

CREATING A NEW GEOGRAPHY OF MEMORY IN THE SOUTH:  
(RE)NAMING OF STREETS IN HONOR OF  
MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.<sup>1</sup>

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The (re) naming of streets in honor of slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. is quickly becoming a common yet controversial feature on the southern urban landscape. This new trend in place-naming reflects efforts by African Americans to create a new geography of memory in a region where much of its landscape has long been used and reserved for remembering (and memorializing) primarily white-controlled and dominated conceptions of the past. This paper articulates a theoretical framework for understanding the struggles that local African-American communities face in the street-(re)naming process. The controversy surrounding MLK street (re)naming can be analyzed in relation to three interrelated struggles: (1) the politics of place-naming, the struggle of African Americans to inscribe their ideological values and aspirations about race relations into the symbolism of place-names; (2) the politics of memory, the struggle of African Americans to reconstruct the region's collective memory of the past through commemoration; and (3) the politics of space and scale, the struggle of African Americans to engage in commemoration of King as it is affected by the long-standing authority of whites to control the scale of black expression and mobilization, black attitudes toward space, and the politics of designing the city. This paper attempts to build a greater understanding of how geography constitutes and structures the production of memory within society.

Traditionally, symbolic space in the South was reserved largely for remembrance and commemoration of the region's role in the Civil War and the mythic "Old South" plantation lifestyle supposedly lost as a result of that conflict. These memories are deeply ingrained into the region's symbology in the form of monuments, historical markers, and place names (Winberry, 1983; Gulley, 1990; Radford, 1992; Gulley, 1993). Recently, however, Civil War-centered conceptions of the past and their primacy over the cultural landscape have been increasingly challenged, particularly by African Americans (Webster and Webster, 1994). For example, in Georgia, these feelings have culminated into a campaign to remove the Confederate battle emblem from the state flag (Leib, 1995). Meanwhile, a movement has begun to create a new "geography of memory," one that would commemorate the historical experiences, struggles, and achievements of African Americans. An important component in this new geography of memory are monuments honoring another, quite different, revolution from that of the Civil War—the Civil Rights Movement.

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A major pillar in the commemoration of the movement is the remembrance of slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK). With the exception of the establishment of a national holiday in 1983, the most conspicuous celebration of MLK is the King Center for Non-Violent Social Change and the surrounding "Sweet Auburn Avenue" historical district in Atlanta, Georgia.<sup>2</sup> A more subtle yet no less important strategy for honoring King has been the attaching of his name to schools, hospitals, parks, and streets. The (re) naming of streets is perhaps the most widespread form of this toponymic commemoration. Using the *1987 National Five-Digit Zip Code and Post Office Directory*, Stump (1988) found 47 cities in the 11 states of the Old Confederacy that had (re) named streets in King's honor. This figure was updated using the 1994 edition of that same directory. Thirty-seven more southern cities have named a street after Dr. King since 1987, thus bringing the total to 84.<sup>3</sup>

MLK street (re) naming can contribute a new chapter in the study of the territorial basis of African-American mobilization and southern race relations.<sup>4</sup> This emerging trend in place-naming represents efforts by African Americans to construct a *new geography of public memory and history* in a region where much of its landscape has long been used and reserved for remembering (and memorializing) primarily white-controlled and dominated conceptions of the past. However, characterizing and interpreting this new geography of memory is a difficult task. On the one hand, the increasing presence of King streets perhaps reflects the growing political and social power of African Americans in post-Civil Rights Era South. Indeed, the (re) naming of streets often takes place when black people control local government or mobilize to petition their local governments. In this sense, these streets may very well serve as positive symbols for southern black communities. On the other hand, in attempting to commemorate King, African Americans also have confronted harsh opposition, particularly in small- and medium-size towns where black political influence often is limited.<sup>5</sup> The streets (or parts of streets) that are (re) named for King are in many instances deserted, run-down, dead-ends, or small side roads located entirely within the black community (*The Atlanta Journal/Constitution*, 15 October, 1993). The use of degraded and obscure streets to keep the memory of MLK. alive has, in some instances, changed the street's symbolic meaning from being a point of African-American pride and identity to what one news reporter has referred to as a "Boulevard of Broken Dreams," yet another reminder of continued social inequality and cultural repression (*The Atlanta Journal/Constitution*, 14 January, 1995).

