Commemorating Racial Violence: Street Naming and Segregation in New York City, 1999

KITADA Eri *

In December 1999, a stretch of Pacific Street in Brooklyn, New York, was renamed “Michael Griffith Street.” Griffith was a black man who had been killed in a predominantly white neighborhood in 1986 for the color of his skin. The street was renamed to remember this incident.¹

The creation of Michael Griffith Street is an example of race-based commemorative naming, which has become an increasingly wide-spread practice in post-civil rights America. Scholars have discussed the significance and problems of commemorative place naming after African Americans, but their analyses largely refer to cases of famous black figures,² and they have paid limited attention to commemorations of ordinary people. I argue that Michael Griffith Street, a street that commemorates someone who had been virtually unknown until he became the victim of racial violence, shows not only similarities to other cases of commemorative naming for prominent black figures but also a unique paradox. His death was partly a consequence of racial housing segregation in New York City,³ and the street was renamed to remember the victim and

* A Ph.D. student at Department of Area Studies, The University of Tokyo [elhiktd@gmail.com]. This work was supported by the America-Japan Society under Research Fund 2011 for Research Trip; and the Department of Area Studies at the University of Tokyo under Grants for Excellent Graduate Schools, 2013. This paper was presented at several conferences. In particular, the trip for the 2014 Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers in Tampa, US, was aided by the American Studies Foundation and Shibusawa Foundation for Ethnological Studies. I would like to thank the anonymous referees of Nanzan Review of American Studies for the careful reading of the manuscript and valuable suggestions. Finally, I want to express my sincere gratitude to the family members of Michael Griffith.

3. Some scholars have pointed out the connection between residential segregation and racial violence, including the case of Michael Griffith. Howard Pinderhughes, “The Anatomy of Racially Motivated Violence in New York City: A Case Study of Youth in Southern
demonstrate the community’s resistance to such cases of racial violence. The paradox here is that, despite its purpose to protest against violence and racial discrimination, the physical location of the street was strongly influenced by the very structure of racial residential segregation that triggered the attack on and the death of Michael Griffith.

The ongoing movement of Black Lives Matter derives from the killing of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, in February 2012, and became intensified through the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in August 2014. The former was a vigilante act, seemingly a hate crime, in a gated community, and the latter was police brutality that happened in a predominantly black suburb. Despite this difference, these two cases strongly indicate that racial violence on black bodies is still a twenty-first century issue and such blatant racism is deeply rooted in the division of living spaces. This paper explores a story after such incidents that prompted the interrogation of spatial justice.


5. The phrase “hate crime” began to draw attention in the 1980s along with discussions about legislation to criminalize the violence motivated by bias at the state and federal levels. Jennifer Bussey ed., Hate Crimes (Farmington Hills: Greenhaven Press, 2007), 117–129.

6. In particular, the recent upsurge of suburban studies has resonated with the growing and historical heterogeneity of suburbia. Historians’ understanding of postwar American suburbs has shifted from the vision of homogenous area of affluent whites or incubator of grassroots conservatism to the understanding that suburbs are a diverse and complicated space. For example, see Kevin M. Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue, eds., The New Suburban History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).


8. Geographers have fostered the concept of spatial justice by engaging social justice issues with inequality surrounding space, environment, and territory. According to Edward W. Soja, spatial justice intends to facilitate effective actions for change as well as to understand situations. Edward W. Soja, Seeking Spatial Justice (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 2; Ava Bromberg, Gregory D. Morrow, and Deirdre Pfeiffer, “Editorial Note:
In the sections that follow I look at how racial violence is commemorated in the daily landscape of an urban environment. The first section situates this case study of Michael Griffith Street in scholarly conversations on place naming, residential segregation, and the politics of memory. The second section traces the 1986 incident that resulted in the death of Griffith. The third section shows the process of official naming and the difficulty of commemorating racial violence. Finally, the fourth section examines the reaction of the black community to this naming. The 1999 case of Michael Griffith Street offers a certain way of remembering violence and demonstrates the ambivalence of the black community towards this politics of memory.

