

*The*  
**ADDRESS  
BOOK**



Deirdre Mask

*The*  
**ADDRESS  
BOOK**



*What Street  
Addresses Reveal  
About Identity,  
Race, Wealth,  
and Power*

**P**

PROFILE BOOKS



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“In Lübeck, on 20 March (1933), a large number of  
people were taken into so-called protective custody.  
Soon after began the renaming of streets.”

—will y brand t, *Links und frei. Mein Weg 1930–1950*  
(*Left and Free: My Path 1930–1950*)

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## *Introduction*

WHY DO STREET ADDRESSES MATTER?

### **NEW YORK, WEST VIRGINIA, AND LONDON**

In some years, more than 40 percent of all local laws passed by the New York City Council have been street name changes. Let me give you a moment to think about that. The city council is congress to the mayor's president. Its fifty-one members monitor the country's largest school system and police force, and decide land use for one of the most densely populated places on earth. Its budget is larger than most states', its population bigger than all but eleven states'. On top of that, New York's streets have largely been named or numbered since the nineteenth century with some street names, like Stuyvesant and the Bowery, dating from when Manhattan was little more than a Dutch trading station.

And yet, I'll say it again: in some years, more than 40 percent of all local laws passed by the New York City Council have been street name changes.

The city council often focuses on honorary street names layered on top of the regular map. So when you walk through the city, you may look up and see that while you are on West 103rd Street, you are also on Humphrey Bogart Place. Or you might be on Broadway and West 65th Street (Leonard Bernstein Place), West 84th (Edgar Allan Poe Street), or East 43rd (David Ben-Gurion Place). Recently, the city council approved the Wu-Tang Clan



District in Staten Island, Christopher Wallace Way (after the Notorious B.I.G.) in Brooklyn, and Ramones Way in Queens. The city council co-named 164 streets in 2018 alone.

But in 2007, when the city council rejected a proposal to rename a street for Sonny Carson, a militant black activist, demonstrators took to the streets. Carson had formed the Black Men's Movement Against Crack, organized marches against police brutality, and pushed for community control of schools. But he also advocated violence and espoused unapologetically racist ideas. When a Haitian woman accused a Korean shop owner of assault, Carson organized a boycott of all Korean grocery stores, where protesters urged blacks not to give their money to "people who don't look like us." Asked if he was anti-Semitic, Carson responded that he was "antiwhite. Don't limit my antis to just one group of people." Mayor Bloomberg said, "there's probably nobody whose name I can come up with who less should have a street named after him in this city than Sonny Carson."

But supporters of the naming proposal argued that Sonny Carson vigorously organized his Brooklyn community long before anyone cared about Brooklyn. Councilman Charles Barron, a former Black Panther, said that Carson, a Korean War veteran, closed more crack houses than the New York Police Department. Don't judge his life on his most provocative statements, his supporters asked. Still, Carson was controversial in the African American community as well. When black councilman Leroy Comrie abstained from the street name vote, Barron's aide Viola Plummer suggested that his political career was over, even if it took an "assassination." Comrie was assigned police protection. (Plummer insists she meant a career assassination rather than a literal one.)

When the council finally refused the Carson-naming proposal (while accepting designations for *Law & Order* actor Jerry Orbach and choreographer Alvin Ailey), a few hundred Brook-

lyn residents flooded into Bedford-Stuyvesant and put up their own Sonny Abubadika Carson Avenue sign on Gates Avenue. Councilman Barron pointed out that New York had long honored flawed men, including Thomas Jefferson, a slave-owning “pedophile.” “We might go street-name-changing crazy around here to get rid of the names of these slave owners,” he called out to the angry crowd.

“Why are leaders of the community spending time worrying about the naming of a street?” Theodore Miraldi of the Bronx wrote to the *New York Post*. Excellent question, Mr. Miraldi. Why do we care this much about any street name at all?

I’ll get to that. But first, another story.

I did not, at first, plan to write an entire book about street addresses. Instead, I set out to write a letter. I was living in the west of Ireland, and I had sent a birthday card to my father in North Carolina. I pressed a stamp on the envelope, and just four days later the card appeared in my parents’ mailbox. I thought, not particularly originally, that this should have been much more expensive than it was. And how did Ireland and the United States share the proceeds? Is there some accountant in a windowless back room of the post office, dividing each penny between the two countries?

Answering that question led me to the Universal Postal Union. Founded in 1874, the Universal Postal Union, based in Bern, Switzerland, is the world’s second-oldest international organization. The UPU coordinates the worldwide postal system. I was soon lost in its website, which is surprisingly engrossing, explaining debates about e-banking and postal policing of illegal narcotics, mixed with lighter posts on World Post Day and international letter-writing competitions.

After I answered my own question—the UPU has a complex system for deciding the fees countries charge each other

for handling international mail—I came across an initiative called Addressing the World, An Address for Everyone. Here, I learned for the first time that most households in the world don't have street addresses. Addresses, the UPU argues, are one of the cheapest ways to lift people out of poverty, facilitating access to credit, voting rights, and worldwide markets. But this is not just a problem in the developing world. Soon, I learned that parts of the rural United States don't have street addresses either. On my next visit home, I borrowed my dad's car, and drove to West Virginia to see for myself.

