

Place naming and the politics of identity: A view from Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., USA

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Naming is a powerful vehicle for identity. As geographers can attest to, the power of naming is especially evident on the cultural landscape. Place names (or toponyms) use a single word or series of words to identify and differentiate geographic features, both human-made (e.g. countries, cities, and streets) and physically based (e.g. mountains, lakes, and rivers). Place names permeate our daily vocabulary – both verbal and visual. They are found on road signs, advertising billboards, and addresses. Toponyms are critical to the use of nearly any kind of map. They are fundamental to navigating the landscape, giving meaning to locations, and developing a sense of place. So important are place names as systems of spatial reference that many countries have set up administrative boards or committees to standardise their spelling and use on maps and other publications. For example, the Committee for Geographical Names of Australasia (CGNA) was formed in 1984 to co-ordinate place naming activities across Australia and New Zealand.

Place names do more than express location; they are also symbolic texts. They are embedded in larger systems of meaning that are read, interpreted, and acted upon socially by people. Humans name places to create a sense of order and familiarity, frequently choosing names that project the importance of their point of view or cultural identity. Toponyms can provide insight into people's religious beliefs, ethnic origins, perceptions of nature and political values. Interpreting such names is not always straightforward and requires reading their many layers of meaning. In 1916, the Canadian town of Berlin, Ontario changed its name to Kitchener, honoring the British Secretary of War who died at the beginning of World War I. On one level, the naming reflected Canada's support of the Allied effort and the strengthening of its ties with England. On another level, it symbolised a nativist rewriting of the landscape and an anti-German hysteria sweeping across Canada. Similar war-time campaigns to remove German place names occurred in the United States and Australia. South Australia restored many of these German names as a result of the Nomenclature Act of 1935. Although place names often outlive their creators and influence how future generations connect with a place, they are not static symbols.

Place names have long played an important role in the study and teaching of Geography – from the rote memorisation of capitals and physical features to more sophisticated spatial and cultural analyses of naming patterns. Traditionally, geographers have collected, classified, and mapped toponyms as cultural artifacts, using them to reconstruct the environmental and human history of places. For instance, names can provide clues to the direction and timing of human migrations. The practice of migrants transplanting place names from their homeland to new settlements is a form of cultural transfer. The name Cumberland – widely found in Australia and the United States – likely originated from a county located in northwestern England. In the past, scholars have mapped the boundaries of vernacular or perceptual regions using place names. Business naming patterns, for example, can shed light on how people classify themselves regionally and how these regional loyalties shift over time.

Newer toponymic approaches stress the cultural politics of place naming. This perspective emphasises that naming is not an innocent locational reference or a passive artifact. Place naming is embedded within social power relations and struggles over the identity of places and people. The power to name can change hands with social and political upheaval. The classic example is Russia, where Saint Petersburg was renamed three times between 1914 and 1991 as the country shifted from Tsarist rule to Soviet control and then to the post-Communist era. Russia is not alone. The fall of Communism prompted government leaders in Germany, Romania, Poland, and Hungary to rewrite many toponyms in order to advance new notions of national identity and history. India renamed large cities such as Bombay (to Mumbai) and Calcutta (to Kolkata) to remove names used during British colonial rule, which ended in 1947, as well as to reflect linguistic traditions and groups in those cities. Naming represents a means of claiming (or reclaiming) ownership of places, both materially and symbolically.

Toponyms are important platforms for countries to re-imagine themselves, but the politics of place naming is not limited to nationalism and erasing signs of earlier political regimes. Multiculturalism is also of importance and a growing number of places are being named (and renamed) as a way of constructing a more prominent public identity of racial and ethnic minorities. Governments are under increasing pressure from minority groups and sympathetic whites to be sensitive to the toponymic interests of these historically marginalised groups. The State of Victoria, for example, encourages the use of Indigenous place names and the involvement of Indigenous communities in the naming process. This effort and others across Australia are meant to counter a history of European explorers, map makers, and settlers ignoring,

displacing, and Anglicising Aboriginal naming systems. The place naming process sheds light on which social groups have the authority to name and the selective way in which naming privileges one worldview over another.