*PURPOSE.* Despite the increasing frequency and seemingly controversial nature of naming streets in tribute to Dr. King, social scientists (particularly geographers) have devoted little direct attention to documenting the occurrence of this new cultural phenomenon, unraveling the political issues and struggles associated with

the street-naming process, or determining the place that these street (re)namings have in the cultural experiences of African Americans and southern whites. In order for any substantial research to be done in this area, a body of theory must be introduced that attempts to address some of these emerging issues.

The purpose of this paper is to articulate a theoretical framework for understanding the social meaning of MLK street (re)naming and the political struggles that local African-American communities face in the place-(re)naming process. Although this paper is not intended as a case study, some mention will be made of the street-(re)naming process in Eatonton and Athens, Georgia, by way of illustrating certain conceptual points.<sup>6</sup> African-American communities in both cities were unable to get a major thoroughfare renamed. King's name was attached, subsequently, to less prominent streets confined primarily to black residential areas. In discussing these examples, I hope to provide some insight into the role of southern blacks in creating this new cultural geography, the controversies and struggles they face, and the ultimate locations which these streets occupy.

This paper argues that King street (re)naming can be analyzed in relation to three interrelated struggles: (1) the politics of place-naming; (2) the politics of memory; and (3) the politics of space and scale. In presenting the politics of place-naming, I propose that MLK street (re)naming be studied as a symbolic and political device used in resisting and redefining the ideological basis of race relations within the South. This theme integrates traditional place-name theory with some ideas advocated by the new "critical" school of cultural geography. Politics of memory is a theme drawn from collective memory theory in sociology. It is argued here that King street (re)naming is a commemorative activity used by African Americans in their attempt to reconstruct the region's collective memory. The street-naming process is limited by competing representations and constructions of the past. The third theme refers to an approach that emphasizes the socially constructed and politically contestable nature of scale and space. Collective memory theorists, although not ignoring geography altogether, nevertheless have treated it in an unsatisfactory manner. King street (re)naming offers an opportunity to investigate how the politics of producing memory are played out in, and shaped by, the politics of producing scale and space.

*UNDERSTANDING MLK STREET (RE)NAMING.* Geographers have shown great interest in studying the origin and meaning of place names, or toponymy. Underlying most toponymic studies is the assumption that much can be learned about people from the names they attach to places such as parks, buildings, cities, or streets. Place names are of analytical significance because they are interpreted as symbols, portions of the landscape to which people attach meaning and from which they draw group identity. Stump (1988) aptly explained the social scientific value of studying toponymic commemorations of Martin Luther King, Jr.:

The places named for . . . King thus represent more than simple memorials. They are public symbols of community values, attitudes and beliefs, revealing the character of both the figure commemorated and the community that has honored him. Examination of patterns in the use of such placenames therefore offers insights into significant variations within the American social landscape (p. 215).

*The Politics of Place Naming.* As symbols, place names reflect and embody ideologies. They are essential to understanding the political landscape (Zelinsky, 1983; 1988). Contemporary researchers have come to view place naming as a critical part of the political process, as symbolic tools used to uphold or contest the legitimacy of competing national and cultural ideologies (Cohen and Klot, 1992; Yeoh, 1992). In other words, place names are often politicized, i.e., imputed with political meaning and an ideological message. This paper proposes that MLK street (re)naming should be analyzed or interpreted in terms of the "politics of place-naming," i.e., the political control, struggle and negotiation interwoven with inscribing ideologies in cultural landscapes through the symbolism of place names.

The new "critical" school of cultural geography uses Gramsci's (1985) concept of hegemony to explain how the production of cultural landscapes serve ideological interests (Jackson, 1989, Ch. 3). Hegemony refers to the fact that the dominant social group or class controls the production of cultural space in order to persuade subordinate groups to accept its ideology as "common sense" or the "natural order." However, the dominance of one form of consciousness is never complete and is challenged by the counter-hegemonic ideologies of subordinate groups. Resistance sometimes is openly confrontational, but most often is symbolic. Symbolic resistance involves "the appropriation of certain artifacts and significations from the dominant culture and their transformation into symbolic forms that take on new meaning and significance" for the subordinate social group (Cosgrove and Jackson, 1987, p. 99).

