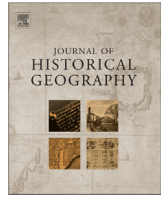


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History and heritage of two Midwestern towns: a toponymic-material approach



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Abstract

Scholarly interest in toponyms and material culture has been revived over the past decades through critical analyses of symbolic meanings and politics of spatial inscription. Place names and physical objects such as public sites, monuments, and buildings provide access to intricate aspects of history, memory, and place; yet toponymic and material studies often lack coherent integration. This paper shows how a combined toponymic-material approach can provide a more comprehensive analysis of commemorative processes and heritage construction at two German-founded towns in the American Midwest: New Ulm, Minnesota, and Eudora, Kansas. Based on qualitative interviews and additional background information, I discuss how various actors foster, assert, and challenge specific narratives of history and heritage through time. Patterns of (re)designing and (re)naming local commemorative features, such as streets, parks, and monuments, overlap and reinforce each other in continuous efforts of identifying an 'authentic' sense of the past and place through time. This includes associated commemorative practices and performances as well as broader discourses of (inter)national history and heritage. Integrating the analysis of physical and symbolic space, the toponymic-material approach provides a valuable perspective on the past and present of place on the local level and beyond.

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Place names and physical aspects of place are closely connected and provide unique understanding of patterns of commemoration and cultural heritage. However, toponymic and materialistic research have generally existed in parallel and await coherent integration. In this article, I argue that an approach combining the study of place names and materiality is needed because toponyms and material features together (re)create commemorative landscapes and foster local and/or ethnocultural heritage by continuous efforts and performances of promotion, celebration, (re)naming, and (re)construction. This advances renewed scholarly interests in both toponymy and material culture that highlight their critical potential for the analysis of social relations and symbolic meanings.¹ Moving beyond traditional approaches of describing and categorizing names and physical objects,

practitioners of both research strands now emphasize the importance of understanding broader sociocultural contexts and their local implications. Jackson contends that 'there are good reasons for taking material culture seriously within a critical, theoretically informed approach to contemporary social and cultural geography',² while Vuolteenaho and Berg assert that 'toponyms can be understood as power-embedded, ubiquitous aspects of cultural geography'.³

Some studies, such as Azaryahu's toponymic and Stangl's material approach on Berlin's commemorative landscape, indicate points of thematic intersection, but they generally remain within their respective analytic focus.⁴ In their study on (re)naming streets for Martin Luther King in the United States, Alderman and Inwood at least touch on the role of physical location and material

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¹ See I.J. Cook and D.P. Tolia-Kelly, Material geographies, in: D. Hicks, M. Beaudry (Eds), *Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies*, Oxford, 2010, 99–122; R. Rose-Redwood, D. Alderman, and M. Azaryahu, Geographies of toponymic inscription: new directions in critical place name studies, *Progress in Human Geography* 34 4 (2010) 453–470.

² P. Jackson, Rematerializing social and cultural geography, *Social and Cultural Geography* 1 1 (2000) 10.

³ J. Vuolteenaho and L.D. Berg, Towards critical toponymies, in: L.D. Berg, J. Vuolteenaho (Eds), *Critical Toponymies. The Contested Politics of Place Naming*, Burlington, 2009, 14.

⁴ M. Azaryahu, German reunification and the politics of street names: the case of East Berlin, *Political Geography* 16 6 (1997) 479–493; P. Stangl, The vernacular and the monumental: memory and landscape in post-war Berlin, *Geojournal* 73 (2008) 245–253.