The lingering presence of racist place names speaks to the ways in which the Australian landscape has traditionally subjugated rather than empowered Indigenous cultural identity. A recent search of the *Gazetteer of Australia* shows that the word “Nigger” is used in the place names of at least 15 features in the country, including three in the State of Victoria. In 2008, Victoria ended decades of heated debate by removing one of these offensive place names. Government leaders renamed Mount Niggerhead, located in the Alpine National Park, to Jaithmathangs. The change generated opposition from some people wishing to preserve the history of the mountain’s name. The replacement name also drew protests from an Aboriginal group, the Dhudhuroas, who claimed that the Jaithmathangs were not the original inhabitants of the area and that the peak is part of their heritage and identity. As the situation in Victoria illustrates, the political stakes of place renaming can be high for minority groups in asserting that they matter culturally and historically. Enhancing their cultural identity does not come without controversy, not only because of white opposition but also because of disagreements and competing claims among fellow minority groups also vying for recognition.

Events in Australia are part of a larger global Geography of place name change worth exploring in the classroom. Putting these name changes in a wider context can assist students in understanding the changing and contested nature of place and identity and how minority identity politics vary spatially. In my case, I would like to offer a view from the United States. America’s racial and ethnic minorities are increasingly turning to place naming as a political strategy for addressing their exclusion and misrepresentation within traditional, white-dominated constructions of heritage and identity. In Phoenix, Arizona, Native American leaders and sympathetic government officials successfully pushed to have Squaw Peak renamed in honor of Lori Ann Piestewa. Piestewa was the first Native American female soldier to die in combat, a 2003 casualty of the Iraq War. The National Congress of American Indians very much interpreted the issue in terms of identity politics, stating that the use of *squaw* as a toponym is “an example of the disrespect for and racism toward native women, who are often political and social leaders of our communities”.

African Americans have been especially vocal in calling for changes in the place name landscape of the United States. In arguing for a greater public recognition of their experiences and struggles, African American activists have carried out a campaign of: (1) removing place names that commemorate white supremacists or purveyors of racial inequality, and (2) renaming places to celebrate black historical figures, particularly from the American Civil Rights Movement. These name changes reflect an effort to create a place identity and image that can assist in reconstructing and enhancing the group identity of African Americans. By naming landscapes in ways that talk about the historical importance of minorities, African Americans seek to change the way they are valued in the present.

Removing racially insensitive place name references has proved especially controversial. Florida’s Palm Beach School Board finally decided to remove the name of Jefferson Davis from a middle school after several years of resistance from parents and white Civil War heritage groups. School officials and black community activists interpreted Davis, the only president of the pro-slavery, southern secessionist government called the Confederacy, as an inappropriate identity for the school and its student population. Events in New Orleans, Louisiana also illustrate the importance that some African Americans see in rewriting the historical identity of schools through renaming. In the early 1990s, the Orleans Parish school board passed a policy that prohibited school names honoring slave owners and others who did not respect equality. The names of many white historical figures (including the slave-holding first president of the United States, George Washington) were removed from schools and replaced with names commemorating prominent African-Americans, including Martin Luther King Jr. These name changes, especially the removal of Washington’s name, sparked a nation-wide debate.

Slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. holds an important place in African American efforts to rewrite the commemorative place name landscape. As a cultural geographer, I have spent the past several years documenting the emergence of streets named for Dr King and analysing the place these streets occupy within the lives and geographies of black and white Americans. Street names serve, quite literally, as signposts for directing people in what (and who) is important historically. Martin Luther King Drives, Boulevards, and Avenues are important centres of African



Figure 1: African Americans and other community organisers in Manhattan, Kansas USA participated in a march when dedicating 17th Street for Martin Luther King Jr. in 2007. Activists see place naming as an opportunity not only to celebrate minority achievements but to advance greater notions of social justice and African American identity. Photograph by Deborah Che (used with permission)