Our understanding of King streets could be broadened greatly by integrating traditional place-name research—with its emphasis on the symbolic and ideological value of place naming—with the new cultural geography and its emphasis on the role played by cultural landscapes in maintaining or challenging the ideological basis of hegemonic social systems. I propose that MLK street (re)naming represents an attempt by African Americans, as a subordinate social group, to appropriate and transform a part of the material culture of the dominant group (street names) in order to contest and redefine the prevailing white-centered southern ideology. By placing King's name on street signs, which are indexed and referred to every day, African Americans perhaps are hoping to refashion local populations' consciousness and advocate an ideology of race relations that will bring a greater recognition of their value and aspirations.<sup>7</sup>

Preliminary evidence indicates that African-American communities are cognizant of the larger ideological meaning behind King street (re)naming and its significance in reshaping the social (attitudinal) atmosphere of the region. For instance, on October 18, 1990, a small group of African-American citizens in the small town of Eatonton, Georgia, petitioned the city council for a major thoroughfare to be renamed in honor of King. News Editor Gary Jones of *The Eatonton Messenger* reported the proceedings:

Members of the group told the council that they felt renaming a major road through the city would “set a good tone for the city and the community” (p. A1).

When African Americans have faced white resistance to the (re)naming process, they have related this opposition to the protection of the southern ideology of racism and whites’ unwillingness to embrace a greater African-American cultural/political influence. Reverend E. J. O’Neal, past president of the Ministerial Alliance of Griffin, Georgia, found great resistance in the white community when he and his coalition attempted, unsuccessfully, to have a busy downtown street named after King. Reverend O’Neal described the situation to *Atlanta Journal/Constitution* reporter Hollis Towns as follows:

The bottom line is race . . . . White folks can’t stand riding along a street named after somebody black . . . . It’s a shame that in 1993 we still have to fight to get just recognition from white folks (p. F1).

*The Politics of Memory.* Sociologists, particularly collective-memory theorists, have devoted considerable attention to defining the link between ideology and memory and the role that commemoration plays in society (Halbwachs, 1980; Schwartz et al., 1986; Schudson, 1989; Schwartz, 1990; Halbwachs, 1992).<sup>8</sup> They assert that while the mechanics of remembering or forgetting the past certainly lie with individual memory, it is by and large a socially directed matter (Halbwachs, 1980, p. 22). Many of our recollections of the past are “collective memories” that society constructs and transmits to us. Schwartz (1991) described in detail how memories are constructed socially:

Every member of society, even the oldest, learns most of what he [sic] knows about the past through social institutions—through oral chronicles preserved by tradition, written chronicles stored in archives, and commemorative activities (making portraits, statues, shrines, collecting relics, *naming places*, observing holidays and anniversaries) that enable institutions to distinguish significant

events from the mundane, and so infuse the past with moral meaning. These processes, chronicling and commemoration, constitute the subject matter of collective memory research (p. 302, emphasis added).

Commemoration plays a vital role in constituting and guiding the social construction of collective memory. The past is made "memorable" (made into a memory) through commemorative activities, of which place naming is perhaps one of the most common and accessible by people.

Society's collective memory of past constantly is being reconstructed in a way that will serve present social needs and ideological interests. However, while the past is reconstructed to serve present interests, the reconstruction process is not done freely without some constraints (Schudson, 1989). People's ability to reconstruct society's collective memory is limited by competition and conflict with other people wishing to refashion the past in a different way. "Control of the past is disputed and the past becomes a contested terrain" (Schudson, 1989, p. 112), because social groups have vested interest in competing for control of the past. The transmission of a commonly accepted conception of history is vital to the legitimation of established social and political orders. By the same token, the overthrow of existing social orders requires the creation and diffusion of new, alternative interpretations of the past. The potential struggle and contest over whose conception of the past will prevail constitutes the *politics of memory*.

I propose that King street (re)naming represents an attempt by African Americans to redefine the ideological basis of race relations within the South through the reconstruction of the region's collective memory. Just as the ideology of racism has attendant conceptions of the past that characterize the perceived inferiority and dependency of African Americans, southern blacks must reconstruct the collective memory in a way that perpetuates an ideology of race relations that recognizes and appreciates the African-American struggle for equality, integration, and freedom from repression. This desire to reconstruct the collective memory is quite obvious in Fanny Pearl Farley's plea to have a major road in Eatonton named after King: "This person [Dr. King] helped each of us" (*The Eatonton Messenger*, 18 October, 1990, A1). However, Farley's request was denied and a smaller street confined within the black community was (re)named.

