A Street Named for a King: The Politics of Place-Naming

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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.[1] 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. For our classrooms, streets and their names can serve as an important component in teaching one of the main themes of geography—an appreciation of place.

Dr. M L King Jr. Blvd., New Bern, North Carolina. (Photograph by Derek Alderman)

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" has emerged as a major approach within geography, one that 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.[2]

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.

The United States now contains no fewer than 890 streets, boulevards, avenues, and courts named for the slain civil rights icon, according to our research. They number as high as 128 in Georgia to 1 in Wyoming and Alaska, and 10 states (mainly Mountain/Great Plains and New England) have none. The naming of streets for Dr. King is certainly about honoring his individual contributions, but it is also about creating places that retell the history of the United States to include a wider, more racially and ethnically diverse society. Even as streets named after King reflect the increased cultural and political power of blacks and the liberalization of white attitudes, they also are sites of struggle for African Americans. In particular, to name a street after King often involves determining *where* best to emplace his name within the community, deciding which street to name or re-name, and debating whether that location does justice to King's memory. African American
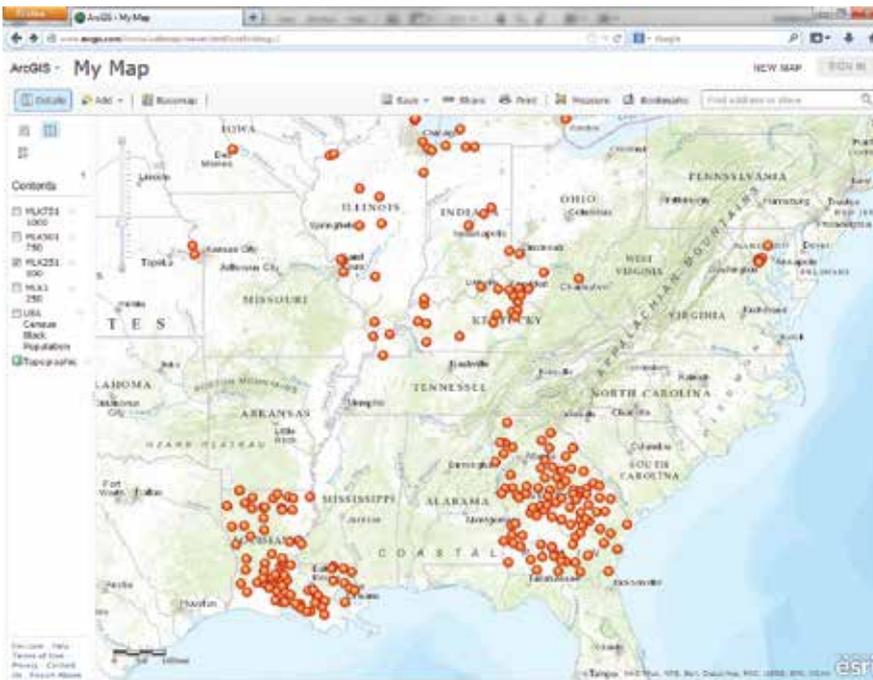
Figure 1. Adding MLK street data. The CSV file containing Georgia, Louisiana, and Midwestern points is shown. Each point displays attribute data (city, state, zip code) when clicked. (Image sourced from **ArcGIS.com**)
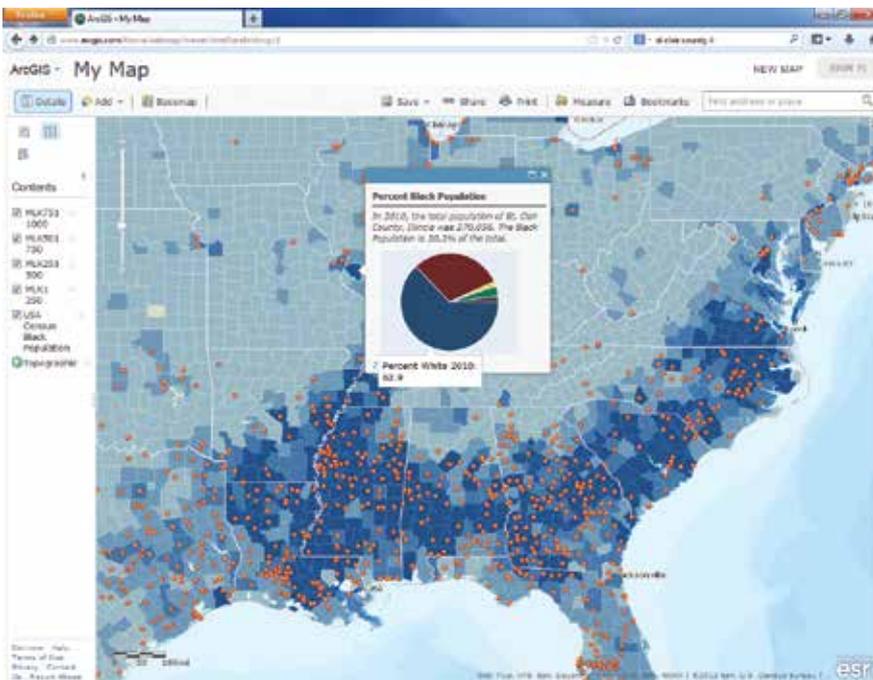