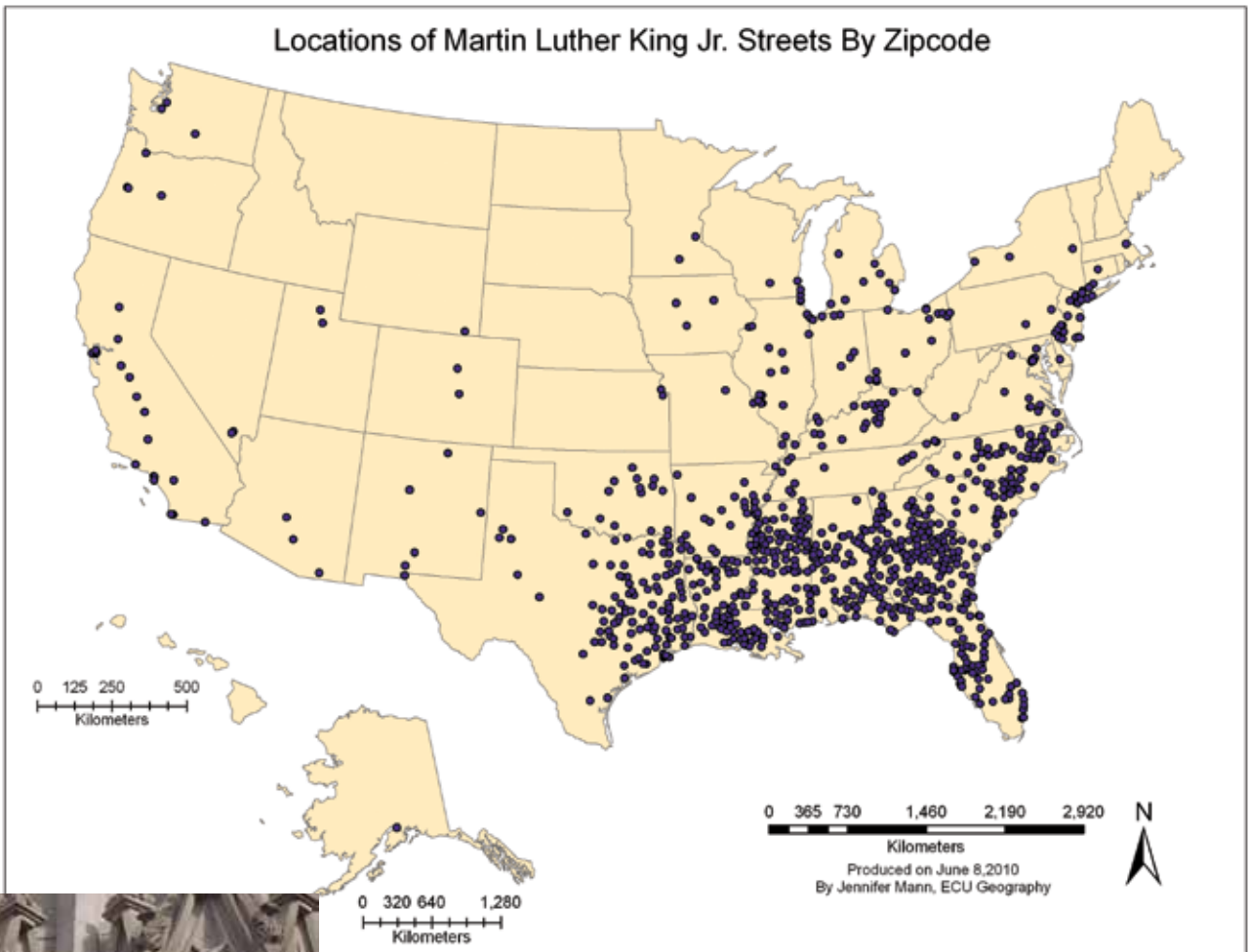


Figure 2: *Martin Luther King Jr. Streets are found in 40 states and the District of Columbia. Over 75 percent of the nation’s King roadways are located in ten southern states. Georgia, the civil rights leader’s home state, has the greatest number of named streets. King Streets are found throughout the urban hierarchy, in metropolitan areas as well as small towns and rural areas.*



