The Politics of Place-Naming

Use an online geographic information system (GIS) to uncover the geographic and social context of streets named after Martin Luther King, Jr. Map street locations to identify regional patterns in honoring King, consider issues related to data accuracy, explore the demographic character of the streets' host communities, and gain proficiency using a geospatial tool.

GRADES
9 - 12+

SUBJECTS
Geography, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), Human Geography, Social Studies, U.S. History

CONTENTS
3 Links, 1 PDF

OVERVIEW

Use an online geographic information system (GIS) to uncover the geographic and social context of streets named after Martin Luther King, Jr. Map street locations to identify regional patterns in honoring King, consider issues related to data accuracy, explore the demographic character of the streets' host communities, and gain proficiency using a geospatial tool.

For the complete activity with media resources, visit:
http://www.nationalgeographic.org/activity/politics-place-naming/

DIRECTIONS

DAY/SESSION 1

1. Review the life and activities of Martin Luther King, Jr.
Your teacher may choose to conduct a simple review, or this may have been done previously as part of a larger unit on civil rights (e.g., Rosa Parks, Brown v. Board of Education, etc.).

2. Read the provided handout “Naming Streets for Martin Luther King, Jr.: No Easy Road” (Alderman, 2006) and answer the three discussion questions that appear below on the provided worksheet.

This is a lengthy read, so your teacher may assign only certain portions or may assign the reading and questions as homework.

- Question 1: Investigate Figure 11.2 (p. 218 of the Alderman Chapter). What size community hosts the majority of streets named for King? Why?
- Question 2: What type of groups typically initiate campaigns to name streets for King? Why?
- Question 3: Consider the Brent, Alabama, example (p. 225). Should it matter where the named street is located so long as Martin Luther King, Jr. is commemorated?

DAY/SESSION 2

Follow the procedure below.

1. Open the provided map, Comparing Street Names and Demographic Data. Make sure both layers are turned on. Then answer the first map discussion question below.

   - Question 1: An orange point indicates an area that has a street named after Martin Luther King, Jr. Is there a pattern for MLK-named streets? If so, what reason(s) account for that pattern?

2. In the same map, zoom in to any location. As the scale becomes larger, county lines will appear, then Census tracts, and then Census block groups. If you zoom in too far, the Census data will disappear and only the streets layer will be visible.

3. Click on any shape—county, tract, block group—and a pie chart will appear that shows the racial/ethnic make-up of that spatial unit.
4. Investigate the racial/ethnic make-up for several places. Suggested places outside of the Southeast include Buffalo, New York, and Bakersfield, California. Buffalo shows a high African American concentration near the streets named after King; for Bakersfield, it is Hispanic near the street point. Remember that the point is not necessarily lined up with the street. In this case (Bakersfield), there is a sizable African American population near the actual road location and a park named for King, too.

5. Answer Question 2 after exploring the map:

- Question 2: Do you think that MLK-named streets are randomly located or are they purposefully located in specific neighborhoods? What data would you need to investigate this question?

6. After investigating various places and their relationships to streets named for King, answer Question 3:

- Question 3: Why do you think re-naming a street after King is sometimes difficult? Can you think of any other historic or contemporary person that should be honored with a street name? Would other people agree with your choice?

What You’ll Need

MATERIALS YOU PROVIDE

- Paper
- Pencils, pens

REQUIRED TECHNOLOGY

- Internet Access: Required
- Tech Setup: 1 computer per classroom, 1 computer per learner, Projector

RECOMMENDED PRIOR ACTIVITIES

- None

BACKGROUND

Background Information
Streets are so common in everyday use that they often escape notice. Their names are more common still—with Second, Third, First, Fourth, and Park as the top five names in the United States. Yet some names evoke far more than a simple moniker atop a signpost. Consider Pennsylvania Avenue, Beale Street, or Sunset Boulevard and images of specific buildings, activities, people, or landscapes come to mind.

An appreciation of place goes beyond a simple understanding of the human and physical characteristics of a location. Rather, this appreciation also involves recognizing how places are actively created or constructed by social actors and groups, who view and experience the wider world in different and sometimes competing ways. Consequently, the creation of place—how it appears and functions, and what it means to people—can become points of contest. The “politics of place” suggests that our most taken-for-granted places are formed through negotiation and even struggle as people engage in broader debates over culture, identity, and symbols.

Street-naming may at first glance appear to be a fairly innocuous exercise, a way of simply creating a system of spatial reference and orientation. Yet, street names are also symbols to which people attach meaning and from which they draw identity, and the naming process can give us insight into the history and social power relations in a particular place. When communities seek to commemorate their past through street signs, disagreement may arise over what or who is honored. In these instances, street names—as socially constructed and contested places—become important public arenas for debating whether certain historical figures are worthy of being remembered publicly. The remembrance of Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) along America’s roadways is a noteworthy example of this dynamic.

**Vocabulary**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Part of Speech</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ArcGIS</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>Geographic information software created by the company ESRI.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Census Bureau</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>government organization responsible for demographic information about the U.S. population, as well as the analyzing of that data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>civil rights</td>
<td>plural noun</td>
<td>set of fundamental freedoms guaranteed to all individuals, such as participation in the political system, ability to own property, and due process and equal protection under the law.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Term</td>
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<tr>
<td>data</td>
<td>plural noun</td>
<td>(singular: datum) information collected during a scientific study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>data layer</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>individual file added to a GIS map, adding a specific type of information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>demographic</td>
<td>adjective</td>
<td>having to do with the social characteristics and statistics of a population.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>geographic information</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>any system for capturing, storing, checking, and displaying data related to positions on the Earth's surface.</td>
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<tr>
<td>system (GIS)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>map feature</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>an item displayed on a visual spatial representation</td>
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<tr>
<td>population</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>total number of people or organisms in a particular area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>spatial data</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>information used to pose, analyze, and resolve problems about the Earth's surface that reflect environmental and human processes.</td>
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LEARN MORE

For Further Exploration

Websites

- MLK Blvd: Open Source Journalism and Photography Project

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