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Walking in Memphis: revisiting the street politics of Ms Jacqueline Smith

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Abstract
This piece revisits the street politics of Ms Jacqueline Smith and her two-plus decades of protest outside the former Lorraine Motel, where civil rights leader Rev Dr Martin Luther King, Jr, was assassinated. Now the National Civil Rights Museum, the Motel is part of a growing heritage tourism industry in the American South, where landscapes of civil rights memorialization are often contested publicly and exist alongside other landscapes of racism. More recently, projects like the Museum have become central to urban redevelopment schemes and vehicles of gentrification. This piece introduces Ms Smith's protest in relation to such themes in cultural geography, followed by the reproduction of a blog post documenting the author's encounter with Ms Smith in June 2015. It urges cultural geographers to engage with Ms Smith's street politics in their writings on landscape and their teachings in the classroom.

Keywords
anti-racism, embodied politics, gentrification, heritage tourism, landscape

Yesterday,[1] I had the honor of meeting Ms Jacqueline Smith. I was staying in Memphis for the night, three blocks away from the Lorraine Motel where Dr Martin Luther King, Jr was killed. After the motel went out of business, it was purchased and turned into the National Civil Rights Museum. The initial investment from the state of Tennessee to turn it into a tourist destination was US$8.8 million, while in the past decade a further US$25 million was pumped in to build a new wing attached to the motel and various beautification projects, all while the neighborhood of South Main faced continual divestment and – more recently – heavy gentrification that priced out many original residents.

As of yesterday, Ms Smith had been protesting outside of the Lorraine Motel for 27 years and 138 days. She first lived in the Lorraine Motel as a teenager and, when the motel was turned into a museum, she was

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> forcibly evicted by Shelby County sheriffs. Since then, she has been staying across the street from the Lorraine Motel, sitting on a bench and telling Dr King's radical vision to anyone who's willing to stop and listen. In a 1988 article on the *USA Today*, Ms Smith reminded folks that the transformation of the Lorraine Motel into a state-owned money-making property did not benefit many of South Main's African-American residents, nor did Coretta Scott King (Dr King's widow) sanction this project. 'Dr. King would have wanted me to stay here. He said he didn't want any memorial, that he wanted to help the poor. That's what he died doing'. Ms Smith said back then.

The paragraphs above opened my blog post about an encounter in Memphis, TN. Reading the landscape is one of the most enduring research methods in American cultural geography.[2] Indeed, it has been a hallmark in the United States well before the 'cultural turn' and subsequent international popularization of cultural geography in the late 1980s.[3] This piece offers a brief reflection on how I came to put this method in practice through a blog post about a particular contested landscape in the American South. In June 2015, I drove from Syracuse, NY, where I had just finished doctoral coursework, to Los Angeles, CA, to embark on dissertation fieldwork. I have to admit to a certain romanticism regarding road-trips. It was my second cross-country drive (not counting dozens of shorter road-trips over weekends and school breaks), and on some level I imagine myself as a seemingly empiricist traveler or, in a flight of fancy, the archetypal geographer.[4] And on this occasion, I picked a route that cut through the American South. One of my stops was Memphis, where African-American civil rights leader Rev Dr Martin Luther King, Jr, was assassinated on 4 April 1968. The site of his assassination, the Lorraine Motel, is now the National Civil Rights Museum. Naturally, I went there as a tourist, but Jacqueline Smith was whom I really went to see. Ms Smith, the last resident there before the Lorraine Motel went out of business, has been protesting outside for two-plus decades. After my conversation with Ms Smith about her protest (and with her permission), I wrote a blog post that received many replies. This piece reproduces that blog post in full, with additional contexts on how it relates to many themes relevant to the practice of cultural geography. At the core though, this piece is about how the Lorraine Motel became the National Civil Rights Museum, and Memphis resident Jacqueline Smith's more than two-decade-long protest against this change.