Figure 3: *A statue of Martin Luther King Jr. was erected at Westminster Abbey in 1998. King stands along statues of nine other 20th-century Christian martyrs from around the globe, including assassinated Roman Catholic archbishop of El Salvador Oscar Romero. Although not depicted in the photograph, the King statue occupies an especially prominent place above the centre door of the royal church. Photograph by Tom Rickenbach (used with permission)*

American identity, activism, and community – constituting what the journalist Jonathan Tilove has called “Black America’s Main Street”. My research examines these streets as memorial arenas – public spaces for interpreting and debating King’s legacies, grappling with questions of race and racism, and finding the most appropriate street to identify with the civil rights icon.

By 2010, at least 893 cities and towns in the United States had named a street for King. Although these named streets are found throughout the US, they are clustered in the southeastern region. It is in the Southeast where the earliest Civil Rights Movement battles were fought and are now the current home of a majority of the country’s African American population. As an aside, King’s name can be found on streets and other public places in a wide range of countries – Belgium, Brazil, Cameroon, France, India, Israel, Italy, Panama, Russia, and Senegal to mention a few. In England, King’s namesakes include a playground in London. Great Britain has also honored the civil rights leader with a statue at Westminster Abbey.

Thus far, I have been unable to locate any Australian streets named for Martin Luther King Jr. However, in Newtown, a suburb of Sydney, there is a prominent mural depicting King’s face, his iconic phrase “I Have a Dream” and the Aboriginal flag.

At least in the case of the United States, the place name commemoration of King evokes highly public debates and protests, exposing racial and political tensions within communities. One of the largest obstacles facing African Americans is the prevailing assumption among the white establishment that King’s historical relevance is limited to the black community and hence renamed streets should not cut across traditional racial boundaries in cities. For many activists, naming a road that stretches beyond



Figure 4: *United States city leaders often bow to public opposition and confine King's name to minor, residential streets or roads largely within African American neighborhoods. But this is not always the case and there are interesting counterpoints. For example, Martin Luther King Blvd. in New Bern, North Carolina is a major commercial artery with over 200 businesses, including car dealerships, national retail chains, and a mall. Pepsi-Cola was invented in New Bern and the Pepsi bottling plant is located on King. The New Bern case is also noteworthy because the street naming campaign had white co-operation and support. Photograph by Matt Mitchelson (used with permission)*

minority neighborhoods is essential to educating the broader white public about the importance of King and all African Americans. These debates about where (and where not) to locate King's name and memory take place between blacks and whites, but they also occur within the African American community. Some naming proponents are more interested in inspiring and mobilising their fellow African Americans than challenging the historical consciousness of whites.

Place plays a key role in these struggles to commemorate King through street naming. Some African Americans have refused to rename a road for the civil rights leader when they believe the street does not have a sufficiently prominent status or identity. By the same token, some opposing whites believe that naming a street for King will stigmatise their street's identity and bring a decline in property value, although there is no evidence to substantiate this. As a result, King's name is frequently (but not always) found on side streets or portions of roads located within poor, black areas of United States cities. The renaming of these degraded and obscure streets has, in some instances, changed the streets' symbolic meaning from being a point of African American pride to yet another reminder of continued racial inequality. As some activists argue, to marginalise the commemoration of King on side streets within the black community, particularly in the face of African American requests not to do so, is to perpetuate the same force of segregation that the civil rights leader battled against.

The naming of streets for Martin Luther King Jr. in some ways says less about King and more about retelling the history of the United States to include a wider, more racially and ethnically diverse society. In this respect, honoring King is about enhancing the cultural identity of America as a country as well as the cultural identity of African Americans as a minority group. Yet, this redefinition and enhancement of identity has come with controversy as African Americans struggle to reverse the control historically exercised by whites over racial and ethnic minorities. These struggles prompt us to consider how the Civil Rights Movement, both in terms of how it has changed society and how it is remembered, is an evolving and unfinished project.