Photo 1: A sign of Michael Griffith Street. Taken by author, 2016.

Street Naming, Segregation, Shifting Forms of Commemoration

The last three decades have witnessed a growing, sophisticated body of scholarship on toponymy, the study of place names. Cultural geographers have


9. Because of an increased interest in the contested nature of memory and the emerging perceptions including “imagined communities” and “invented traditions” since the 1980s, the geographical scholarship on place names has shifted from traditionally etymologic and taxonomic approaches to investigation into the practice of place naming and its power politics. Reuben Rose-Redwood, Derek Alderman and Maoz Azaryahu, "Geographies of Toponymic Inscription: New Directions in Critical Place-Name Studies,” *Progress in Human Geography* 34, no. 4 (2010): 453–470; Lawrence D. Berg and Jani Vuolteenaho, “Towards Critical Toponymies,” in *Critical Toponymies: The Contested Politics of Place Naming*, eds. Berg and Vuolteenaho (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 1–18; Frédéric Giraut and Myriam Houssay-
emphasized the relation between place names and power because place naming has been deeply related to such significant issues as nation-state building, colonization, and struggles for minority representation. In particular, many previous works have explored the relation between race and the politics of naming. Derek H. Alderman is one of the leading scholars who considers the meaning of place names in the context of African American memories. He has investigated the practice of naming places such as streets and schools after Martin Luther King, Jr. (hereafter King) to understand how such names are central to the creation of commemorative sites.\(^\text{10}\) Eliot M. Tretter has further expanded the scope of research on commemorative place naming by paying attention to spaces named for other prominent black individuals. According to Tretter, names of African American men, particularly that of King, represent the majority of places named after African Americans in the United States as a whole. “King” comprises two thirds of such place names and this naming practice is especially concentrated in small towns in the southern states. Meanwhile, places that commemorate African Americans besides King are more generally seen in metropolitan areas in the mid-Atlantic region.\(^\text{11}\) Both Alderman and Tretter note that these commemorative place names are concentrated in predominantly black districts.

Meanwhile, Reuben S. Rose-Redwood has focused on places named after African Americans in Harlem, New York. Not surprisingly Harlem has a disproportionate number of such places as it is a well-known black district. While previous studies have described the controversies about the King streets as a conflict between black activists (proponents) and white business people or residents (opponents), Rose-Redwood points out that the black community is not always in agreement about commemorative naming practices. For example, in 1988, Harlem residents on Fifth Avenue failed to reach a consensus to change Fifth Avenue to Marcus Garvey Boulevard. The name “Fifth Avenue” has a prestigious image even though in Harlem it is not lined with expensive shops. The middle-class black residents on the street refused to replace their prestigious sounding address with Garvey’s name.\(^\text{12}\)


\(^{11}\) Tretter, “The Power of Naming.”

\(^{12}\) Reuben S. Rose-Redwood, “From Number to Name: Symbolic Capital, Places of
Thanks to the work of cultural geographers, other scholars outside the
discipline are now beginning to take note of the significance of place naming. In
particular, scholars working in fields such as urban/suburban history concerned
with residential segregation are increasingly paying attention to place naming.\textsuperscript{13}

These works have revealed that many of the places named after African
Americans are concentrated in primarily black districts. It may not be surprising
that such places are located in the neighborhoods with a large black population;
black residents would more willingly commemorate figures of their own race.
But Tretter also notes that the distributional pattern of such commemorative places
reinforces the reality of residential segregation.\textsuperscript{14} The correlation between such
disproportionate distributions of place names and existing segregation is rarely
questioned by the black community or by people of other races, because the
presence of more places named after African Americans seems like a positive
social change. As historian Dylan Gottlieb implies, the preservation and
introduction of names with racial overtones in racially isolated areas have been
elusively bolstered by the colorblindness of the post-civil rights era.\textsuperscript{15}