Dr King is arguably the most memorialized individual in the American landscape. Derek Alderman documented more than 730 cities across the United States with at least one street named after him.[5] Although the distribution is much denser in the American South, this is by no means a regional or a historical phenomenon. For example, my hometown Seattle, WA, is located in King County. Originally named after William R. King, the 13th Vice President of the United States and a Southern slave owner, it was re-dedicated to Dr King in 1986 and its logo subsequently changed to an artistic rendition of Dr King's face in 2007.[6] There was not much consternation over the name change, but that is not always the case. In many instances, some vehemently opposed such (re-) naming and saw it as reflective of a heritage that they do not share or identify with.[7] These struggles over the appropriation of landscape are common, especially in the South where memorials of the civil rights movement often exist side-by-side with memorials of 'Southern heritage', landscapes of slavery, and other sites of white privilege.[8] Such struggles over the appropriate meaning and representation are etched in landscapes like the National Civil Rights Museum.[9]

To characterize these struggles as symptomatic of simply 'race relations' (i.e. white vs black residents) in the American South misses the point, however, and it is this line of critique that animates Ms Smith's protest outside the Lorraine Motel.[10] The story of how the Lorraine Motel became the National Civil Rights Museum is of a piece with how heritage tourism became central to urban redevelopment efforts in many Southern cities (including Memphis). Although memorials such as the National Civil Rights Museum have the potential to affect positive social change, how they came to be memorialized is often heavily influenced – if not dictated – by commercial interests.[11] In many

cities, the maturation of Southern heritage tourism into a profit-making enterprise goes hand in hand with plans of urban regeneration that displace African-American residents in those same neighborhoods. In others, streets named after Dr King coincide with concentrations of poverty.[12] Ironically, the geography of civil rights today often overlaps with the lasting geography of racism, and Ms Smith is protesting against the National Civil Rights Museum for exactly that reason.

This piece is not the first time Ms Smith has appeared in geographical print. J.P. Jones' 'The Street Politics of Jackie Smith', published in 2003, eloquently laid out the history of Ms Smith's protest and its implications for how we think about the politics of space.[13] More recently, Derek Alderman and Josh Inwood considered the National Civil Rights Museum part of the changing landscapes of the American South.[14] So why revisit Ms Smith now? I am conscious of the risk of over-framing my blog post, but do want to explain what motivated me to reproduce it here. For one, Ms Smith's street politics has only become more urgent since 2003. Gentrification was a minor theme in Jones' account, yet it has accelerated so much since then and has come to dominate the neighborhood where the National Civil Rights Museum is located, and this is reflected in how Ms Smith focused on the drastic changes in the physical landscapes and the residential demographics around the Museum. There is also the longevity of Ms Smith's protest. Regardless of whether one agrees with her positions, there is no doubt that Ms Smith has put own body on the line outside the Museum every day for over 20 years; this sustained protest should force geographers to reconsider the embodied politics of protest.[15] Her embodied street politics strongly resonated with me; she asked me to spread the word, and it was the first time in my life where I felt like I must run to write everything down immediately. Judging by the many private messages that I received after I published the blog post online, this politics resonated for many others. Finally, I bring this piece here as a demonstration of a more sustained, public engagement with politics by cultural geographers. Social media – through which I published my reflection after talking to Ms Smith – are one key site for public scholarship, and this is a small case of putting cultural geography into practice there.[16] Another such key site is our classrooms. Jamie Winders likes to say that as academics, the most political thing we will ever do is teaching, and it was in her classroom where I first encountered Ms Smith. Consider this piece my small attempt to put that anti-racist politics into the world through reading the landscape together with Ms Smith.

Walking in Memphis

This section picks up immediately after the opening paragraphs and reproduces the rest of the blog post in full:[17]

I first learned of Ms Smith's ongoing protest in a class from Dr Jamie Winders during an introductory human geography course. I was a teaching assistant for that course during my very first semester in graduate school, and it was challenging to both teach myself and convey to the students that there are contesting visions of how to best commemorate historical legacies and that building a shiny monument might not be an idea that everyone – especially local residents – might agree with. Now that I'm on my way out of graduate school to embark on my own research project, visiting Ms Smith seems like a fitting start.

Perhaps coincidentally, the National Civil Rights Museum is closed on Tuesdays, so I didn't have the chance to pay US$15 for a tour even if I wanted to. That did not stop many people from hopping out of their cars, snapping a photo in front of the balcony where Dr King was shot, and then driving away immediately. During the hour or so that I spent there, I counted more than 20 people stopping by – none of whom paid any attention to Ms Smith. It was just before noon on a scorching day, but Ms Smith remained under the umbrella eager to talk to anyone who was willing to stop by.

