



# Toward a Strategy for More Spatial Control: The Politics of MLK Street (Re)naming

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While the bulk of the study of the burgeoning movement to (re)name streets for Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK) has predominantly been centered on the creation of a new geography of commemoration honoring the leader's legacy and philosophy, little work has explicitly addressed the spatial motivations undergirding Black communities' insistence on quickening the pace of such a process. This study strives to bring this point further by proposing to analyze the growing phenomenon of street naming for King in terms of Black communities' relentless determination to challenge and reformulate the long-established practices shaping the MLK toponymic streetscape, especially in the southern part of the United States. On a deeper level, the paper reveals that Black communities and leaders use the spatial commemoration of King as a conduit for the acquisition of a more equitable share of and control over the urban landscape with their white counterparts. The politics of street naming thus lays bare the history and legacy of racial segregation in the South, the unfinished journey of the march for socio-spatial justice, and the rising power of Black communities.

## INTRODUCTION

There has existed a broad consensus in contemporary research on the urban landscape about the intersection of the politics of place naming and the ideologies structuring naming practices for the human-built landscape. The recent emphasis of the field of critical urban toponymy on the powerful role of place naming in contesting hegemony and exposing issues of exclusion and marginalization through the valorization of subordinate groups' cultural achievements is not unwarranted. This so-called "critical turn" in toponymic inquiry moves beyond the conventional figuration of urban toponymy in terms of etymology and taxonomy to reinterpret it as a site of political technology deployed variously by competing social groups for self-serving ends; people in authority and dominant groups would utilize it to sanitize or whitewash controversial accounts of histories whereas marginalized groups would use it

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to provide a counternarrative of the past that usually contests hegemonic versions.<sup>1</sup> Place naming thus does not operate in a sociopolitical vacuum, but is rather redolent of, and susceptible to, multifaceted interests and agendas of contending agencies, as well as being intimately interwoven with the overall struggle for identity formation, ultimately taking the form of a race for the control and manipulation of cultural expressions.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the urban landscape is seen as a politically and epistemologically engaged arena charged with meanings and associations that often tend to serve as a mechanism for upholding, contesting, and even transforming power relations among different social actors.<sup>3</sup>

The debate over naming streets after slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK) in many southern cities fits well within this paradigm of power struggle and political contestation. Most recent studies have focussed on the cultural aspects of this widespread phenomenon, proposing that Black activists' insistence on claiming space to commemorate King simply reflects the group's long-standing quest for an appreciation of its cultural achievements and contributions to the country.<sup>4</sup> A sizeable number of these studies have also conceptualized Black communities' competition for an equal share of the cityscape through labeling roads for King in terms of place attachment

<sup>1</sup> J. Brasher, D. Alderman, and A. Subanthore, "Was Tulsa's Brady Street Really Renamed? Racial (In)Justice, Memory-Work, and Neoliberalism's Mandate of Least Disruption," *Social & Cultural Geography*, 21, 9 (2020), 1223–44; S. Tiwari and S. Ambinakudige, "Streetscapes and Stereotyping: Streets Named after Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Geographies of Racial Identity," *GeoJournal*, 87, 1 (2020), 1–14.

<sup>2</sup> J. A. Agnew, *Place and Politics: The Geographical Mediation of State and Society* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987); M. Hannah, "Space and Social Control in the Administration of the Oglala Lakota ('Sioux'), 1871–1979," *Journal of Historical Geography*, 19 (1993), 412–32; L. Hershkovitz, "Tiananmen Square and the Politics of Place," *Political Geography*, 12 (1993), 395–420; D. Mitchell, "Iconography and Locational Conflict from the Underside: Free Speech, People's Park, and the Politics of Homelessness in Berkeley, California," *Political Geography*, 11 (1992), 152–69.

<sup>3</sup> P. Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Essay in Spatial History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987); L. Berg and R. Kearns, "Naming as Norming: 'Race', Gender, and the Identity Politics of Naming Places in Aotearoa/New Zealand," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 14 (1996), 99–122; G. Myers, "Naming and Placing the Other: Power and the Urban Landscape in Zanzibar," *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, 87 (1996) 237–46; B. Yeoh, "Street-Naming and Nation-Building: Toponymic Inscriptions of Nationhood in Singapore," *Area*, 28 (1996), 298–307; C. Nash, "Irish Place Names: Post-colonial Locations," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, NS 24 (1999), 457–80; Y. Whelan, "Mapping Meanings in the Cultural Landscape," in G. Ashworth and B. Graham, eds., *Senses of Place: Senses of Time* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2005), 61–71.

<sup>4</sup> G. Caliendo, "MLK Boulevard: Material Forms of Memory and the Social Contestation of Racial Signification," *Journal of Black Studies*, 42, 7 (2011), 1148–70; A. Tichavakunda, "A Critical Race Analysis of University Acts of Racial 'Redress': The Limited Potential of Racial Symbols," *Educational Policy*, 35, 2 (2020), 304–22.

and a sense of belonging.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, the politics of commemorative street naming have recently signaled a shift in the scale of power relations between the Black and white racial groups, with southern Black communities apparently no longer comfortable with the ideological and political premises guiding the constitution of commemorative landscape in the region on the one hand, and white people's advocacy of the status quo on the other.<sup>6</sup> Understandably, white resistance epitomizes their deep concern over losing control of the physical environment that has historically constituted the basis of white privilege. As Johnathan Tilove and Michael Falco point out, "The map of King streets, like the map of Black America it so tenaciously tracks, is the geopolitical synthesis of Black insistence and White resistance."<sup>7</sup>

Notwithstanding the saliency of such an analysis, this article hopes to dig deeper into this controversial issue by proposing to study the MLK streetscape from a wider perspective that sheds more light on the motives behind the prevalent phenomenon of (re)naming streets for King. I seek to demonstrate that what underpins the campaigning of Black communities and leaders to designate particular streets to be named after King is a subtle strategy to lay claim to a larger swath of the physi-cultural landscape. As a matter of fact, Black efforts to name streets [after King] that cut across white neighborhoods, and so to cross the long-established color line demarcating much of the southern cityscape, reflects their long-suppressed yearning for a proportionally equal or wider share of the urban landscape.