Further reading

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- Berg, Lawrence and Vuolteenhaho, Jani., eds. (2009) *Critical Toponymies: The Contested Politics of Place Naming*, Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company.
- Dwyer, Owen and Alderman, Derek, (2008) *Civil Rights Memorials and the Geography of Memory*, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- Monmonier, Mark (2006) *From Squaw Tit to Whorehouse Meadow: How Maps Name, Claim, and Inflamm*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Randall, Richard (2001) *Place Names: How They Define the World – and More*, Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.
- Tilove, Jonathan (2003) *Along Martin Luther King: Travels on Black America's Main Street*, New York, NY: Random House.
- Zelinsky, Wilbur (1988) *Nation into State: The Shifting Symbolic Foundations of American Nationalism*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Internet resources

Committee for Geographical Names of Australasia (CGNA)
www.icsm.gov.au/cgna/
 Geographical Renaming (Wikipedia)
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geographical_renaming
 Geoscience Australia: Place Names of Australia Search
www.ga.gov.au/map/names/
 MLK Blvd. Open Source Journalism and Photography Project
<http://mlkblvd.wordpress.com/>
 USGS: Geographic Names Information System (GNIS)
<http://geonames.usgs.gov/pls/gnispublic/>

The case of Greenville, North Carolina USA

West Fifth Street became Martin Luther King Jr. Drive in 1999. Originally African American leaders wanted all of Fifth Street renamed – not just part of it – but residents and business owners on the eastern end strongly opposed the proposal. King’s namesake marks an area that is predominantly black whereas East Fifth is mostly white. More recent attempts to rename all of Fifth Street have failed, leading to deep frustration within the city’s African American community. In the words of one black elected official, “The accomplishments of Dr King were important to all Americans. A whole man deserves a whole street!”. Across the United States, street naming opponents consistently impose strict spatial limits on such proposals, in effect seeking to limit King’s memorial to black areas. The sad irony is that while King challenged segregation, his legacy is often fixed at a scale that reinforces contemporary racial boundaries. In the time since the above photograph was taken, another call to honor King down the rest of Fifth Street emerged, causing several months of intense public debate. Seeking to settle what they saw as a “divisive” issue, white municipal leaders voted in 2007 to rename the city’s bypass for King and ordered that the existing Martin Luther King Jr. Drive revert back to West Fifth Street. In response, African Americans in Greenville must now bear the expense and inconvenience of changing their address, to ensure, in effect, that white property owners on East Fifth Street would not have to do so.

A useful classroom activity could involve students visiting Google Maps with their web browser and exploring the western and eastern portions of 5th Street in Greenville, North Carolina using maps and satellite images. Ask students to use the Street View capability in Google Maps to document differences in residential and commercial development on 5th Street. Then ask students to visit the US Census website and use its online mapping capabilities to examine the demographic characteristics of East vs. West 5th Street at the block group level, specifically median household income and African Americans as a percentage of population. These hands-on activities will demonstrate how 5th Street is part of major racial and economic boundary in Greenville, allowing students to better understand how the continuing social and geographic importance of this boundary shaped the identity politics of naming a street for King.

I am indebted to Owen Dwyer (Indiana University, Indianapolis) and Margaret Pearce (University of Kansas) for this classroom activity idea.

When someone tells you to go to Hell, where do you go?

In Australia, you can go to at least 190 places, including:

- Holy Hell Creek, Victoria
- Hell Fire Gully, Victoria
- Little Hell Dam, Queensland
- Hells Gate Pass, South Australia

In the United States, you can go to at least 900 places, including:

- Hell and Purgatory Airport, North Carolina
- Big Hell Hole Lake, Louisiana
- Hell for Sure Lake, California
- Cow Hell Swamp, Georgia

Note: There are far fewer place name references to Heaven; 326 in the United States and only 6 in Australia

Sources: Geoscience Australia: Place Names of Australia Search
 USGS: Geographic Names Information System (GNIS)



Figure 5: *The photograph of Martin Luther King Jr. Drive in Greenville, North Carolina speaks to the ways in which naming streets for Martin Luther King Jr. are constrained by traditional racial boundaries and territoriality within cities. Such constraints, even in the face of increased black power and the liberalisation of white attitudes, point to the contested nature of place and identity in today’s world. Photograph by Derek Alderman*