Naming public places for African American luminaries, the product of the civil
rights and post-civil rights eras, serves to underscore a traditional memory practice
that celebrates historical events and honors heroes and martyrs. Since the end of
World War II, however, memorials have increasingly been created for tragic
events and victims of violence.\textsuperscript{16} Place naming articulates such shifting forms of
commemoration. For example, Mia Swart focuses on street name changes for
victims of past atrocities in post-Holocaust Germany, Austria, and post-Apartheid

\textsuperscript{13} Dylan Gottlieb, “Sixth Avenue Heartache: Race, Commemoration, and the Colorblind
1085–1105; Higuchi Hayumi, “Amerikagasshukoku no jinshuchitsujo wo meguru kinkyo:
Chaperuhiru no dourokaiheimeronsou to saikaihatsu no jirei kara” [The current situation
surrounding racial orders in the United States: Focusing on a controversial street renaming and
gentrification in Chapel Hill], \textit{Rekishigakukenkyu} 865 (2010): 33–42; Josh Sides, “Straight into
Compton: American Dreams, Urban Nightmares, and the Metamorphosis of a Black Suburb,”
\textit{American Quarterly} 56, no. 3 (2004): 583–605.

\textsuperscript{14} Tretter, “The Power of Naming”: 51–52.

\textsuperscript{15} Gottlieb, “Sixth Avenue Heartache.” Colorblindness means the situation after the civil
rights movements, in which racism in public policy and everyday practice is covert and
different from conventional overt racism. Also see Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, \textit{Racism Without
Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America} (Lanham:
Rowman and Littlefield, 2009).

\textsuperscript{16} Kenneth E. Foote and Maoz Azaryahu, “Toward a Geography of Memory: Geographical
Dimensions of Public Memory and Commemoration,” \textit{Journal of Political and Military
Sociology} 35, no. 1 (2007): 130–131; Erika Doss, \textit{Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America}
South Africa.\(^{17}\) She considers street naming to be “part of a package of restorative measures”\(^{18}\) and, at the same time, points out the complicated relationship between victims and conventional heroes in the politics of memorialization.

Michael Griffith Street is also a part of such a phenomenon to embrace the painful past (or present). In the United States, there are a certain number of place names that commemorate victims of racial violence, including victims of hate crimes and police brutality.\(^{19}\) The American landscape is a tapestry of places named for tragic memories as well as those named after heroes. The story of Michael Griffith Street illuminates a moment in which the unique purpose to remember his unjust death came into collision with the conventional norm.

**The “Howard Beach Incident”**

The incident that led to the creation of Michael Griffith Street began in the night of December 19, 1986, and lasted until the early hours of the following morning. Three young black men were found walking in a predominantly white district of Queens in New York City. Their car had stalled and they were looking for a nearby subway station. The men were Michael Griffith, 23, a construction worker whose family had come from Trinidad-Tobago; Cedric Sandiford, 36, also a construction worker who had left Guyana as a teenager and who was then the fiancé of Griffith’s mother; and Timothy Grimes, 18, who was unemployed at that time and was the boyfriend of Sandiford’s niece.\(^{20}\)

---


\(^{18}\) Swart, “Name Changes as Symbolic Reparation after Transition,” 106.