This article thus seeks to unravel the spatial dialectics forming the toponymic tug-of-war revolving around the selection of a particular space and scale for the commemoration of King and, more broadly, the celebration of the sacrifices and gains of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Moving beyond the commonplace engagement with this warfare as a mere illustration of a certain type of "memory work," the article offers a critical reinterpretation of the politics of MLK street naming that brings to the fore the racial/spatial power dynamics at the root of commemoration. In particular, I set out to transcend the orthodox perception of place naming as an exclusively affective undertaking to emphasize instead its inherently deeper pragmatic cast that potentially renders it a contentious arena of continuing

<sup>5</sup> J. Brasher, "Place (Re)Naming," in C. Post, A. Greiner, and G. Buckley, eds., *The Routledge Companion to the American Landscape* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 243–52.

<sup>6</sup> F. Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> J. Tilove and M. Falco, *Along Martin Luther King: Travels on Black America's Main Street* (New York: Random House, 2003), 21).

power struggle and identity formation.<sup>8</sup> The fact that Black communities now forcefully request specific major streets to bear names of their leaders, and no longer accept seeing those names relegated to depreciated areas, signifies that the debate over the toponymic streetscape has gone far beyond the simple politics of memory activation and cultural recognition to acquire a spatial dimension, defined by a desire to expand the presence of Black identities, politics, and histories within urban spaces, to exert control over the politics of toponymic inscription, and ultimately to exercise occupation and expansionism.<sup>9</sup> Seen in this respect, the paper hopes to contribute to the study of the current controversy over MLK street naming by construing it not simply as a “vehicle for bringing the past into the present,” as Derek Alderman contends, but as a scheme devised to roll back the long history of Black spatial and racial subjugation and confinement.<sup>10</sup>

This scheme [has] involved a few practices that form a pattern of Black struggle for territorial control in relation to MLK street (re)naming. Chief among these are the de-confederalization and African-Americanization of commemorative spaces; that is, the removal of problematic names of white supremacists and their replacement with Black-friendly surrogate names; the campaign to inscribe King’s name into major streets and thoroughfares (a practice known as “toponymic rescaling”); and moral suasion, on the grounds that King’s figure, message, and name could help heal America’s deep-seated wounds and bring the dream of interracial reconciliation to fruition.<sup>11</sup>

Relatedly, another crucial element motivating the argument of this article is the historical contingency of commemorative street naming. Although the debate over the widespread visibility of streets christened after King has played out within a sociopolitical framework, it has rarely been properly placed in the same way against its historical backdrop, hence the inaccuracies and misconceptions haunting debates over the MLK streetscape. It is the contention of this paper that African Americans’ strategy to construct a new

<sup>8</sup> K. Till, “Wounded Cities: Memory-Work and a Place-Based Ethics of Care,” *Political Geography*, 31 (2012), 3–14; K. Till and A. Kuusisto-Arponen, “Towards Responsible Geographies of Memory: Complexities of Place and the Ethics of Remembering,” *Erkundung*, 69, 4, (2015), 291–306.

<sup>9</sup> M. Swart, “Name Changes as Symbolic Reparation after Transition: The Examples of Germany and South Africa,” *German Law Journal*, 9, 2 (2008), 105–20; W. Adebawli, “Coloring ‘Rainbow’ Streets: The Struggle for Toponymic Multiculturalism in Urban Post-apartheid South Africa,” in R. Rose-Redwood, D. Alderman, and M. Azaryahu, eds., *The Political Life of Urban Streetscapes: Naming, Politics, and Place* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2018), 277–303.

<sup>10</sup> D. Alderman, “Street Names and the Scaling of Memory: The Politics of Commemorating Martin Luther King, Jr. within the African-American Community,” *Area*, 35, 2 (2003), 163–73, 163.

<sup>11</sup> Till; and Kuusisto-Arponen; Brasher, Alderman, and Subanthore, “Was Tulsa’s Brady Street Really Renamed?”; Brasher.

geography of memory and commemoration conducive to a much fairer remapping of the physical landscape cannot be fathomed in the absence of a lucid exposition of the long-standing policies and practices of Black exclusion and marginalization. The racial subordination of people of African descent, whether in the form of chattel slavery, *de jure* and *de facto* segregation, or contemporary color-blind racism, has been aided and abetted by a discriminatory spatial policy that is as old as the United States itself. Together, the processes of racialization and spatialization have denied African Americans the power to produce and control their physi-cultural landscape. For want of a better term, this article puts forth the concept of “spa-cialization” in place of “the geopolitics of race” and “racial territoriality,” offered by David Delaney and Elise Boddie respectively.<sup>12</sup> The proposed term is a shorthand for spatialization and racialization; it highlights the intertwined nature of the two processes of Black racialization and spatialization and treats them on an equal footing in terms of their significance and implications for the socio-physical positionality of the African American community within American society at large. Where Delaney’s term puts much more emphasis on race than on space, Boddie’s seems to lay it the other way round. The new concept of spa-cialization eschews such differential categorization. The paper also draws on some of the insightful literature of Black geographies.<sup>13</sup>

## BLACK SPA-CIALIZATION

Spatialization and racialization are two intertwined processes that came of age in the New World with the first contact of early European settlers with indigenous peoples. The forced relocation of peoples of African descent onto the new continent as part of the transatlantic slave trade heightened the pace and fervor of these two processes and widened the range of the subjects that were to be directly or indirectly involved or affected by them. The two processes have grown increasingly interdependent over the course of American history to the degree that the meanings inherent in each term have become deeply embedded in the other. The overlap is so inextricable that it has now become very difficult, if not impossible, to address the issue of race relations in the US without drifting into discussions about their spatial forms and implications.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> D. Delaney, *Race, Place, and the Law, 1836–1948* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998); E. Boddie, “Racial Territoriality,” *UCLA Law Review*, 58 (2010) 401–63.

<sup>13</sup> C. Hawthorne, “Black Matters Are Spatial Matters: Black Geographies for the Twenty-First Century,” *Geography Compass*, 13, 11 (2019), 1–13.