Figure 2. 2010 Census data added to the map showing Percent Black Population. Counties can be selected to display specific demographic data, for example St. Clair County, Illinois. (Image sourced from **ArcGIS.com**)

activists who seek to rename major thoroughfares have confronted significant public opposition, frequently leading to the placement of Martin Luther King Jr.'s name on minor streets or portions of roads located entirely within African American neighborhoods. The process of naming a street after King, then, can be more than a celebration of the man and his work, but also a test of social equality within communities. As Alderman previously observed, "Streets named after [Martin Luther] King illustrate the important yet contentious ways in which race, place, and memory intersect through the American landscape."[3]

The lesson described on pages 125–126, which we have carried out with high school students as well as pre-service and in-service teachers, uses an online geographic information system (GIS) to uncover the geographic and social context of streets named after King, prompting students to consider why these named streets are found in certain places and not in others and what forces and decisions likely drive these patterns. Students map the street locations to uncover regional patterns in honoring King, wrestle with issues related to data accuracy, explore the demographic character of the street's host community, and gain proficiency using a geospatial tool. In doing so, students gain a firmer appreciation and analytical understanding of streets and their names in terms of the cultural politics of naming and making places. The lesson also allows students to explore the specific dimensions of an increasingly popular but contentious addition to the United States landscape—a landscape movement that is ongoing as communities continue to propose and debate ways to commemorate the civil rights movement.

The Politics of Martin Luther King Jr. Street-naming

The commemoration of Martin Luther King Jr. through street (re)naming is part of a larger movement to redress the exclusion of African American experiences and achievements from the national historical consciousness. The naming of streets for King began soon after his assassination, with Chicago

Grade level: 9–12, secondary
Objectives:

- Identify factors that may make street-naming, or place-making, contentious.
- Import spatial data into an online geographic information system and construct a map.
- Compare the location of MLK-named streets with demographic data for the same area and offer explanations for any resulting patterns.
- Gain procedural knowledge of geospatial technology using an online geographic information system.

Time needed: 2 days
Materials: Computer lab, classroom computer with digital projection, or overhead projector (see display comments at beginning of Procedures below): the background reading (Derek Alderman, "Naming Streets after Martin Luther King, Jr.: No Easy Road," in *Landscape and Race in the United States*, ed. Rich Schein. London: Routledge, 2006) and the Martin Luther King Jr. street data files can be freely downloaded at **http://artsandsciences.sc.edu/cege/mlk.html**; handout with discussion questions.

Resources

GIS (geographic information system) mapping software is available from ESRI. This software can be used freely by establishing a user account at **www.arcgis.com.** Once logged in, users can change the base map and begin adding data.

Procedures:

Different options exist here: (1) the instructor may construct the maps ahead of the lesson and present it via overhead or digital projection; (2) the instructor may complete the investigation step-by-step during class from the classroom computer; or (3) the students complete the investigation themselves in a computer lab. These procedures are written for the third option.

Day One

1. Highlight the life and activities of Martin Luther King, Jr. 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.), so a simple review may be appropriate here.
2. Have the students read "Naming Streets after Martin Luther King, Jr.: No Easy Road" (Alderman, 2006) at **http://artsandsciences. sc.edu/cege/mlk.html** and answer the three discussion questions provided here. This is a lengthy read, so the teacher may elect to assign only certain portions. A short discussion of the reading and discussion questions may close Day One. If extra time was spent on Step 1, the reading and discussion questions

may be assigned for homework. The questions and suggested answers are below:

Question 1: Investigate Figure 11.2 (p. 218 of the Alderman Chapter). What size community hosts the majority of streets named for King? Why? [Answer: The majority of U.S. streets named for King are in places with a population of fewer than 10,000 people. Small places far outnumber large places.]

Question 2: What type of groups typically initiate campaigns to name streets for King? Why? [Answer: Campaigns are often conducted by the NAACP, churches, and various African American-led community improvement associations.]