\(^{19}\) There are more than ten sites remembering the victims of racial violence in several US regions. As far as I have investigated, there are the following eight sites in New York City: Manuel Mayi Jr. Corner (located in Queens, named in 1997), Michael Griffith Street (Brooklyn, 1999), Anthony Baez Place (The Bronx, 2000), Julio Rivera Corner (Queens, 2000), Nicholas Naquan Heyward, Jr. Park (Brooklyn, 2001), Amadou Diallo Place (The Bronx, 2002), Timothy Stansbury Jr. Avenue (Brooklyn, 2005), and Sean Bell Way (Queens, 2009). In addition, Chicago has Emmet Till Road (named in 1991) to memorialize Emmett Till, who was lynched in Mississippi, 1955. Sandra Bland Parkway in Prairie View City, Texas, was named in 2015 for an African American woman who was found dead in her cell after her unjust arrest. Mamie Till-Mobley and Christopher Benson, *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime That Changed America* (New York: Random House, 2003), 260; Alice Barr, “Texas City Will Keep Road Named after Sandra Bland,” *USA Today*, September 23, 2015, accessed September 22, 2016, http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/09/23/sandra-bland-road-name-remains/72666544/.

\(^{20}\) Charles J. Hynes and Bob Drury, *Incident at Howard Beach: The Case for Murder* (New
Near the New Park Pizzeria on 157th Avenue, they chanced upon three young white men — Salvadore DeSimone, 18, John Lester, 16, and William Bollander, 17. These men had just left a birthday party at their friend’s house nearby and were driving home a girlfriend of their friend, Scott Kern. When these teenagers saw the three black men standing at a crosswalk near the pizzeria, DeSimone honked his horn and flashed his high beams. The two groups jeered at each other for a while. After dropping off Kern’s girlfriend, DeSimone, Lester, and Bollander returned to the party, and reportedly appealed to their friends by saying, “There’s [sic] some n*ggers in the pizza parlor, and we should go back and kill them.” In response, a total of twelve teenagers left the party in cars loaded with baseball bats and tree limbs, and soon confronted the three black men at a parking lot outside the pizzeria. While Grimes quickly managed to escape by running north along Cross Bay Boulevard, Griffith and Sandiford were soon cornered by the white youths. Griffith somehow managed to escape through a fence hole and ran to the Belt Parkway. However, there he was hit by a car driven by an off-duty corrections officer named Dominick Blum. When police officers arrived, they found Griffith dead on the street. Sandiford was punched and hit with baseball bats and tree limbs by the white youth. When the police found the wounded Sandiford staggering down the Belt Parkway, they picked him up to show Griffith’s body. They offered no first aid and instead pushed Sandiford into the patrol car and investigated him as a suspect of an unrelated homicide which had taken place nearby.

This attack became a high profile incident in the 1980s in New York and throughout the entire nation. The New York Times reported on the geographical

York: G. P. Putnam’s Son, 1990), 11–16.
22. Ibid., 18–25.
particularity of “Howard Beach” in Queens as being rather isolated from the rest of the city.\textsuperscript{25} Such articles emphasized the dominance of single-family homes in the area and the fact that most of the residents were whites, mainly of Italian, Jewish, or other European descent.\textsuperscript{26} Even after Griffith’s main attackers were convicted,\textsuperscript{27} the legacy of this hate crime has remained, along with the name of the neighborhood that was seen as the site of the incident.\textsuperscript{28}

The Making of Michael Griffith Street

About ten years after the incident, Jean Griffith-Sandiford, the mother of Michael Griffith, began an attempt to commemorate Michael in the landscape of New York City. Though she could do nothing special right after her son’s death, the family members held a memorial ceremony at Brooklyn Museum to mark the tenth anniversary of the attack in December of 1996.\textsuperscript{29} Then, she brought the proposal to create Michael Griffith Street to the Community Board 8 of Brooklyn in the fall of 1998.