<sup>14</sup> Delaney, *Race, Place, and the Law*; D. Delaney, “The Space that Race Makes,” *Professional Geographer*, 54 (2002), 6–14; G. Lipsitz, “The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race,” *Landscape Journal*, 26 (2007), 10–23; E. Hanafi, “The Spa-cial Formation Theory:

Historically, the long-standing process of spa-cialization has been integral to the production and reproduction of a socio-spatial hierarchy designed to naturalize and, at a later stage, institutionalize the identification of space with whiteness and the relegation of other people of color to positions of out-of-placeness and non-belongingness. Most whites have accordingly had the prerogative to choose where to dwell, play, and work, as opposed to other races, the presence of which in a specific setting has been subject to constant scrutiny and acquiescence by the white majority. Beside the exclusionary aspect of spa-cialization, the process has also been impregnated with pervasive racialized notions – the likes of “them-versus-us,” “the other,” “the alien,” and so on – notions that have been instrumental in the reification of Black subordination and inferiority. Spa-cialization has, accordingly, been critical both to the (re)shaping of white space through the “racialization of space” and to the historical constitution of race through the “spatialization of race.”<sup>15</sup> In this context where the production of space has been tightly connected to, and determined by, practices of domination and power relations,<sup>16</sup> it should come as no surprise that African Americans have had little say or sway over the arrangement and management of their physical environment.

A constellation of factors have coalesced to bring about and maintain the process of spa-cialization to the present day. Prominent among these are the role of the legal system and the racialized meanings attached to Black space. The interplay between the social and the spatial has been particularly ignored by constitutional law, which has tended to extricate racial discrimination from its spatial implications by adopting a narrow conceptualization of discriminatory intent required by the Fourteenth Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause.<sup>17</sup> This lack of spatial awareness in legislation has guaranteed the wide-ranging exclusion of people of color from decision-making processes involving the stewardship of the physi-cultural landscape and has contributed to the legitimation of racialized practices that systematically generate and feed off geographies of denial and constraint. According to Elise Boddie, the legislative body has “failed to take into account the racial meaning of space and the role space itself plays in catalyzing the exclusion and marginalization of people of color.”<sup>18</sup>

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Transcending the Race–Class Binary in Environmental Justice Literature,” *Antipode*, 49, 2 (2017), 397–415.

<sup>15</sup> Delaney, *Race, Place, and the Law*; Lipsitz.

<sup>16</sup> K. McKittrick, “On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place,” *Social & Cultural Geography*, 12, 8 (2011), 947–63; J. Inwood, “Righting Unrightable Wrongs: Legacies of Racial Violence and the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 102, 6 (2012), 1450–67.

<sup>17</sup> L. Pulido, “Geographies of Race and Ethnicity II: Environmental Racism, Racial Capitalism and State-Sanctioned Violence,” *Progress in Human Geography*, 41, 4 (2017), 524–33.

<sup>18</sup> Boddie, 412.

The slave codes enacted during slavery, for example, fostered the concept of white property rights and validated slaveholder's desires to have full control over the bodies and souls of their Black hands. The correlation between the spatial and the racial inherent in those codes had yet to be discerned and identified by American society at large. But slaveholders, by institutionalizing those restrictive measures, were in fact creating racialized spaces in which slave labor and behavior were micromanaged. Enslaved people were often confined for most of their lifetime within the boundaries of plantations where their freedom and mobility were severely curtailed. The plantation system immediately introduced enslaved and free African Americans to the geopolitics of inclusion and exclusion and strictly set the terms that guided race relations, thus laying the ground for a socio-spatial order exceedingly informed and determined by phenotypical variations.<sup>19</sup>

Spa-cialization became deeply ingrained in US social life following the adoption of the Jim Crow laws, which embodied a growing spatial awareness in the way legislation approached race matters. These series of segregation measures formally ended the relative racial proximity that had been common in antebellum America and instigated a landscape characterized by a rigid separation of the two racial groups. Jim Crow laws, according to Joshua Inwood, "created a spatial system of differentiation that reinforced White expectations and limited the ability of African Americans to assert themselves in everyday discourses."<sup>20</sup> In their attempt to reincarnate a slavery-like system of spa-cialization, white supremacists, in the North and the South, drew on the "separate but equal" clause to keep the two races apart. The separate sites resulting from this doctrine, along with the signage system delineating them, were intended to remind a now "arrogant" Black population of their physical and social "place" in post-Reconstruction America.<sup>21</sup> As Leon Litwack notes,

The daily reminders of "place" and inequality were nearly everywhere. The degrading racial etiquette, the places they were forbidden to enter ... or where they were rigidly separated from whites ... the dehumanizing caricatures, the ritualized subservience, the verbal and physical harassment, the savage public murders, and the quiet murders – all of these, the dramatic and the mundane, became part of their lives and elevated their racial awareness to new levels.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> K. McKittrick, "Plantation Futures," *Small Axe*, 45 (2013), 1–15.

<sup>20</sup> J. Inwood, "Making the Legal Visible: Wilhelmina Griffin Jones' Experience of Living in Alabama during Segregation," *Southeastern Geographer*, 45, 1 (2005), 54–66, 59.

<sup>21</sup> E. Guffey, "Knowing Their Space: Signs of Jim Crow in the Segregated South," *Design Issues*, 28, 2 (2012), 41–60.

<sup>22</sup> L. Litwack, *Trouble in the Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 16.

Contemporarily, the spa-cialization process has proven to be resilient and unwilling to die despite the seeming headway in race relations following the legislative accomplishments of the civil rights movement. Nowadays, spa-cialization has found expression in the destruction of Black neighborhoods through the concerted efforts of the public and private sectors to secure a same-race, undiluted environment for the white population.