African Americans' ability to fully reconstruct the South's collective memory through street (re)naming is constrained by competition and resistance from other people, particularly whites, also seeking to define the collective memory. The pattern of street naming is shaped by a politics of memory, a struggle over the legitimacy of certain conceptions and representations of the past. The comment of a white citizen against street-(re)naming illustrates the use of interpretations of the past to contest the ideological legitimacy of King streets:

We don't need any streets named after King. He was a troublemaker and a Communist . . . I don't think he's worth a street name (*The Atlanta Journal/Constitution*, 15 October, 1993, F1).

In the past few years, the South has become a region where the "politics of memory" are particularly evident, not only in the struggles over street (re) naming but across the whole southern landscape. As mentioned in the introduction, the South has seen the political reevaluation and contestation of traditional, Civil War-based commemorative structures and the conceptions of the past they memorialize. This notion of creating a new geography of African-American memory must be examined in relation to corollary attempts to "de-Confederalize" the cultural landscape. For example, Jefferson Davis Middle School (in San Antonio, Texas) was renamed to honor S. J. Davis, a local black civic hero, the reasoning being that the name of the president of the Confederacy should not be attached to a school with 95% nonwhite attendance (*The Atlanta Journal/Constitution*, 7 March, 1993). Again, we find ideology guiding decisions of what constitutes legitimate and illegitimate conceptions and representations of the past. King street (re) naming and other new geographies of African-American memory are perhaps intimately tied to removing Confederate symbols from the landscape. In order for black southerners to fully reconstruct the region's collective memory, they must also produce what Burke (1989) termed "social amnesia." In addition to trying to place a respectful image of King in the social memory of southerners, African Americans are also attempting to persuade Southerners to forget certain conceptions of the past that go against the grain of a new ideology of race relations advocated by blacks. Quite possibly, King street naming, particularly renaming, is a struggle that centers around the *politics of forgetting* as well as a *politics of remembering*.

White Southerners perhaps feel threatened, not just by the memory of King and the ideology of race relations he embodied but also because they fear the changes in the existing commemorative landscape that may accompany MLK street (re) naming. However, while intensifying white resistance, this larger struggle over symbols has actually worked to help draw the lines of battle and encourage black southerners to mobilize for change necessary to initiate street (re) naming. Jim Auchmuty described such a situation in his article "The Symbol War" (*The Atlanta Journal/Constitution*, 7 March, 1993):

Will Smith was up to his elbows in grease when the phone rang at his garage in southeast Atlanta. He dropped his tools and scrambled to answer it. "You know any Klan people down there?" sneered the voice on the other end. That did it. Mr. Smith, who is black, had never thought much of his business until Georgians began scrapping over the state flag. Now he decided it was time to change his shingle

from the Confederate Avenue Garage to Smith's Garage. When a neighbor came around trying to start a movement to drop the street name entirely, he said to count him in (p. A1).

*The Politics of Space and Scale.* Collective memory theorists have long recognized the importance of space to memory, particularly the significance of physical surroundings as reminders and reinforcers of memories (Feeley-Harnik, 1991). Commemorative space functions as a fixed symbolic structure with an inertia that resists and restricts changes in the production of memory (Halbwachs, 1980). Schudson (1989) spoke to this idea of the spatial fixity of memory as well when he described how the past is not reconstructed freely because attempts to remove commemorative landscapes (e.g., museums, plaques, statues) often "create public controversy that revives rather than erases memory" (p. 109). This is an important point that applies to our understanding of King street naming.

Attempts to reconstruct the region's collective memory through King street (re) naming are perhaps limited by the sheer fact that existing street names have what Schudson (1989) referred to as their own "self-perpetuating rhetorical power" and therefore are resistant to change. Ironically, at the same time that King street (re) naming is attempting to reconstruct the collective memory around certain conceptions of the past, the process is intensifying competing claims on the past from the traditional definers of the collective memory. After considering this, it is clear to see why King street naming, particularly renaming, faces such difficult obstacles and African Americans often fail to have prominent, well established streets renamed. Southern blacks are sensitive to the public controversy and reaction that renaming brings, as evidenced by the stance taken by Eatonton's black community at a city council meeting. Gary Jones reported:

The group told the council that they considered the bypass a good thoroughfare to rename [sic] in honor of Dr. King since it didn't have a name and it wouldn't involve renaming a street that some people may object to (*The Eatonton Messenger*, 18 October, 1990, A1).