I told Ms Smith that I am from Seattle and that my professor at school had told me and other students about her protest. That folks from outside Memphis knew about her protest made Ms Smith very happy. Her table was covered with materials that document the state's ongoing project of gentrification in South Main. Of the US$25 million dollars that went into building a new wing and refurbishing the museum, none went to projects that work with local residents. The neighborhood first declined due to continual divestment. The resulting depression of property prices then allowed developers to swoop in and producing a neighborhood renaissance, just not with many of the original residents. Ms Smith pointed to new condos that were built in the past decade and told me about their developers. Very few of them were invested in maintaining affordable housing for original residents. Of the vacant lots in the neighborhood, Ms Smith said that she wouldn't be surprised that they're all bought up in a few years.

I told Ms Smith about my experience of teaching her protests to undergraduate students, and I asked her what she would tell the students who didn't see building a museum to commemorate Dr King's legacy as problematic. 'Everybody quotes Dr. King's speeches. They're all on Youtube now', she said. 'But few people remember that Dr. King's most pressing goal was to help lift people out of poverty in their own neighborhoods'. The primary issue, Ms Smith said, is about cultural appropriation. Besides the National Civil Rights Museum, she pointed to the nearby Blues Hall of Fame as an example. 'Some random people bought up a two-story building, printed out photos of blues musicians, and then started selling books and prints for profit', she said. 'Where did those money go? Not to local residents or blues musicians. Why do they get to profit from our image?'

Ms Smith has a battered copy of *A Testament of Hope*, a compilation of Dr King's speeches and remarks. In response to my question, she pointed to a passage from the 1959 speech before the Youth March for Integrated Schools that we read out together. It reads,

> As June approaches, with its graduation ceremonies and speeches, a thought suggests itself. You will hear much about careers, security, and prosperity. I will leave the discussion of such matters to your deans, your principals, and your valedictorians. But I do have a graduation thought to pass along to you. Whatever career you may choose for yourself – doctor, lawyer, teacher – let me propose an avocation to be pursued along with it. Become a dedicated fighter for civil rights. Make it a central part of your life. It will make you a better doctor, a better lawyer, a better teacher. It will enrich your spirit as nothing else possibly can.

The next time students ask us this question, Ms Smith said, read them this passage and ask them whether building a fancy museum in and of itself qualifies as fighting for civil rights, or is it primarily about prosperity for a certain small group of people.

During the hour or so I spent with Ms Smith, none of the other tourists and passers-by stopped at her bench. Two Memphis residents, however, drove by and greeted her warmly. They brought water and other things, and it's clear that there's still local support for Ms Smith endeavor. Before I left, I asked her whether there's anything I (and other people) can do to help her protest. She asked me for two things. The first is simply to spread the word. Whether people agree with her or not, she does not want people to know of the Lorraine Motel as a museum and nothing else. The second, she asked me whether I could go to a cafe around the corner (now littered with a yoga studio, several gastropubs, a boutique soda store, etc.) and bring back a cup of ice. 'I don't leave this bench because I don't want to miss anyone who wants to hear what I have to say, so I have to rely on folks like you to get me through the day', she said. If no one stops by for the day, then she doesn't get any replenishments.

I went to the cafe but I had to order something to get a cup of ice to-go. I got a small cup of iced tea (US$2.46, the cheapest item available) and brought them back to her bench. She took the ice but refused the tea. 'Only water for me', she said as she filled cup the cup of ice from a bottled

water that local residents had brought by for her. During the entire time I was with her, she kept rearranging her bench area to get me more shade under the hot sun.

Ms Smith graciously allowed me to take a photo of her before I left. She said that she's honored to have people take the time to speak with her, when really it should be the opposite. I told her that I wanted to tell my friends and my professor about my conversations with her, and she was very happy to hear that. She reminded me to thank my professor on her behalf for telling her students about her 'ordinary actions'. By everyone of us spreading the word, Ms Smith hopes that folks one day will remember the Lorraine Motel as not just a museum, but a place – like many other places – where ongoing struggles against gentrification and inequalities are happening.