On September 23, 1998, Jean Griffith-Sandiford met with the members of the Transportation Committee of Community Board 8. She also submitted signatures of support she had collected. The committee members requested her to submit her son’s biography, and they met with her again on October 27. After reviewing the biography, her petition, and the letters of support, the Transportation Committee approved the proposal, with four members in favor, two abstentions, and none against. The proposal then moved to the community board, which discussed the


\textsuperscript{27} The verdict of this incident was as follows; John Lester, Scott Kern, and Jason Ladone were convicted of second-degree manslaughter and first-degree assault on December 21, 1987. The other six were convicted of lighter charges and three were acquittal of all charges. Joseph P. Fried, “3 in Howard Beach Attack Are Guilty of Manslaughter,” \textit{New York Times}, December 22, 1987; Thomas Morgan, “Howard Beach Juror Cites Victim’s Fear,” \textit{New York Times}, December 27, 1987; Hynes and Drury, \textit{Incident at Howard Beach}, 295–303.


name change in November. Griffith-Sandiford attended the meeting with Christopher Griffith, one of Michael’s brothers. Twenty members were in favor, twelve abstained, and two voted against the name change. The board passed the proposal and the board minutes recorded only their conclusion, but according to a report in the New York Times, the process of renaming a street raised some tensions in the local black community.

At the meeting in November, the voice of the opposition was represented by Margaret Vinson, one of two board members who voted against the name change. Vinson said that Michael Griffith had been a troublemaker as a teenager. She argued that he made little contribution to the community and had even damaged it. According to the article:

“I don’t consider him any kind of hero,” she said. “You name streets after people who contributed something positive. His death was unfortunate, but I don’t know what naming a street after him would do except say if you are unfortunate enough to be killed in a white community you will get a street named after you.”

Vinson and another opponent believed a commemorative place name should memorialize someone who contributed to the community during their lifetime. They claimed that Griffith had not been a model resident and thus did not deserve a street that was named after him. Indeed, during the trial of his attackers in 1987, defense lawyers for the white youths pointed out that the three black men who had been assaulted, including Griffith, had a history of drug use.

In reply, Griffith-Sandiford maintained that “her son did make positive contributions to the community.” She did not believe that her son had been involved in any trouble. She asserted that Griffith deserved a street named after him because he had contributed to the neighborhood by leading a good life and being a good member of the community.

In contrast to these two opposing positions, a third stance was promoted by Mable Boston, a board member who supported the name change based on a reason different from that of Griffith’s mother. Boston said that “although some of her

31. Julian E. Barns, “Naming a Street, Raising a Conflict,” New York Times, December 5, 1999. This article reported that it had not been easy to decide the renaming of Michael Griffith Street in a meeting of the local community board one year earlier the city council’s approval of Michael Griffith Street.
32. Ibid.
34. Barns, “Naming a Street, Raising a Conflict.”
colleagues remembered Mr. Griffith as a bully, the majority felt naming the street was a good way of making sure people do not forget the attack. 

It was Boston’s view that ultimately prevailed. As far as the board was concerned, the point of establishing Michael Griffith Street was to remember that a community member had been brutally killed and to learn a lesson from his violent death. In renaming this street, the board emphasized how the incident could bring a community together and how remembering this violence could serve as a reminder of race issues in the city. This perspective drew attention away from the character of the victim, who did not have to be innocent or respectable to be commemorated. The board disagreed about the meaning of Michael Griffith’s life, but its members ultimately agreed that his death was unreasonable and worth remembering for the sake of the community. Boston argued, “It’s one way of letting the neighborhood know we are against what happened to him.” Michael Griffith Street was renamed, in other words, as a memorial for black community members to show their resistance to ongoing racial violence.

After the local community board reached an agreement about renaming a street for Michael Griffith, the process of making the proposal into a local law began in the New York City Council in February of 1999. In the city council, there was little debate about the bill for Michael Griffith Street. In November, the Committee on Parks, Recreation, Cultural Affairs, and International Intergroup Relations approved the renaming. The report of the committee reads:

In view of the tragic death of Michael Griffith, at the age of twenty-three in a hate related assault, it is fitting that Pacific Street, between Albany Avenue and Ralph Avenue, be renamed “Michael Griffith Street” in his memory to remind New Yorkers that vigilance against hate and bigotry is forever necessary. In the words of Michael’s mother Jan Griffith Sanderford [sic], “We want this change so that my son’s death will not have been in vain. We hope that young people will learn that we should not hate and fear one another but to learn to love and live in unity. The youth of today are the future of tomorrow and they should know that when prejudice rears its ugly head we, by acting together as one, can defeat it.”