While insightful, this treatment of geography is somewhat limited. Collective-memory theorists fail to fully realize the politically contestable and contradictory nature of space and have not conceptualized how scale, also a struggle over construction, affects the production of memory. King street (re) naming is a phenomenon demonstrative of how the politics of space and scale figure directly into the politics of redefining the South's collective memory and its ideology of race relations.

Space is a social product whose production and reproduction is open to contradiction, conflict, and transformation (Harvey, 1985; Soja, 1985; Soja, 1989;



Lefebvre, 1991; Herod, 1991a). The *politics of space* refers to the struggle, negotiation, and control between social groups as they compete for production and control of space (Agnew, 1987; Mitchell, 1992; Routledge, 1992; Hannah, 1993; Hershkovitz, 1993; Kong, 1993). Scale also is a contestable social construction (Smith, 1984; Smith and Denis, 1987; Herod, 1991b). Scale is actively produced as the “geographical resolution of processes of cooperation and competition between and among social groups” (Herod, 1991b). Because scale is forged out of social cooperation and competition, there is a certain politics to its production. This politics of scale, like the politics of space, constitutes and structures social relations.

Collective memories of the past, like all cultural products, are not just geographically expressed but spatially constituted. The social struggles that surround the construction and control of space affect struggles over the construction and control of the past. Specifically, I argue that the ability of African Americans to reconstruct/elevate the region’s collective memory of King (and hence redefine the ideological structure of race relations) is affected by the “politics of space and scale” in three ways. First, the commemoration of King through street (re) naming is affected by white attempts to protect scale, to ensure a dual, segregated spatial structure, and to protect the power they have traditionally held in controlling the extent of African-American mobilization and expression. Second, the commemoration of King through street (re) naming is affected by the attachment of blacks to existing street names and conflict among blacks over what they perceive or define as the “appropriate” space or street to honor King. Third, the commemoration of King through street (re) naming is affected by the fact that changes in the production of space within cities involves a government-directed process with procedures and professionals who mediate and, in fact, shape the design of urban space and hence the construction of memory.

*Memory and the Protection of Scale by Whites.* When African-American communities use King street (re) naming to reconstruct the region’s collective memory, they do so in a region long predicated on the construction and perpetuation of unequal and segregated spaces. Despite the removal of legal, political, and some economic barriers by the Civil Rights movement, the South still is operating in many ways, socially and culturally, within a Jim Crow-style geography that defines the very extent to which African Americans can organize and struggle for space. At the heart of the production and maintenance of Jim Crow space is the construction and policing of geographic scale, i.e., certain activities by blacks are allowed in certain places as long as they do not penetrate past the scale of the black community and disrupt segregated space. This pre-existing notion of a proper and an improper scale of black mobilization and expression is evident in decisions and struggles over street-naming. Stump (1988) cited an example of this:

In 1972 the City Commission of Montgomery, Alabama, voted to name seven blocks of a city street after King, in response to a petition by 10,000 blacks. Within two weeks the Commission rescinded this action under pressure from white opponents to the change . . . . This objection derived in part from the fact that, although the street in question ran through a black residential area, it also contained white-owned businesses and white Masonic lodge . . . . They indicated that they would not object if a street located entirely within the black community were named after King (p. 210).

In the cases of Eatonton and Athens, Georgia, no opposition from the white community was offered when the street (re)named was limited or confined in scale to the "black area" of each town (*Athens-Clarke County Planning Department Records; Eatonton City Hall Records*). Conflict arose, however, when African Americans attempted to (re)designate a street outside the scale of the black community. The struggle to have a major road named after King that cuts through and joins the white and black communities is difficult not only because it involves challenging existing race-based conceptions and representations of the past but also because it involves challenging the authority of whites to control the scale at which blacks can mobilize and express themselves. While the legal framework of segregation is gone, white control of scale continues to exist and is now perhaps hindering the location of MLK streets outside the traditional boundaries of black neighborhoods.

The production and control of geographic scale is critical to the African-American reconstruction of the region's past. In order for black Southerners truly to redefine the Southern collective memory (especially of Southern whites) the scale at which King is commemorated through street (re) naming must be constructed outside the confines of the African-American community. King street (re) naming should be conceptualized as an African-American struggle to create and control the scale of collective memory, which is of large importance in determining whether or not they fully redefine the ideology of race relations in the South. While King streets are new developments upon the landscape and in the politics of race relations, the controversy and difficulties surrounding the street (re) naming process is endemic of a much larger and older problem facing African Americans as they attempt to seize control of the production of space within the city.