Spa-cialization can also be reconceptualized in accordance with the “cultural turn” as a form of political technology deployed by the White hegemony to portray and reinforce a particular image of Black America through the stigmatization of the Black race and space as disreputable, inferior, pathological, and unsanitary. Central to spa-cialization has been the attachment of negative representations and stereotypes that stigmatize people of African descent as readily amenable to enslavement and subservience, incapable of self-government and, therefore, unequipped to rub shoulders with whites in all respects. This form of racialization has been used by mainstream white society and state authorities to establish and justify what Michael Omi and Howard Winant have considered as racial projects designed to keep African Americans politically and economically dispossessed.<sup>23</sup> Sweta Tiwari and Shrinidhi Ambinakudige pointedly claim that “negative stereotypes about African Americans are the outcome of a broader set of processes related to race formation and racialization that have put African Americans in a relatively disadvantaged position, socioeconomically speaking, thereby buttressing those negative stereotypes.”<sup>24</sup>

This racial stigmatization of Black people was bound to spill creepingly over into their living space, hence the process of spatialization, which, among other things, has disparagingly portrayed Black space in general, and the “ghetto” in particular, as a haven of all social ills and vices.<sup>25</sup> Black spatial stigmatization has also nurtured white fear of urban decay and property devaluation, paving the way for the introduction of an array of residential and environmental policies that have confined the majority of African Americans to polluted and same-race neighborhoods.<sup>26</sup> A quick glance at the projects of urban renewal and gentrification that compel many African Americans to desert

<sup>23</sup> M. Omi and H. Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 3rd edn (New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> Tiwari and Ambinakudige, “Streetscapes and Stereotyping,” 2.

<sup>25</sup> A. Giroux, “Violence, Katrina, and the Biopolitics of Disposability,” *Theory, Culture and Society*, 24, 7–8 (2007), 305–9; U. Linke, “Racializing Cities, Naturalizing Space: The Seductive Appeal of Iconicities of Dispossession,” *Antipode*, 46, 5 (2015), 1222–39.

<sup>26</sup> L. Wacquant and J. Howe, *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008); I. Audirac, “Shrinking Cities: An Unfit Term for American Urban Policy?,” *Cities*, 75 (2018), 12–19; C. Bonam, C. Yantis, and V. J. Taylor, “Invisible Middleclass Black Space: Asymmetrical Person and Space



their areas, the policies of redlining and blockbusting, the discriminatory and delusory services offered by banks and real-estate agencies, state-sanctioned and individual violence, the disproportionate location of hazardous-waste facilities in Black neighborhoods, and the expanding industry of Black incarceration, among other things, all reveal that African Americans are yet to achieve control over their space to a degree proportionally similar to that enjoyed by their white counterparts.<sup>27</sup>

MLK streetscape politics cannot be disentangled from this larger pattern of Black spa-cialization. Many whites see Black campaigns to extend the civil rights leader's name and memory into their neighborhoods as a harbinger of racial turnover, that they fear will be accompanied by a quick rise in crime rates, government disinvestment, shrinkage policies, and urban blight. The MLK name would taint white areas with Blackness, trash, and, most importantly, the specter of debasement.<sup>28</sup> Therefore the whole idea of wedding King's name to white space must be sacrificed on the altar of protecting white socioeconomic capital. It is within this context that spa-cialization and its attendant politics of toponymic streetscape have grown into a political technology that serves to denigrate subaltern groups and compromise their cultural capital by limiting the reach of their commemoration in the urban landscape.<sup>29</sup>

The flourishing discipline of Black geographies revolutionizes our understanding of the intrinsic spatiality of Black existence and resistance by deconstructing the White-centric modus operandi of reducing Blackness to the body politic.<sup>30</sup> The scholarship of Black geographies redirects the lens of analysis of Black lives squarely to space and place by asking "how the analytical tools of critical human geography can be used to engage with the spatial politics and practices of Blackness, and how an engagement with questions of Blackness can in turn complicate foundational geographical categories such as capital, scale, nation, and empire."<sup>31</sup> It should not strike us as odd, therefore, to see

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Stereotyping at the Race-Class Nexus," *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 23, 1 (2018), 24-47; Tiwari and Ambinakudige.

<sup>27</sup> K. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); B. Satter, *Family Properties: Race, Real Estate, and the Exploitation of Black Urban America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2009); R. Brahinsky, "Race and the City: The (Re)development of Urban Identity," *Geography Compass*, 5, 3 (2011), 144-53, Brahinsky, "Race and the Making of Southeast San Francisco: Toward a Theory of Race-Class," *Antipode*, 46, 5 (2013), 125-76.

<sup>28</sup> C. Mills, "Black Trash," in L. Westra and B. Lawson, eds., *Faces of Environmental Racism* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 73-91; Hanafi, "The Spa-cial Formation Theory."

<sup>29</sup> D. Gabbard, "Arguments against Street Renaming Flawed," *Daily Reflector*, 9 July 2006, D1; Caliendo, "MLK Boulevard."

<sup>30</sup> McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*; Satter; Brahinsky, "Race and the City"; Brahinsky, "Race and the Making of Southeast San Francisco."

<sup>31</sup> Hawthorne, "Black Matters are Spatial Matters," 8-9.

Black southerners strive to compete with whites over the control of space through the inscription of names of several noteworthy Black figures into physical sites.

### MLK STREET NAMING: A COMMEMORATIVE ENTERPRISE?

It should go without saying that (re)naming in a general sense is intimately connected to the faculty/power of remembering. (Re)naming somebody or something activates the process of identification and commemoration. In addition to its connection to memory, the power of (re)naming consists also in regulating spatial ordering, easing spatial orientation, organizing relationships, and simplifying life in general. Knowing one's name and knowing other subjects' names help their remembering in the first place, and ease, improve, or sometimes delineate relationships amongst them in the second place. In keeping with the argument of this article, naming is also related to owning and possession. If something is in your name, then it is yours. The acts of un-naming and de-naming, in contrast, connote marginalization, effacing, and dispossession. In short, toponymic practices are likely to have a great bearing on, if not determine, people's worldviews as well as their codes of intercommunication.

The politics of toponymic streetscape cannot depart from this tradition. Street names help direct and guide people to locate certain premises more practically, and, most pointedly, render their lives and interaction much easier. Street names can also perform a symbolic function by according a special privilege to the name chosen for a particular street. People tend to glorify certain public and historical figures, and one common way to do so is to attach their names to accessible sites, most notably streets, boulevards, hospitals, and schools. In doing so, people believe, these figures and their contributions will remain indelibly vivid in the public imagination.