Like the local community board, the city council believed that the purpose of the renaming lay in commemorating Griffith’s unfortunate death, though the council’s document never mentioned his race and did not explain that the incident was a racially motivated assault. The report quoted the words of Griffith’s mother

35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
who said that she hoped the street name change would send an important message to young people and would serve as a reminder to fight racial prejudice.

On November 22, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani signed the bill creating Michael Griffith Street into law. In this way, the petition from Griffith’s mother to rename a street for her slain son came to fruition. A stretch of Pacific Street, running 1.7 miles east-west, was renamed after Michael Griffith in order to remember his tragic death.

Discussions of Michael Griffith Street

A month after the city council’s decision, a ceremony was held to install the new street signs in Bedford-Stuyvesant, an area of Brooklyn, where Griffith once lived. December 20, 1999, was the thirteenth anniversary of Griffith’s death. Elected officials including Mayor Giuliani, community activists, and religious representatives gathered in the area on that rainy Monday morning and delivered speeches in memory of Griffith. Jean Griffith-Sandiford expressed her wish that her son had not died in vain and that young people would learn from his brutal death.

New York Amsterdam News, a leading weekly African American newspaper in New York City, covered the story of this ceremony and the street renaming with two articles. One article quoted many African American figures in the community and their reaction to this event. For example, the pastor and activist Herbert Daughtry attended the commemoration ceremony and read a letter addressed to Griffith. The New York State Assembly member Albert Vann referenced the memory of Martin Luther King, Jr. and saw in Griffith’s death “a challenge to make society what Martin wanted it to be.” The State Senator David A. Paterson, who later became the first African American Governor of New York State in 2008, lamented the difficulty of overcoming the 1986 tragedy. Patricia Griffith, the wife of Michael’s brother Christopher, read a message from the former African American mayor of New York City, David N. Dinkins, in which the former mayor said the name change was a “fitting reminder of [Griffith’s] life and legacy.”

According to the newspaper report, Griffith’s death was the result of racially motivated violence against black men, and therefore an example of the kind of hate crimes African Americans have long endured. Griffith’s suffering, in this


41. Boyd, “Brooklyn Street Named for Slain Youth.”

42. Ibid.
sense, embodied the experiences of all African American men living in the African American community. Meanwhile, the specific immigrant roots of Griffith and Sandiford remained unmentioned, as their narrative was being incorporated into the mainstream African American experience that was associated with the heritage of slavery in the United States.  

In contrast to this kind of positive narrative about Michael Griffith Street, another article on the same page observed the renaming from a different perspective. A group of young men in the neighborhood watched the ceremony surrounding Michael Griffith Street from a distance. The youth, including Ricky Nelson, a friend of the deceased, felt that the creation of Michael Griffith Street was a superficial show for the politicians and the mass media, and was ultimately meaningless for the residents. One man among them indicated that changing a street name would bring little actual change to their neighborhood. Their attitude was far from what Griffith’s mother had hoped for — when she wanted Michael Griffith Street to provide an important message for young people.

The same article also described Jean Griffith-Sandiford’s commitment to the renaming. She had demanded the street name change not in Howard Beach, the place where her son was killed, but in Bedford-Stuyvesant, the place where her son had lived with his family. The article explained the reason why the mother chose this location to commemorate her slain son as follows:

The relentless mother of Michael Griffith was determined to erect something to remind people that her son lived. She thought about the renaming of a Howard Beach street, but she knew residents there would have battled the very idea. Howard Beach residents may have advanced in their tolerance of outsiders, but the still-grieving mother is not convinced the community has made enough of a step to be able to accept an outsider as part of their community — even on a sign post.