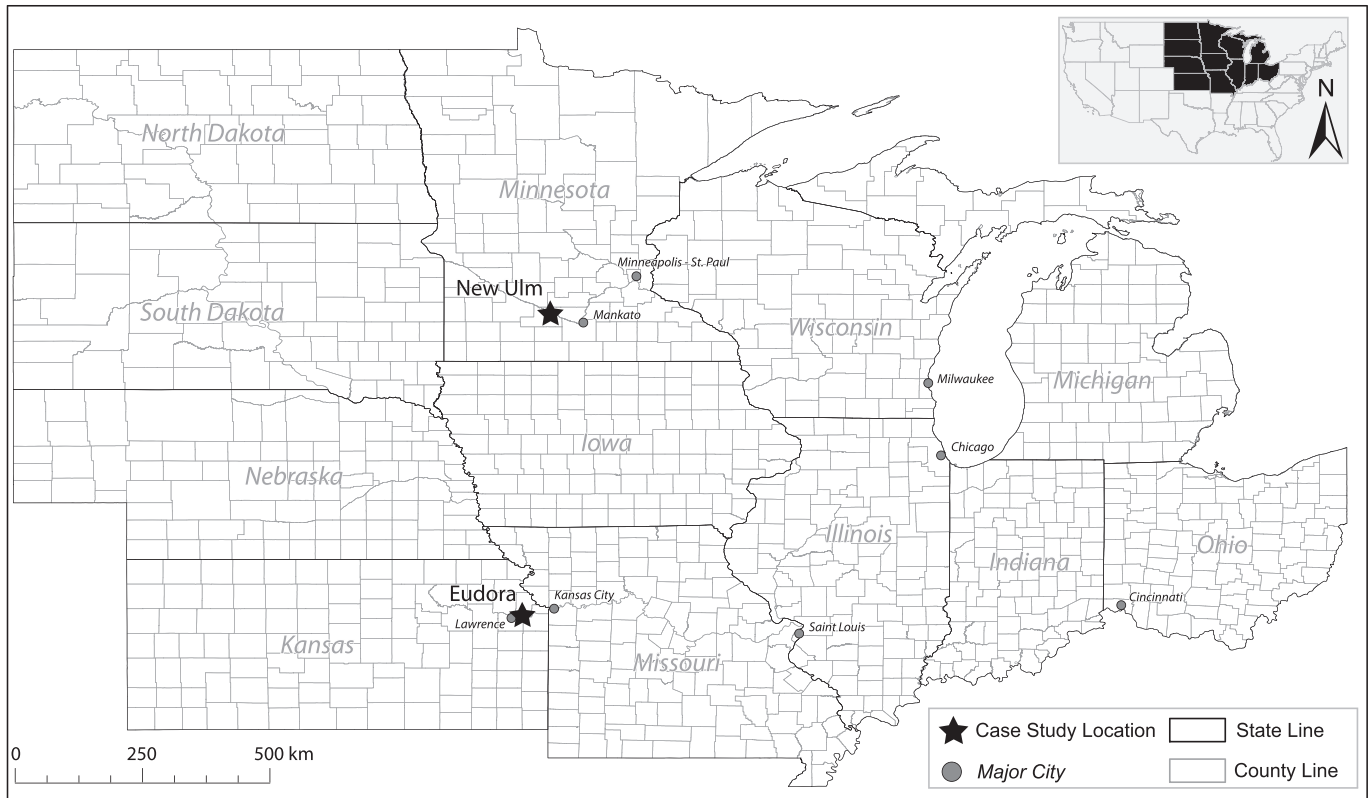


Fig. 1. Map of the American Midwest. Cartography by the author.

geography for assessing issues of race, belonging, and social (in) justice.⁵ The present study takes this argument further and shows how toponyms and physical aspects of place combine and mutually reinforce each other in processes of memory and heritage construction. Such an integrated approach provides a more comprehensive view on memorial landscapes. Looking at two locations of German⁶ settlement in the American Midwest, New Ulm, Minnesota, and Eudora, Kansas (Fig. 1), I discuss questions such as, how are the respective origins commemorated in the physical and sociocultural character of the two towns? What role do the initial founders and eponyms play in local historical representation? What are the underlying historic contexts and social influences within and beyond these sites?

Place names and material culture

Geographical research engages with materialities in various ways and contexts, addressing sociocultural issues such as symbolic

meanings, social differentiation, and power relations.⁷ This parallels recent conceptions of place and landscape as material and visible as well as dynamic social constructs that entail multiple layers of cultural representation and discourse.⁸ I understand material culture as ‘the study through artifacts of the beliefs – values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions – of a particular community or society at a given time’.⁹ Various physical objects, from deliberate works of art to utilitarian devices, comprise inherent or attached value that allows insights into local and/or broader culture. Materials, styles, character, and geography of certain objects such as buildings or monuments transmit cultural signals that provide access to underlying motives, ideologies, and mental patterns.¹⁰ Hence it is crucial to move ‘beyond the surface of matter, to engage with the politics, grammars and productive power of materials that are in place, shaping place and effectively making a difference to place and the place of each other’.¹¹

Although highly valuable and insightful, the analysis of material artifacts ‘is only one route to the understanding of culture’.¹² It

⁵ 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) 211–233.

⁶ In the following, the term ‘German’ includes people from the territory of the German Empire of 1871, from surrounding German-speaking areas such as in Switzerland and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and from German exclaves such as on the Black Sea.

⁷ See Cook and Tolia-Kelly, Material geographies (note 1); Jackson, Rematerializing social and cultural geography (note 2), 9–14.

⁸ I understand discourse as a social framework of shared meanings, ideologies, and narratives that guide signifying practices; H. Leitner and P. Kang, Contested urban landscapes of nationalism: the case of Taipei, *Ecumene* 6 2 (1999), 215; R.H. Schein, The place of landscape: a conceptual framework for interpreting an American scene, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 87 4 (1997) 660–680.

⁹ J.D. Prown, An introduction to material culture theory and method, *Winterthur Portfolio* 17 1 (1983) 1.

¹⁰ S. Dixon, Mobile monumental landscapes: shifting cultural identities in Mexico City’s ‘El Caballito’, *Historical Geography* 37 (2009) 71–91; N.C. Johnson, Cast in stone: monuments, geography, and nationalism, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 13 (1994) 51–65; K. Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves. Race, War and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America*, Princeton, 1997.

¹¹ D.P. Tolia-Kelly, The geographies of cultural geography III: material geographies, vibrant matters and risking surface geographies, *Progress in Human Geography* 37 1 (2013) 154.

¹² Prown, An introduction to material culture (note 9), 5.

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