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? [Answer: In the Brent case, location mattered considerably. As to whether it *should* matter, student responses will vary.]

Day Two

1. Download the street files to your computer. Visit **http://www. artsandsciences.sc.edu/cege/mlk.html** and save four CSV files to your computer: MLK1_250, MLK251_500, MLK501_750, MLK751_1000.
2. Via the Internet, pull up the **ArcGIS.com** website and login using your personal account.
3. Click on the tab labeled "Map" on the top bar. A map of the world will appear and you will be able to add data.
4. Using the "Basemap" tab, select either "Streets" or "OpenStreetMap."
5. Click on the "Add" tab. This button has a small "plus" sign on it. Select "Add Layer from File" from the drop-down menu. An "Add Layer from File" window will appear.
6. Click on "Browse." A new window will appear for you to select the first of the files of streets named after King. Select that file and click "Import Layer." A new window will appear titled "Add CSV Layer." Make sure that the Location Fields are marked "City," "State," and "Zipcode." Click "Add Layer."
7. Martin Luther King Jr. street features will appear on the map (Figure 1). This is a subset of the total dataset as ArcGIS.com will only allow you to import 250 features at a time. Repeat steps 5-6 to add the full dataset to your map. Add MLK251_500, MLK501_750, MLK751_1000.
8. With the first map complete, have the students answer the first two map discussion questions. Suggested answers follow.

Question 1: Is there a pattern for MLK-named streets? If so, what reason(s) account for that pattern? [Answer: Most features are in the Southeast; other features are in Northern cities with sizable African American populations; another interesting pattern is the central California valley (farm workers, progressive politics)].

Question 2: Choose a Martin Luther King Jr. point feature and zoom in to it. Can you find the King-named street? If not, why not? [Answer: Many point features do not line up with a street named for King. This is an important point regarding the King dataset. The Martin Luther King Jr. street features are represented by a point inside a zip code area that contains the street. If a student zooms in to a specific point, they may not readily see a street named for King nearby. The street data was collected at the zip code scale, not street level, and the point feature is simply at the center of the zip code area. A good example to illustrate this issue is Columbia, South Carolina. If one zooms in to that feature, it appears to be on "Lower Richland Boulevard." A quick glance to the east shows where "Martin Luther King Boulevard" is located. Another example is Cheyenne, Wyoming. Just to the southwest of the point is the Martin Luther King Jr. Park and the Martin Luther King Jr. Court].

9. Add demographic data. Click on the "Add" tab. Choose "Search for Layers" from the drop-down menu.
10. In the side bar window, type "Census 2010 Black" into the "Find" spaces and click "Go." A series of datasets will appear. Select "USA Census Black Population" by clicking "add."
11. The new data has been added to your existing map (Figure 2). Zoom in to any location. As the scale becomes larger, county lines will appear, and then Census tracts, then Census block groups. If you zoom in too far, the Census data will disappear and only the streets layer will be visible.
12. Click on any feature—county, tract, block group—and a pie chart will appear that shows the racial/ethnic make-up of that spatial unit (Figure 2).
13. Have students 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.
14. Have students answer Question 3 after viewing the new map:

Question 3: 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? [Answer: Streets named after King are frequently located in sections of cities that have higher numbers of African American residents. This naming, often a street re-naming, process can be politically contentious. The second part of this question was answered by adding a new dataset, 2010 Census race data (see step 10).]

15. After investigating various places and their relationships to streets named for King, close the lesson by discussing Question 4:

Question 4: 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? [Answer: This question is used to close the lesson. Answers may vary. Obviously most Americans would be repulsed by a "Bin Laden Boulevard," but others would express distaste for a street named for Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, or Harvey Milk depending on their political or social leanings. Street-naming is a political act that defines who controls a particular space. Many people believe that how their place is represented also has an impact on things such as property values].

EXPANSION ACTIVITY

Additional demographic and other data is available for use in online ArcGIS. For example, students may include "USA Median Household Income" and investigate the relationship between that variable and an MLK-named street.