Not to be underestimated, street naming is also a political exercise par excellence. More often than not, the decision to name a street after a particular person, and the choice of the location of the street, do not occur arbitrarily but are deeply anchored in political ideology. Public officials realize the power inherent in street names as well as the far-reaching implications they can have for the (re)construction of a group's or a nation's culture, knowledge, and conduct. They know well enough that street names are politically charged with meanings and associations, and, accordingly, the party that takes hold of the naming process is more likely to oversee the production and dissemination of those attributes. According to Rose-Redwood, Alderman, and Azaryahu, "There are few spaces as ordinary and mundane, yet politically charged, as a city's streets ... The urban streetscape is a space where different visions of the past collide in the present and competing spatial imaginaries are juxtaposed

from one street corner to the next.”<sup>32</sup> Hence a great deal of competition and resistance is involved in the process of street naming and renaming between elite groups that strive to keep the status quo and subordinate groups that tend to construe the streetscape as a contested arena of social injustice.

The notions of “sites of memory” and “sites of countermemory” devised respectively by the French historian Pierre Nora and the British environmental historian Stephen Legg are worth noting here.<sup>33</sup> Nora shares the view that humans across the social and ethnic/racial spectrum tend to anchor their memories in certain sites as a way of giving meaning and significance to certain activities. These sites can take the form of a physical space like cemeteries, museums, monuments, and schools, or can be nonphysical, as in the case of according special attention to festivals, celebrations, public dates, and figures. Underlying this tradition of commemoration is the glorification of the past.<sup>34</sup> Notwithstanding its universality, the creation of sites of memory mostly comes under the aegis of hegemonic groups, which generally determine the location, naming, and ways of celebrating those sites.

As opposed to the politics of “sites of memory,” the realm of “sites of countermemory” tends to be more associated with marginalized groups. The latter, in their attempt to rail against practices of exclusion and marginalization that they regularly face, create sites of their own to commemorate their unacknowledged struggles and contributions. In other words, these sites are turned into a form of resistance to what they consider a systemic pattern of subordination. What is interesting about these sites of countermemory, besides their fixation with the notion of the past, is their emphasis on improving the present situation through the correction and restitution of past wrongs. This is why,

<sup>32</sup> R. Rose-Redwood, D. Alderman, and M. Azaryahu, *The Political Life of Urban Streetscapes: Naming, Politics, and Place* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2018), 1–2.

<sup>33</sup> P. Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire,” *Representations*, 26 (1989), 7–25; S. Legg, “Sites of Counter-memory: The Refusal to Forget and the Nationalist Struggle in Colonial Delhi,” *Historical Geography*, 33 (2005), 180–201.

<sup>34</sup> B. Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); R. Flores, *Remembering the Alamo: Memory, Modernity, and the Master Symbol* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); B. Forest and J. Johnson, “Unraveling the Threads of History: Soviet-Era Monuments and Post-Soviet National Identity in Moscow,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 92 (2002), 524–47; M. Sturken, “Memorializing Absence,” in C. Calhoun, P. Price, and A. Timmer, eds., *Understanding September 11* (New York: The Free Press, 2002), 374–84; D. Alderman and S. Hoelscher, “Memory and Place: Geographies of a Critical Relationship,” *Social & Cultural Geography*, 5, 3 (2004), 347–55; D. Alderman, “Surrogation and the Politics of Remembering Slavery in Savannah, Georgia,” *Journal of Historical Geography*, 36 (2010), 90–101.

Michael Schudson believes, “Control of the past is [always] disputed and the past becomes a contested terrain.”<sup>35</sup>

Naming streets after King falls within this trend of creating a new “geography of memory” that serves to evoke, recount, and bring public attention to the various “experiences, struggles, and achievements of African Americans.”<sup>36</sup> In a broader sense, MLK street naming is part of a growing toponymic movement to celebrate the gains of the civil rights revolution of the 1950s and 1960s. For in addition to the veneration of King with the establishment of a national holiday in 1983 celebrating his birthday, the attachment of his name to schools and hospitals, and the creation of The King Center for Nonviolent Social Change (which also houses the burial site of King and his wife Coretta Scott King), in Atlanta, the naming of streets for him stands out as the most popular and noticeable form of reviving his legacy. Six years after Roger Stump published his study in 1988 outlining the number of cities in eleven southern states hosting streets (re)named for King, an updated study found that the figure had nearly doubled in 1994, jumping from forty-seven to eighty-four cities.<sup>37</sup> By 2010, more than 893 cities and towns across the entire nation had had a street named for King, 70 percent of which were located in the South.<sup>38</sup> Though the figure stagnated over much of the following decade, barely going over 900 – most probably due to white backlash and mounting Black intra-racial competition for cityscape toponymic reconfiguration – the general practice of MLK street (re)naming is still regarded as a remarkably growing phenomenon, largely interpreted as part of African Americans’ unfinished struggle for reparations and recognition.<sup>39</sup>

Though King is not the only figure commemorated toponymically by Black communities, he has come to dominate the site of the African American physico-cultural landscape.<sup>40</sup> So far, in most southern cities, decisions in support of adorning public sites with King’s name have almost always been based on

<sup>35</sup> M. Schudson, “The Present in the Past versus the Past in the Present,” *Communication*, 11 (1989), 105–13, 112, square brackets in original.

<sup>36</sup> D. Alderman, “Creating a New Geography of Memory in the South: (Re)naming of Streets in Honor of Martin Luther King, Jr.,” *Southeastern Geographer*, 36 (1996), 51–69, 51.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*; R. Stump, “Toponymic Commemoration of National Figures: The Cases of Kennedy and King,” *Names*, 36 (1988), 203–16.

<sup>38</sup> D. Alderman and J. Inwood, “Street Naming and the Politics of Belonging: Spatial Injustices in the Toponymic Commemoration of Martin Luther King, Jr.,” *Social & Cultural Geography*, 14, 2 (2013), 211–33.

<sup>39</sup> D. Alderman and R. Rose-Redwood, “The Classroom as ‘Toponymic Workspace’: Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Campus Place Renaming,” *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 44, 21 (2020), 124–41; Tiwari and Ambinakudige, “Streetscapes and Stereotyping”; Brasher, “Place (Re)Naming.”