*Memory and Black Attitudes Toward Space.* While the spatially based attitudes of whites is of paramount importance, one should not fail to consider how the construction of King's memory is being affected by the attitudes of African Americans toward the reorganization of space within the city. African Americans hold strong, sometimes confrontational, feelings about what types of streets

should serve as the location of King's memory. Athens, Georgia, provides an excellent example of how the proposed location for a King street sparked a reaction from members of the black community and hence affected the politics of reconstructing the city's collective memory:

Excerpt of letter sent to CEO and Commissioners of Athens-Clarke County Unified Government from "Reese Street Concerned Citizens" (June 1992):

We are concerned citizens of Reese Street and Athens-Clarke County . . . we are opposed to the Athens Human Relations Council's request to change the name of Reese Street to Martin Luther King, Jr. in honor of such an outstanding humanitarian. As stated in our presentation at your June 2nd meeting, we are not opposed to the idea but we are greatly opposed to the location that was chosen for a variety of reasons. We feel that a main street or highway should be named in his honor instead of an unknown street in a drug infested area . . . The majority of us are Senior Citizens and have been homeowners for over forty (40) years on Reese Street and we are *OPPOSED* to the request to change the name (*Athens-Clarke County Planning Department Records*).

Because of this protest by Reese Street Concerned Citizens (a neighborhood coalition of largely African-American home and property owners), the Athens-Clarke County government was forced to look elsewhere for a street to be (re)named. The Reese Street campaign is an excellent example of how the commemoration of King is affected by black attitudes about what constitutes an "appropriately prominent and moral space" in which to house the memory of Martin Luther King, Jr.

However, the controversy over where to commemorate King did not end with Reese Street. When Loretta Scott, an African-American homeowner, was notified through the Athens-Clarke County government that her street's name would be renamed, she wrote a letter illustrating how the importance and significance of commemorating King was intimately linked to the type of space used to symbolize and display the memory of King:

Excerpt of Letter from Loretta Scott to CEO and Commissioners of Athens-Clarke County Unified Government (August 4, 1992).

I respect what Dr. King stood for and [it] is definitely for human rights for all, but I think it is an injustice to his name

to want to name any street at random after him and feel something has been accomplished. I think the use of Dr. King's name should have purpose and reflect some important change that is taking place. The residents on the streets feel some sense of loyalty to their present [street] names because of their long existence and family heritage. I disagree with the change (*Athens-Clarke County Planning Department Records*).

Ms. Scott's statement also draws our attention to the attachment that blacks have toward existing street names and their resistance to the (re)naming process. I have found preliminary evidence of blacks opposing the (re)naming of their street after King on the grounds of financial and emotional attachment to their current street address. Below are two letters written by elderly African Americans in protest of having their street renamed.

Letter to Athens-Clarke County Planning Department (August 2, 1992):

In regards to the proposed change of name of Hobson Avenue and Water Street, I want to voice my opposition to such a change. I have lived here some 40 years and do not wish to see such a change. I am a widow and cannot drive to change addresses and other related hardships that would occur with the proposed change (*Athens-Clarke County Planning Department Records*).

Letter to Athens-Clarke County Planning Department (August 3, 1992):

I am an elderly property owner. I got the letter of a change in name for Hobson Avenue. I have been here 50 years and like things how they are now. My folks lived here . . . and this name means home. If you change the name many people away will not recognize the name. Please do not change (*Athens-Clarke County Planning Department Records*).

The previous section hypothesized about how white attitudes toward the production and protection of space affects the politics of commemorating King. This section has suggested that the attitudes and perceptions of African Americans toward space also affects the King street (re)naming process and hence the ability to reconstruct the city's collective memory. Space is a variable of critical

importance in the politics of constructing memory to the extent that African Americans are willing to oppose and even protest the (re)naming of a street after King when: (1) the selected street is not a space of great prominence or reflective of proper moral values and (2) the proposed street affects or endangers the financial and emotional attachment and link that African Americans have with existing street names.

*Memory and The Politics of Designing the City.* The decision to honor King through street (re)naming is a process that must go through the channels of the city's political structure and perhaps is susceptible to the influences and movements of government policies and guidelines which constantly guide the designing of urban space. For instance, in Athens, all requests for making a street-name change are forwarded to the planning department, which is required to submit a report and recommendation to the planning commission. The planning commission then is required to submit a report to the county commissioners, who then hold a public hearing and finally vote on the proposed street-name change (*Athens-Clarke County Planning Department Records*). The renaming of a street after King is not simply a matter of struggling against competing conceptions of the past but involves, perhaps more importantly, struggling against a governmental decision-making framework that is inherently conservative and methodical in implementing changes in the spatial structure of the city. Consider the potential places where the politics of commemorating King could be slowed, if not stopped, as it is negotiated through the many layers of agencies and regulations involved in designing and planning the city.