Note about the Martin Luther King Jr. street dataset
*The dataset of streets named after King has been compiled over the past decade. It is a conservative, yet confirmed, listing of streets named after King. New streets are named/re-named, and not all instances may have been uncovered. The varied naming also complicates identification (street, blvd., MLK, MLK, Jr., Martin Luther King, etc.). The dataset is made available in four separate files since the free online GIS—**ArcGIS.com**—only allows data uploads of 250 features or less. CSV files are comma-separated values where tabular data is in plain-text form. These files are readable and can be modified in Microsoft's Excel spreadsheet software. The data points are not line features. The MLK street features are represented by a point at the center of the zip code area that contains the street.*
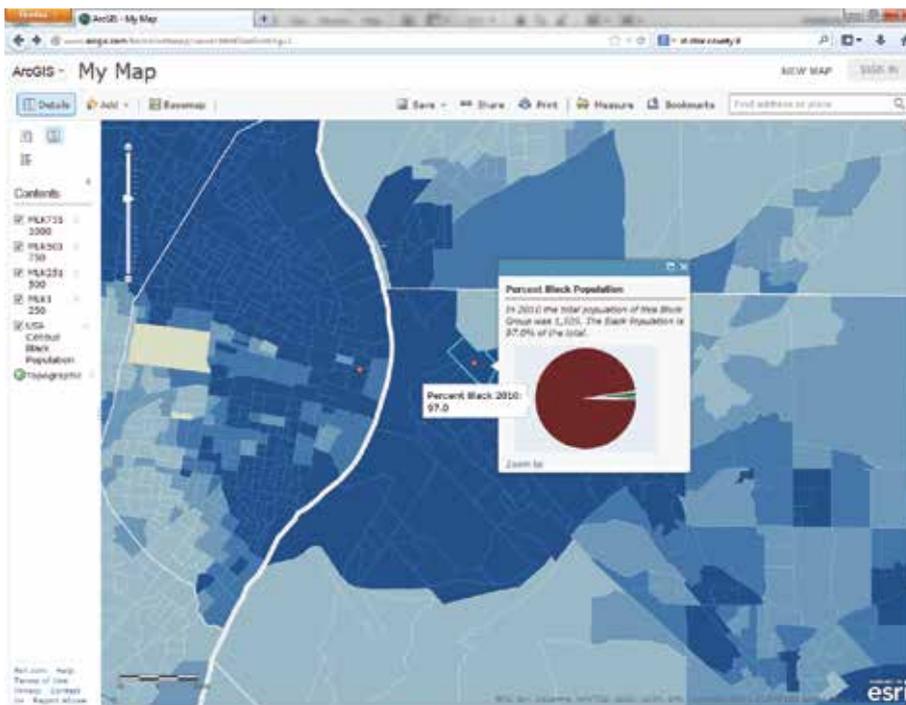
Figure 3. The same Martin Luther King Jr. street location in Fig. 2 (East St. Louis, Illinois) is shown at a larger scale. Map readers can now see that the census block containing the street is 97 percent Black. Fig. 2 showed the same county to be approximately 63% White, illustrating the importance of scale to answering geographic questions (Image sourced from **ArcGIS.com**)

THE POLITICS OF PLACE-NAMING *from page 124*

perhaps being the first city to honor him in this way.[4] King's status and the legitimacy of street-naming ceremonies rose after the federal government established a federal holiday in his honor in the early 1980s. At the same time, street-naming offers a geographic permanence and year-round visibility to the civil rights leader's memory that the birthday celebration in January cannot provide. Martin Luther King drives, boulevards, and avenues are often important centers of African American identity, activity, and community, demonstrating the importance of streets and street names as components of place and place identity.

Overall, King streets are found most often in places where African Americans represent at least a third of a city's population, which reflects the strong role that activism plays in the street-naming process. Local chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference

(SCLC), and other African American–led community improvement associations and coalitions are often responsible for street-naming proposals. There are noteworthy instances of whites not only supporting the cause but leading it. Most often, however, the naming process becomes a contested cultural arena that exposes continued racial divisions within communities and opens up political debates about King and his legacies as well as larger issues of racism and power in America. These debates have led to shouting matches at government meetings, boycotts of businesses, protest marches, petition drives, court appeals and injunctions, vandalizing of roads, and activists chaining themselves to street sign poles.[5]

Although seemingly ordinary and unimportant in nature, street names offer a means of making the past a visible and intimate part of the everyday realm. Street names have a geographic connectivity that contributes to their symbolism—providing a unique way of linking people and places that would otherwise be insular and of educating the larger white public about King's importance.

Some proponents believe that naming a smaller, less prominent street for King degrades the civil rights leader's historical importance and perpetuates the same aspects of segregation that he battled. In the words of journalist Jonathan Tilove, "To name any street for King is to invite an accounting of how the street makes good on King's promise or mocks it."[6]

Yet, it is the power of street names to touch and connect disparate groups—some of which may not identify with King—that also makes the practice controversial. Commercial interests are consistently the most vocal opponents to having their street addresses changed, citing not only cost and inconvenience but also a potential stigma, as they see it, of having their street identified with King. As author Guillermo Caliendo notes, for many in America, "King streets … signify Blackness, poor Black people, and even a dangerous neighborhood whereby commemoration recalls not social achievements by African Americans but a socioeconomic decay of Black neighborhoods"[7] These images can be self-fulfilling, though there are streets named after King that defy this stereotype. Nevertheless, many city officials "respond to the potentially racial and negative overtones of naming a street for King by segregating his name within the African American community, thus further reinforcing the material basis or reality of the stigmatization." [8]

Given the central and controversial role that location plays within the politics of memorializing Martin Luther King through street-naming, it is imperative that students develop the critical perspectives required to understand how, why, and where these named streets have emerged in the United States.