The repeating usage of the word “outsider[s]” by the reporter suggests that this area continued to have primarily white population since the incident, at least according to Griffith-Sandiford and the African American media, despite of the demographic change that has been shown through statistics such as the U.S. Census.

45. Ibid.
46. The Census of 2000 implies that Howard Beach, covered by Queens Community
At the turn of twenty-first century, when Griffith’s mother attempted to commemorate her slain son, black people may walk in the neighborhood more safely than in 1986. Jean Griffith-Sandiford, however, thought she could not expect the residents to support the plan of making a Michael Griffith Street in the area where he was killed. While his death was attributed in part to residential segregation, the location of the commemoration was also strongly influenced by the same segregation. The community board of Brooklyn decided to rename the portion of Pacific Street for Griffith in order to show that racial violence should not be tolerated. Yet, by locating Michael Griffith Street in a predominantly black district, it followed and reinforced the very structure of the residential segregation that had caused the hate crime and his death.47

By including the views of young men on the street, the article in the *Amsterdam News* questioned for whom the renaming was done, and asked where Michael Griffith Street should have been established after all. It exposed the fact that there were some problems behind the renaming of Michael Griffith Street, and also perhaps behind the increasingly popular practice of street naming after African Americans in general. Thus the newspaper provided, on the same page, both a positive evaluation and a critique of the street. It called for the need for more actual changes in the community than the renaming and commemoration, if the hopes of Griffith’s mother for the younger generation were really to materialize.

**Conclusion**

This paper explored the process and discussions of naming places after black people through the case of Michael Griffith Street in Brooklyn, New York City. This naming needed the legitimacy of commemoration probably more than those of prominent blacks because Griffith was not a famous figure who had contributed to the nation or even to the black neighborhood where he had lived. The voice of opponents at the community board meeting reflected the normative view that commemorative naming must be a celebration for people who made a lasting contribution to the community. Whereas commemorations for famous black figures honor their feats in their lifetimes, Michael Griffith Street aimed to protest

---

47. In contrast to the demography of the Howard Beach area, the neighborhood of Michael Griffith Street, equivalent to Brooklyn Community District 8, retains its black predominance. In the district, Black/African American accounts for 78% of the total population of 96,076, followed by Hispanic Origin (of any race) 10.4%, White 7%, and Asian 1.6%. Ibid.
against his death as well as racial violence against other blacks. The unique purpose of establishing this street shows that place naming has a significant role as a call for social justice.

The geographical location of Michael Griffith Street, however, was in a sense contradictory to this unique and important purpose: the location actually chosen for this street resulted in the acknowledgement and acceptance of residential segregation in the city, from which the attack and his death had partly stemmed. When Griffith’s mother brought the idea of street renaming to Community Board 8 of Brooklyn, or before the neighborhood reached an agreement about the significant purpose of the naming, the site of commemoration was already segregated by existing housing segregation and its impact on the Jean Griffith-Sandiford’s choice. In view of this paradox, the New York Amsterdam News suggested that naming places to remember African Americans had not yet brought crucial social changes for the racial minority.

Commemorating African Americans through place naming is an ongoing national trend. On one hand, the tendency of celebrating heroic figures remains conspicuous. This situation suggests the longstanding demand for the representations of prominent members of minority groups especially after the legal abolition of discrimination. The act of embedding the names of such figures in ordinary landscapes continues to be significant for African American communities, as well as for broader society. On the other hand, the number of places named after victims of racial violence is steadily rising. As American society grapples with urban/suburban unrest and the meaning of the disproportionate violence against people of color, the importance of such geographic naming cannot be overstated. Though the increase of names signifies the continuation of racial violence and even the ineffectiveness of protest through commemorative naming, these memorials also illustrate how today’s American society uses place naming as a reminder of violence.

In this way, today’s name-related commemorative practices are embracing not only the tradition of honoring influential figures, but also the practice of remembering victims. Street naming both reflects and shapes discursive processes of commemorations and the spatial politics of race.