An important component in the politics of designing the urban landscape is the decisions of professional spatial agents—local government officials and/or design professionals—who often have the authority (whether legitimately gained or not) to shape how space within the city should be designed, used, and policed. As Cuff (1989) pointed out, these professionals and activists often unknowingly create “mirrors of power,” physical artifacts that reflect and renew the dominant social order rather than actually revising or rewriting it. Although these decision-makers may believe that they are fulfilling the goals of the community, they actually can assist the community's adversaries and lead the community to conflict.

King street (re)naming in Athens offers an example of how the political decisions of individual spatial agents have evoked negative response from members of the African-American community and hence shaped the politics that surrounded the commemoration of King. As noted earlier, the coalition “Concerned Citizens of Reese Street” protested the proposed street name change suggested by the Athens Human Relations Council, a civic organization devoted to improving race relations within the city. In their June 1992 letter to the CEO and Commissioners of Athens-Clarke County Unified Government, Concerned

Citizens of Reese Street had this to say about the Athens Human Relations Council and their role in choosing a street for the commemoration of King:

As citizens, property owners, and homeowners, we feel that we should be heard! Let it also be a part of the record that not a single member of Athens Human Relations Council is a resident of Reese Street (to our knowledge). These are merely "outsiders" looking in (*Athens-Clarke County Planning Department Records*).

The relationship between Reese Street residents and the Athens Human Relations Council pushes us to consider how the politics of commemorating King is shaped by conflicts between well-intending yet "outside" professional spatial agents and the potentially impacted neighborhood. Rather than simply being an issue of how and where to publicly remember King, the politics of street (re) naming is perhaps being affected by a much larger and older geographical struggle over who should be directing and controlling the re-identification of urban space.

Athens' Loretta Scott voiced much of this same concern when she protested the renaming of her street after King. In addition to being concerned about the need to rename a more prominent street, she also expressed concern over how this important decision had been made by one professional spatial agent (a county commissioner) without consulting the residents who would be affected by the street name change. Specifically, she wrote, in a letter to the CEO and Commissioners of Athens-Clarke County, August 4, 1992:

I am just a bit concerned in the fact that the person that recommended the change does not live on either of the streets and has not consulted the property owners that do live on the named streets (*Athens-Clarke County Planning Department Records*).

The political alienation felt in Athens is perhaps felt by many African-American communities as they struggle to have a voice in the street (re) naming process. A sound theory to explain MLK street (re) naming would have to consider how the politics of commemorating King are not simply disputes over the legitimacy (or illegitimacy) of certain memories of the past. More importantly, MLK street (re) naming also is affected by the politics inherent in designing the city, specifically: (1) the array of government procedures and agencies through which proposals for street (re) naming must travel and (2) the sometimes contradictory and abrasive role that professional spatial agents play in influencing how urban space will be constructed and identified.

**CONCLUSION.** Although King streets occupy a rather small part of actual earth-space, they occupy a much larger symbolic place in the lives of African Americans

and Southern whites. MLK streets likely serve as conduits through which black Southerners are attempting to establish and communicate a new set of ideological values about race relations and the position of African Americans within society. King street (re) naming also can be understood as an attempt to create a new frame of historical reference for Southerners, particularly whites. Reconstruction of the past is essential for the redefinition of the ideology of race relations. African Americans are limited in their ability to reconstruct the region's memory of King because they struggle against long-established, competing collective memories and their attendant commemorative structures. Finally, the politics of commemorating King through street (re) naming are structured by the power of geography—specifically, the enduring legacy of segregation, as it controls the scale of southern black cultural expression, the attitudes of African Americans as they consider the financial, emotional, and symbolic implications of where to locate King's memory, and the friction between professional spatial decision-makers and impacted black neighborhoods.