<sup>40</sup> E. Tretter, “The Power of Naming: The Toponymic Geographies of Commemorated African Americans,” *Professional Geographer*, 63, 1 (2011), 34–54.

unanimous African American representation.<sup>41</sup> This, however, should not mislead us into categorizing African Americans as a monolithic group or thinking of symbolic struggles over MLK street naming in terms of a white/Black binary. In the same way as the legacy of the Civil War and its military generals still generates conflicting interpretations among white Americans of different persuasions, King's image, and the way in which and extent to which it should be exhibited, are also open to potential contestation within the Black communities, reflecting class and gender concerns.<sup>42</sup> Though discussion of such a topic deserves an independent platform in its own right, it should be noted here that the bulk of the intra-racial debate about MLK has been centered on how best to venerate him; that is, whether his commemoration should take the form of continuing civil disobedience, whether his legacy should be enshrined in a center or a memorial, and whether a national holiday should be designated for his birth/death date. The very few cases – Eatonton, Georgia and Greenville, North Carolina – that have been documented where local Black leaders dismissed the naming of a street or bypass after King were by no means based on disagreements over King himself or his philosophy, as much as on other procedural or sometimes self-serving ends.<sup>43</sup> At worst, those few cases would fade away when the matter turned into an interracial battle over spatial control.

In light of this, the toponymic predominance of King's name in the southern streetscape should be favorably understood as a badge of unity and unanimity, rather than a marker of monolithicity; most African Americans share a firm belief in the power of space in shaping and perpetuating meanings and values and, hence, their unyielding determination to entrench the leader's memory in a physical setting that matches his legacy. For, despite the elevation of King as a public hero with the designation of his birthday as a national holiday, these African Americans continue to push for a more forceful strategy to commemorate him, assuming that the holiday, while significant, would not have a lingering and permanent effect on the constitution of a general public memory about the leader.<sup>44</sup> As Alderman puts it, "Embedding King's memory in physical space is a powerful form of commemoration, rivaling the holiday in

<sup>41</sup> Alderman, "Street Names and the Scaling of Memory."

<sup>42</sup> R. Rose-Redwood, "From Number to Name: Symbolic Capital, Places of Memory and the Politics of Street Renaming in New York City," *Social & Cultural Geography*, 9, 4 (2008), 431–52.

<sup>43</sup> C. Johnson, "Black Leaders React to Vote to Rename Bypass for King," *Daily Reflector*, 12 Aug. 2006, A1; S. Batchelor, "Council Meeting Racially Charged," *Daily Reflector*, 9 March 2007, A1; R. Schein, "Belonging through Land/scape," *Environment and Planning A*, 41 (2009), 811–26.

<sup>44</sup> D. Alderman, "Naming Streets for Martin Luther King, Jr.: No Easy Road," in R. Schein, ed., *Landscape and Race in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 213–36.

terms of what it can teach us about how Americans remember and interpret his life and legacy.”<sup>45</sup>

As previously mentioned, the politics of toponymic streetscape cannot be disassociated from the more encompassing category of the politics of memory construction/erasure, which conceal a tug-of-war between disparate and, most often, conflicting ideologies as to whose conception and representation of the past should prevail. It is little wonder, then, to find that African Americans’ attempts to alter the southern cityscape through naming certain streets after King or, on a wider scale, through establishing memorials and museums that recount the Black experience in North America have often been met with stiff opposition from a sizeable number of southern whites who have an interest in imposing a certain version of the region’s history. The competition becomes understandable when we know that the simple attachment of King’s name to the physical landscape would trigger discussions about race questions believed to have been transcended and bypassed, questions like urban planning and residential integration, regional development and government disinvestment, and gentrification, to name a few.

White southerners’ resistance to introducing any kind of toponymic change to the cityscape mirrors a concern over the potential ramifications of such changes on the southern way of life. The fact that African Americans have proposed and managed to remove certain names that were notoriously linked to slave-ownership and the practice of slavery (George Washington and Thomas Jefferson) or with the Confederacy (Jefferson Davis, Generals Robert E. Lee, J. E. B. Stuart, Stonewall Jackson, and Nathan Bedford Forrest) from certain sites and rename them in honor of notable African American figures (Ronald McNair, Ernest N. Morial, Dr. Charles Richard Drew) shows an intention on the part of African Americans to redraw the region’s physical landscape through trying to edit out an indispensable, though not necessarily glorious, chapter of its history and culture. Here, African Americans are not only predating their struggle for recognition on the politics of memory, but also attempting to chart the waters of the politics of forgetting. “African Americans,” according to Alderman, “are 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.”<sup>46</sup> The MLK streetscape thus consciously and unconsciously articulates an unpronounced strategy on the part of African Americans to vie for a more equitable share not only of the region’s past, but also of its physical landscape. Given the long-standing history of

<sup>45</sup> D. Alderman, “School Names as Cultural Arenas: The Naming of US Public Schools after Martin Luther King, Jr.,” *Urban Geography*, 23, 7 (2002), 601–26, 602.

<sup>46</sup> Alderman, “Creating a New Geography of Memory in the South,” :57.

urban exclusion and residential segregation they have had to endure, these African Americans have seen in the pattern of street (re)naming the possibility to fight back against the overt and covert practices intrinsic to the pervasive process of spa-cialization in a country that purports to have gone postracial.

### MLK STREET NAMING: A STRATEGY FOR SPATIAL CONTROL

Since its emergence as a pattern in the 1980s, MLK street naming has largely been tied to the politics of remembering and forgetting. While there is much evidence to suggest that this conceptualization deserves traction, very little scholarly attention, however, has been paid to the “undeclared” motive(s) driving the campaign of African Americans to (re)name as many streets as they can after MLK, thus taking hold of the physical space. Considering the long history of spa-cialization, marked by white monopoly on the country’s physi-cultural landscape, it would not be unreasonable to argue that these African Americans have grown up with a fervent desire to lay claim to, and come to grips with, their physical and cultural environment. Their tireless effort to see the name of their civil rights leader widely adorn the texture of the human-built environment goes beyond the mere practice of commemoration and becomes instead a practice of occupying space. Accordingly, the politics of MLK commemorative street naming mask a struggle for spatial acquisition. This understanding seems to be in line with Mark Purcell’s view that the urge driving subaltern groups to appropriate space involves not only an inclination “to *occupy* already-produced urban space,” but also “the right to *produce* urban space so that it meets the needs of inhabitants.”<sup>47</sup>

The use of the term “undeclared” above is not arbitrary. This paper strongly advocates the idea that the pattern of MLK street naming, with its growing popularity and controversy over the last three decades, indicates that a cold spatial warfare has lately been simmering between Black and white communities, driven by a desperate passion for more control of the streetscape. In fact, it was Naftali Kadmon who first introduced the term “toponymic warfare” to draw our attention to the dialectical role of the strategy of place (re)naming in addressing geographies of exclusion and inclusion involving marginalized and dominant groups.<sup>48</sup> In the US, for example, both white and Black communities understand quite well that the control of the physical space goes first and foremost through the manipulation of the cultural landscape,

<sup>47</sup> M. Purcell, “Excavating Lefebvre: The Right to the City and Its Urban Politics of the Inhabitant,” *GeoJournal*, 58 (2002), 99–108, 103, emphasis added.