Planning a Lesson around Martin Luther King Street-Naming

The lesson on pages 125–126 engages students directly with themes ❷ TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE and ❸PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS in the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies. Here geography is coupled with an analy-

sis of history and the legacy of the past to first identify patterns of naming streets for King and then to offer explanation for those patterns as they appeared over time.[9] The dual emphasis on continuity and change in the social studies standards is especially relevant. The United States has a long history of naming places, especially streets, after patriot heroes and other notables, but the presence of roads named for King signal an important reversal or *change* in the traditional omission of African Americans within places of public commemoration. At the same time, the location-based struggles that surround the naming of streets after King highlight the continuing difficulties in challenging the social and spatial control historically exerted by a white political establishment over minorities, suggesting that naming streets "Martin Luther King Jr." represents an extension rather than a culmination of the civil rights movement.

A second goal of the lesson is student use of geospatial technology. Geographic information systems, specifically, offer problem-solving applications appropriate across many disciplines, including the social studies, and a number of educators have successfully demonstrated its utility in the K-12 classroom.[10] Online geographic information systems, like the type utilized here, eliminate many of the traditional barriers to GIS classroom use (e.g., cost, software maintenance, learning curve). Not only can GIS be an important teaching and learning tool; evidence is mounting that its use can result in improved student achievement.[11]

Summary

Social studies educators are tasked with bringing past people, places, and events into the present, highlighting the often complex interplay between them. The Martin Luther King street lesson outlined here allows students to investigate contemporary landscape features born out of a struggle for equality that still plays out in America today. Civic engagement, history, and geography are brought together through GIS by uncovering regional patterns and demographic correlations not easily explored otherwise. Students use geospatial technology, question their past, and learn that they do more than "live" in places; they learn that they are capable of (re)making them, too. 🌐

Notes

1. National League of Cities, "Most Common U.S. Street Names" (Washington, D.C.: 2013), www.nlc.org/build-skills-and-networks/resources/cities-101/city-factoids/most-common-us-street-names.

2. Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

3. Derek Alderman, "Naming Streets after Martin Luther King, Jr.: No Easy Road," in *Landscape and Race in the United States*, ed. Rich Schein (London: Routledge, 2006), 213-236.

4. Jonathan Tilove, *Along Martin Luther King: Travels on Black America's Main Street* (New York: Random House, 2003).

5. Owen Dwyer and Derek Alderman, *Civil Rights Memorials and the Geography of Memory* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2008)

6. Tilove.

7. Guillermo Caliendo, "MLK Boulevard: Material Forms of Memory and the Social Contestation of Racial Signification," *Journal of Black Studies* 42, no. 7 (2011): 1148–1170.

8. Matthew Mitchelson, Derek Alderman, and Jeff Popke, "Branded: the Economic Geographies of MLK Streets," *Social Science Quarterly* 88, no. 1 (2007): 120-145.

9. National Council for the Social Studies, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Washington, D.C.: NCSS, 2010), www.socialstudies.org.

10. Jerry T. Mitchell, Jeremy Cantrill, and Justin Kearse, "The "Why" and "Where" of the Tappan Zee Bridge: A Lesson in Site Location, Physical Geography, and Politics," *Social Education* 76, no. 4 (2012): 205–209; Marsha Alibrandi and Herschel Sarnoff, "Using GIS to Answer the "Whys" of "Where" in Social Studies," *Social Education* 70, no. 3 (2006): 138-143; Anne Kelly Knowles, ed., *Past Time, Past Place: GIS for History* (Redlands, Calif.: ESRI Press, 2002).

11. Ali Demirci, Ahmet Karaburun, and Mehmet Unlu, "Implementation and Effectiveness of GIS-Based Projects in Secondary Schools," *Journal of Geography* 112, no. 5 (2013): 214–228; Donna Goldstein and Marsha Alibrandi, "Integrating GIS in the Middle School Curriculum: Impacts on Diverse Students' Standardized Test Scores," *Journal of Geography* 112, no. 2 (2013): 68–74.

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