There are a number of issues and questions that this paper did not address but which warrant investigation in future studies. The first issue concerns the role of whites in the King street (re) naming process. Should Southern whites always be seen as adversaries to commemorating King? If not, what cooperative role do whites play in the politics of street (re) naming? It is possible that some white resistance to street (re) naming is linked less to racist attitudes and more to strong emotional and financial attachments to existing street names, such as this paper found among blacks. If white resistance is not motivated entirely by race, what is it about the image of King as a leader or hero that disturbs whites? Resistance to King's commemoration perhaps could be attributed to the period in which he lived and died. Presumably, the 1960s was a post-heroic age in which there were declines in the prestige even of traditional heroes such as Lincoln, Washington, and Franklin D. Roosevelt. The second issue concerns the role of African Americans in MLK street (re) naming. To what extent do African Americans actually view the street-naming process as an ideological weapon against an oppressive white cultural structure? Perhaps some African-American coalitions are using commemorative street-naming as a device simply to orient and consolidate the "black" community and have little interest in gaining widespread acceptance from the white community. How King streets are used ideologically, either for integration or separatism, may well be a major issue in later studies. The third and final issue concerns defining the larger social context of street (re) naming. How effective have these streets been in the movement toward African-American equality? How has the presence of King streets changed the way in which blacks see their cities and the region? Does improved race relations and a higher quality of life accompany street (re) naming?

Through the case of MLK street (re) naming, this paper has attempted to develop an understanding of *the geography of memory* beyond the naive yet popular assumption that memorials and monuments simply celebrate historically

important events and people. I believe that one can conceptualize the relationship between space and memory in four ways. A geography of memory would refer to a commemorative space that: (1) serves as a symbolic representation of a collective memory that is constructed and reconstructed through social control, conflict, and negotiation; (2) serves as a site of social struggle over the meaning of the past; (3) serves as a source of political and cultural identity for social groups (both dominant and subordinate); and (4) serves as an example of the socio-spatial dialectic, i.e., where the politics of creating space structure the politics of commemorating the past.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The author would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers of this paper for their insightful comments. Thanks also go to Donna G'Segner Alderman, Andrew Herod, and Suzanne Davies Withers for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

<sup>2</sup>Recently, the King Center has been involved in a highly publicized struggle with National Park Service over how King's memory should be commemorated and marketed to visiting Olympic tourists in 1996 (*USA Today*, 13-15 January, 1995).

<sup>3</sup>Very little research has been done in documenting the number and distribution of streets named after MLK. These figures are not definitive. Named streets in smaller towns and cities are not published in the zip code directory. More comprehensive data sources are Zip+4 National Directory File and telephone directory databases.

<sup>4</sup>As pointed out by Jackson (1989a), geographers traditionally have been concerned with measuring patterns of residential segregation and have used terms such as race and race relations uncritically. Recent geographical work emphasizes the socially constructed nature of race and how racial and ethnic minorities resist dominant cultural representations imposed upon them (Clark, 1993; Dwyer, 1993). Particular attention has been devoted to the street as a site of cultural display and spectacle, where the construction of race and the discourse of racism are either reinforced, contested, or both (Jackson, 1993; Smith, 1993).

<sup>5</sup>Pinkney (1993) discussed the situation of rural and small-town black communities, pointing specifically to continued poverty and powerlessness. Melissa Fay Greene (1992) provided a nonacademic yet factual account of the limited power of rural African Americans in post Civil Rights-era Georgia.

<sup>6</sup>Eatonton is a town of 4,737 people (2,776 black) located in Middle Georgia (Putnam County). Athens has a population of 45,734 (13,547 black) and is located in Northeast Georgia (Clarke County) (population figures based upon 1990 census). Both towns have relatively active African-American communities and had a street renamed after M. L. King, Jr. in the 1990s.

<sup>7</sup>Geographers such as Smith (1989) have argued that the reproduction of racial inequality as an ideological structure is a "changeable" and "contestable" process. A change in the social structure of racial inequality requires a change in its attendant spatial structure. Urban space does not simply reflect the ideological values and prejudices that guide its production. The physical design of the city "plays a part in social reproduction, that is, in the reflection and renewal of the dominant economic, cultural, and ideological structure of society (Cuff, 1989, p. 332)." Quite simply, social relations shape and are shaped by the urban built environment.



<sup>8</sup>This is not to suggest that geographers have done no work in collective memory. Geographers are quickly building a body of literature that investigates the construction of tradition, the selective use of memory in the promotion of place, and the political struggles that surround representations, commemorations, and preservations of the past (Lowenthal, 1985; Bowden, 1992; Charlesworth, 1994; Fournier, 1995; Heffernan, 1995; Kerans, 1995; Till, 1995).

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