<sup>48</sup> N. Kadmon, “Toponymy and Geopolitics: The Political Use—and Misuse—of Geographical Names,” *Cartographic Journal*, 41 (2004), 85–87.

which, due to the process of specialization, has remained under whites' command. This domination, however, has not gone unopposed. Since the end of formal segregation in the 1960s, African Americans have exhibited no qualms about challenging white unilateral control and management of the built environment. The MLK streetscape exposes a deep-seated intention on the part of African Americans to use the cultural domain as a means of staking a claim to the physical environment. Behind the language of commemoration and cultural legitimation lurks an insatiable thirst for territorial expansionism. Thus this paper brings home the view that the politics of the MLK streetscape ought to be reinterpreted beyond its cultural symbolism and be understood as emblematic of a long-denied desire held by Black Americans for spatial autonomy equal to that enjoyed by their white counterparts.<sup>49</sup>

Among the practical measures adopted by African Americans to assert control over the urban landscape has been the de-Confederalization and then African-Americanization of the streetscape. While the former involves the removal of toponymic references to supremacist icons of slavery, leaders of the Ku Klux Klan, and unreconstructed advocates of segregation in the South, the latter addresses their replacement with Black-friendly names. This leads us to the crux of the debate surrounding the politics of King place naming, namely the geographical scale of the leader's commemoration. As a matter of fact, the geographical extent defining the contours and boundaries of the places to be (re)named after King or any Black activist lies at the heart of the "toponymic warfare" between Black and white communities in the South. While Black leaders aspire and mobilize to stretch King's names over major thoroughfares and streets that cut through white and Black neighborhoods, a technique known as "toponymic rescaling," whites insist on limiting such a tendency for the extension of Black street names into white neighborhoods by capitalizing on white fear of property devaluation and loss of economic capital.<sup>50</sup> This tug-of-war makes it doubtless that the real issue here goes beyond the simple question of identifying the scale at which King ought to be commemorated and celebrated, as most cultural geographers have claimed, to entail a deeper conflict over the boundaries of the color line in Dixie.

On a national level, the difficulties surrounding the politics of where and where not to place King's name have belied the much-professed claims

<sup>49</sup> Brasher, Alderman, and Subanthore, "Was Tulsa's Brady Street Really Renamed?", 15.

<sup>50</sup> R. Rose-Redwood, D. Alderman and J. Inwood, "Street Naming and the Politics of Belonging: Spatial Injustices in the Toponymic Commemoration of Martin Luther King, Jr.," in Rose-Redwood, Alderman, and Azaryahu, *The Political Life of Urban Streetscapes*, 328–46.



shaping the discourse of color-blindness and postracialism.<sup>51</sup> For though extrinsically these difficulties tend to curb the evocation of the civil rights leader's accomplishments, they intrinsically expose the enduring role of the process of spa-cialization in more broadly fixing the contours of racial integration. Seen from this angle, the pattern of street (re) naming should be reconceptualized as another tool used by African Americans to roll back the long history of their spatial and racial stigmatization. As Alderman and Inwood argue, "proponents of achieving a distributive justice through King street naming advocate for a 'toponymic rescaling,' hoping to reframe the spatial identities of places in new ways that literally and figuratively make more room for African American belonging."<sup>52</sup>

Indeed, had the politics of street branding for King simply been a matter of revivifying the leader's legacy, African Americans would have been more than content to see his name tethered to any site in the South, knowing that the region is notorious for having long been predicated on racial discrimination. In many instances, however, as in the cases of Eatonton, Sylvester, and Athens, Georgia, or Danville, Virginia, to name a few, African Americans refused to name a road or a street that did not occupy a sufficiently visible location in their cities and that failed to stem the tide of the long-standing process of spa-cialization. African Americans are quite cognizant that the construction of a new geography of memory can readily be conducive to an enlargement of their participation in the production and management of space. Put differently, to the extent that toponymic geographies are means of constructing and legitimating "cultural capital," they are also instruments of accumulating "spatial capital."<sup>53</sup>

African Americans' requests for the expansion of the geographical scale of streets named after King are often couched in the rhetoric of race relations or identity formation. The reservation of a large and distinctive road for King that stretches beyond the confines of the African American community, Black activists claim, would function as a bridge of cultural communication between the two racial groups, as well as educate the white population about the contributions of the civil rights leader not only to Black America but also to the nation at large. A small, dead-end road would restrict the extent of King's image and replicate the racial divides in the cityscape. Reacting to the county commission's vote against the extension of King's road in the city of Keysville, Georgia, mayor Emma Greshman commented,

<sup>51</sup> D. D'Souza, *The End of Racism* (New York: Free Press, 1995); K. Bruyneel, "The Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial and the Politics of Collective Memory," *History and Memory*, 26, 1 (2014), 75–108.

<sup>52</sup> Alderman and Inwood, "Street Naming and the Politics of Belonging," *Social & Cultural Geography*, 221. <sup>53</sup> Tiwari and Ambinakudige, "Streetscapes and Stereotyping."