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Notes

1. 9 June 2015.
2. For example, R.H.Schein, 'The Place of Landscape: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting the American Scene', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 87(4), 1997, pp. 660–80; D.Mitchell, 'New Axioms for Reading the Landscape: Paying Attention to Political Economy and Social Justice', in J.L.Wescoat Jr and D.M.Johnston (eds), *Political Economies of Landscape Change* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), pp. 29–50.
3. C.Barnett, 'The Cultural Turn: Fashion or Progress in Human Geography?', *Antipode*, 30(4), 1998, pp. 381, 384.
4. See J.Winders, 'Imperfectly Imperial: Northern Travel Writers in the Postbellum U.S. South, 1865-1880', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 95(2), 2005, pp. 391–410.
5. D.H.Alderman, 'Naming Streets for Martin Luther King, Jr.: No Easy Road', in R.H.Schein (ed.), *Landscape and Race in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 216; see also <http://mlk-street.com/>
6. See <http://community.seattletimes.nwsource.com/archive/?date=19980118&slug=2729257>; < http://www.kingcounty.gov/about/logo.aspx>
7. For example, D.H.Alderman, 'School Names as Cultural Arenas: The Naming of U.S. Public Schools after Martin Luther King, Jr.', *Urban Geography*, 23(7), 2002, pp. 601–26; D.H.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, pp. 211–33.
8. For example, G.R.Webster and J.I.Leib, 'Whose South Is It Anyway? Race and the Confederate Battle Flag in South Carolina', *Political Geography*, 20(3), 2001, pp. 271–99; D.L.Butler, 'Whitewashing Plantations: The Commodification of a Slave-Free Antebellum South', *International Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Administration*, 2(3–4), 2001, pp. 163–75; S.P.Hanna, 'A Slavery Museum? Race, Memory, and Landscape in Fredericksburg, Virginia', *Southeastern Geographer*, 48(3), 2008, pp. 316–37; cf., O.Dwyer, D.Butler and P.Carter, 'Commemorative Surrogation and the American South's Changing Heritage Landscape', *Tourism Geographies*, 15(3), 2013, pp. 424–43. See also recent efforts to #KickOutKKK by students at University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCtY-cXMSijGmKsobh4jtq_g>; J.F.G.Inwood and D.G.Martin, 'Whitewash: White Privilege and Racialized Landscapes at the University of Georgia', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 9(4), 2008, pp. 373–95.

9. O.J.Dwyer, 'Symbolic Accretion and Commemoration', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 5(3), 2004, pp. 419–35.
10. Karen and Barbara Fields argued such lazy logic reproduces racism by assuming that 'any situation involving . . . people of African descent automatically falls under the heading "race relations"'. As an example of this logic,

    [p]robably a majority of American historians think of slavery in the United States as primarily a system race relations – as though the chief business of slavery were the production of white supremacy rather than the production cotton, sugar, rice, and tobacco.

    K.E.Fields and B.J.Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (New York: Verso, 2012), p. 117; see also chapter 5.
11. O.J.Dwyer, 'Location, Politics, and the Production of Civil Rights Memorial Landscapes', *Urban Geography*, 23(1), 2002, pp. 36–56; J.F.J.Inwood, 'Sweet Auburn: Constructing Atlanta's Auburn Avenue as a Heritage Tourist Destination', *Urban Geography*, 31(5), 2010, pp. 573–94; cf., J.F.J.Inwood, 'Contested Memory in the Birthplace of a King: A Case Study of Auburn Avenue and the Martin Luther King Jr. National Park', *cultural geographies*, 16(1), 2009, pp. 87–109.
12. See <http://www.citylab.com/cityfixer/2015/11/the-remaking-of-martin-luther-king-streets/415449/>
13. J.P.Jones III, 'The Street Politics of Jackie Smith', in G.Bridge and S.Watson (eds), *A Companion to the City* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 448–59.
14. D.H.Alderman and J.F.J.Inwood, 'The National Civil Rights Museum, Memphis, Tennessee', *Southeastern Geographer*, 55(1), 2015, pp. 1–5.
15. For example, R.Slocum, 'The Embodied Politics of Pain in US Anti-Racism', *ACME*, 8(1), 2009, pp. 18–45.
16. D.Fuller and K.Askins, 'Public Geographies II: Being Organic', *Progress in Human Geography*, 34(5), 2010, pp. 654–67.
17. The original blog post includes color photographs. Due to space and cost considerations, they are not reproduced here. To see them, please visit <https://seanywang.github.io/memphis_post/>

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