significant state by state variation. Future work should examine the type of enterprises and entrepreneurs identified with MLK streets in order to fully measure the degree to which these streets "bridge" different racial groups and economic classes or simply reinforce traditional social "boundaries."

The findings presented here provide only a general insight into the spatial extent and nature of a new commemorative movement in the American South. We will find the larger cultural geography of MLK streets by recognizing and exploring the diversity of named streets and adopting a more critical framework. An important barrier to developing a more critical study of commemorative street naming, and place naming overall, has been the scant attention given to the intra-urban locational conflicts that make up the toponymic process. A focus on the locational politics of MLK street

naming would examine how named streets fit into the material and symbolic geography of their respective cities, how the street name's location is open to a number of different meanings among the local population, and how local political actors and groups struggle and negotiate with each other over finding a street fit for commemorating Martin Luther King, Jr. ■

Notes

¹ It is virtually impossible to devise a universally accepted definition of the South. These states were chosen because of past association with the Confederacy and the intense commemorative politics resulting from this association and their role in the early civil rights movement.

² The Census Bureau recognizes two kinds of places: incorporated places, and census-designated places (CDPs), which are locally recognized settled population centers by name.

³ In fact, a 1996 *Southern Focus Poll* of 1,222 adults nationwide showed that over 80% of southern respondents said they admired MLK somewhat (*Southern Focus Poll* 1996).

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