“The whites who protested the new name need a little more knowledge about what King meant not only to his race but to America.”<sup>54</sup> In Statesboro, Georgia, Donnie Simmons, one of the local NAACP leaders, expressed the same idea thusly: “Dr. King lived a highly visible life and should have a highly visible place named ... I can never agree to renaming a street restricted to the black community. This would bury Dr. King in the black community and say that Dr. King was only for blacks ... King was against injustice for every man [*sic*].”<sup>55</sup> The spatial intentions behind the sociocultural declarations can be more pronounced in the statements of the NAACP leaders in Clearwater, Florida, when they were trying to persuade local officials to change the street that bore King’s name to a larger one for purposes of cultural identity and commemoration. To them, “If King is going to have a road named after him, it should be more significant. It should *traverse* different areas of the city, different *boundaries*.”<sup>56</sup>

Whites, at the other end of the spectrum, look askance at the progress of MLK street (re) naming in their areas because they understand quite well that the politics of toponymic inscription transcend the declared motives of commemoration and cultural recognition to include other tacit objectives that could possibly destabilize the geographic scale of Black/white presence in the region. Thus most attempts to African-Americanize some southern streets and sites have almost always been met with white reactionary forces aiming to hinder the success of such plans. And the more African Americans grow determined to conquer more space through the soft power of place naming and cultural exhibition, the more they face opposition from the White oligarchy.

As part of their strategy, whites do not generate any kind of opposition when the street chosen to be (re)named after King is situated within the confines of African American communities, as in the cases of Eatonton and Athens, Georgia.<sup>57</sup> As previously noted, African Americans were successful in supplanting some of the names of Confederate generals and planters with names of prominent Black figures. But when African Americans contemplate inscribing King’s name into a street that stretches beyond their neighborhoods to run through adjacent white areas, whites would have no scruples about

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in “Whites in Burke County Win Fight over Renaming Road,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 13 Jan. 1989, A18.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Rose-Redwood, Alderman, and Azaryahu, *The Political Life of Urban Streetscapes*, 342.

<sup>56</sup> C. Headrick, “NAACP Wants Martin Luther King Jr.: A Venue Moved,” *St. Petersburg Times*, 31 Aug. 2001, 7, added emphasis.

<sup>57</sup> Alderman, “Creating a New Geography of Memory in the South”; Alderman, “Street Names and the Scaling of Memory.”

thwarting the plan. Whites would either resort to mitigating the process of renaming or squarely re-Confederalize street names. “The struggle to have a major road named after King that cuts through and joins the white and black communities,” Alderman adjudicates, “is difficult ... because it involves challenging the authority of whites to control the scale at which blacks can mobilize and express themselves.”<sup>58</sup> As a result, the MLK streets in southern cities continue to be located in rundown, dilapidated areas and generally of little strategic significance.<sup>59</sup>

Whites mostly tend to couch their rejection of spatial connection to King’s name in sugarcoated racial terms. They contend that the figure of King and the cultural representations associated with him have little to do with white residents and, therefore, should not be imposed on their geographic cityscape. King’s name, in other words, ought to be identified with his people and restricted to areas with a Black majority.

They sometimes express those concerns in economic terms by claiming that their businesses would be compromised if their shops or offices were part of a street named after a Black leader. The case of Chattanooga is relevant here. Reverend Billingsley’s request to rename Ninth Street in honor of King was met with stiff resistance from white business owners, who expressed their deep concern about the economic repercussions of attaching their business addresses to an African American figure. According to T. A. Lupton, a white real-estate developer, “West Ninth Street is not related to King ... It is no longer a residential street or rundown business street. It is a top class business street that can play a great part in the future of Chattanooga.”<sup>60</sup> Even after the street was successfully rebranded for King in 1982, most business owners chose to avoid being identified with the civil rights leader by deciding to change their mailing addresses to a bordering street.

This section has demonstrated that underneath the fierce competition between the two racial groups over the construction of a geography of cultural memory lies vigorous warfare over the production and control of the urban landscape. The controversies over the MLK streetscape are twofold: a strong impulse on the part of African Americans to remove the long-standing spatial barriers separating the races, counterposed by white reluctance to rush headlong in that direction for fear of losing hold of their wages of whiteness, a shorthand for spatial, cultural, and economic capital.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Alderman, “Creating a New Geography of Memory in the South,” 60.

<sup>59</sup> Alderman, “Naming Streets for Martin Luther King.”

<sup>60</sup> P. Wilcox, “Unity Asked in Street Name Change,” *Chattanooga Times*, 25 March 1981, B1.

<sup>61</sup> D. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 2007).

Though this conflictual state of affairs might be mitigated following the countrywide protests against police brutality in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, it is still too early to judge whether a reversal policy of public commemoration that respects all races will soon be projected onto the physical landscape. But to end on a positive note, the fact that African Americans have lately started to compete with whites over the construction of the physi-cultural landscape marks a turning point in the traditional power relations between the two racial groups that can be attributable to "the growing political and social power of African Americans in post-Civil Rights Era South" and their ability to exercise pressure on their local governments.<sup>62</sup> These efforts echo the group's deep interest in having a voice in the spa-cial reconstruction of a region that has long been resistant to racial integration as well as antithetical to representations of Black culture and agency.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to illuminate a barely recognized feature of the politics of street naming by examining the issue in terms of the struggle on the part of African Americans for a wider share of space. For, in addition to their proclaimed statement to expand the scalar construction of cultural recognition, African Americans are also committed to a major overhaul of the spatial pattern on which racism has long been predicated. Indeed, MLK street naming goes beyond the mere symbolic form of resistance traditionally correlated with the celebration of the group's achievements and contributions to involve a more overarching quest for spa-cial justice. The long history and legacy of spa-cialization that has been in place since Black people set foot on American soil is today producing a strong sense for spatial reparation. Black leaders' and laypeople's insistence on having streets of major importance named for King is quite indicative of their thirst to acquire more space. And despite the facts that most attempts at (re)branding major streets in honor of King have been doomed to failure, and that most of those streets successfully named or renamed after him are restricted to demoted Black neighborhoods, it should also be noted that the movement to spatially commemorate King has largely contributed to the raising of a Black sense of power and awareness about their spatial rights, as well as the possibility of effecting change in the physi-cultural landscape in their favor. The politics of the MLK streetscape indicate a remarkable change in race and power relations in the region. On a broader note, the controversies and contentions surrounding the toponymic streetscape reform that involves people of color also reveal that

<sup>62</sup> Alderman, "Creating a New Geography of Memory in the South," 52.

America has yet to live up to its professed ideal of color-blindness and postracialism.

#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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