The first problem I had was finding Alan Johnston. Johnston was a friend of a friend who had petitioned the county government for a street address. The street he lives on had never had a name, and he had never had a house number. Like most residents of McDowell County, he had to pick up his mail at the post office. When he first tried to order a computer, the woman from Gateway asked him for his address. "You have to live on a street," she told him. "You have to *be* somewhere." She called the power company and put a representative on a three-way call to confirm Johnston's location. Sometimes deliverymen found him, but sometimes they didn't. He often had to drive to Welch (pop. 1,715), about four miles away, to meet a new UPS driver.

The directions Alan had given me to his home filled half a page, but I was lost from the first turn. I then found out that West Virginia has some of the world's most exuberant direction givers. A man working shirtless on his lawn darted across a busy lane to advise me to make a left at the community hospital. Somehow I made a right instead and ended up on a road overgrown with kudzu. The road seemed to grow narrower with every mile. Winding back the way I'd come, I saw a man leaning against his pickup truck in the damp heat. I rolled down my window.

"I'm looking for Premier," I told him, the tiny unincorpor-

rated village where Johnston lives. He eyed me and my dad's long black car. "You done lost," he noted correctly. I asked for directions, but he shook his head. "I'll have to take you there, or you'll never find it." Against my protests, this stranger stubbed out his cigarette, got in his truck, and led me a mile down to a bigger road where I saw the old radio station Johnston had told me to look out for. The man honked and drove away, and I waved until he couldn't see me anymore.

Now I knew I was close. Johnston told me that if I went past B&K Trucking, I'd gone too far. I passed B&K Trucking and turned around. Two city workers were raking at the side of the road when I stopped to confirm I was headed in the right direction.

"Which B&K Trucking did he mean?" they asked me, mopping their brows. "There are two B&K Trucking companies on this road." I thought they must be joking, but their faces betrayed nothing.

Next, I came across a red pickup truck on the side of the road. An elderly pastor with a trucker cap perched on his head sat in the cab. I tried to describe where I was going, and then, hopefully, told him I was going to see Alan Johnston. "Oh, Alan," he said, nodding. "I know where he lives." He paused, trying to direct me. Finally, he asked, "Do you know where *my* house is?"

I didn't.

Eventually I found the sharp, unmarked turn that led to Alan Johnston's gravel road, and parked next to a pale blue bus he and his wife had fixed up. Alan, whose friends call him Cathead after a kind of enormous West Virginia biscuit, had a good life back in the winding rocky roads locals call the hollows. He had a warm, sturdy wood house in the thick woods, the walls covered in studio pictures of his wife and children. His father had worked in the coal mines nearby, and his family had never left.

Strumming his guitar while we talked, he wore denim overalls and his graying hair tied in a ponytail.

Clearly he needs a street name. Does he have anything in mind?

“Years ago, back when I went to grade school,” he told me, “there were a whole lot of Stacys lived up in this hollow. Ever since, locals have called it Stacy Hollow.”

West Virginia has tackled a decades-long project to name and number its streets. Until 1991, few people outside of West Virginia’s small cities had any street address at all. Then the state caught Verizon inflating its rates, and as part of an unusual settlement, the company agreed to pay \$15 million to, quite literally, put West Virginians on the map.

For generations, people had navigated West Virginia in creative ways. Directions are delivered in paragraphs. Look for the white church, the stone church, the brick church, the old elementary school, the old post office, the old sewing factory, the wide turn, the big mural, the tattoo parlor, the drive-in restaurant, the dumpster painted like a cow, the pickup truck in the middle of the field. But, of course, if you live here, you probably don’t need directions; along the dirt lanes that wind through valleys and dry riverbeds, everyone knows everyone else anyway.

Emergency services have rallied for more formal ways of finding people. Close your eyes and try to explain where your house is without using your address. Now try it again, but this time pretend you’re having a stroke. Paramedics rushed to a house in West Virginia described as having chickens out front, only to see that every house had chickens out front. Along those lanes, I was told, people come out on their porches and wave at strangers, so paramedics couldn’t tell who was being friendly and who was flagging them down. Ron Serino, a copper-skinned firefighter in Northfork (pop. 429) explained how he

would tell frantic callers to listen for the blare of the truck's siren. A game of hide-and-seek would then wind its way through the serpentine hollows. "Getting hotter?" he would ask over the phone. "Getting closer?"

Many streets in rural West Virginia have rural route numbers assigned by the post office, but those numbers aren't on any map. As one 911 official has said, "We don't know where that stuff is at."

Naming one street is hardly a challenge, but how do you go about naming thousands? When I met him, Nick Keller was the soft-spoken addressing coordinator for McDowell County. His office had initially hired a contractor in Vermont to do the addressing, but that effort collapsed and the company left behind hundreds of yellow slips of paper assigning addresses that Keller couldn't connect to actual houses. (I heard that West Virginia residents, with coal as their primary livelihood, wouldn't answer a call from a Vermont area code, fearing environmentalists.)

Keller was personally in charge of naming a thousand streets in the county. He searched online for ideas, poaching names from faraway places. He tried to match places with historical names. He ran out of trees and flowers. "For generations people will be cussing my road names," he told me. Keller ordered street signs and personally installed them with a sledgehammer, his body trained for the job from years of chopping wood as a child.

Each West Virginia county cultivated its own naming strategy. Some took an academic approach, reading local history books to find appropriate names. Phone books borrowed from Charleston and Morgantown were brought to the office. When one addresser was looking for short names that would fit on the map, his secretary scoured Scrabble websites. Things got creative. One employee told me that a widow, "a pretty hot lady,"

found herself living on Cougar Lane. Addressers came across the remnants of a party at the end of another street. Bingo: Beer Can Hollow.

Another addressing coordinator told me he would sometimes sit for forty-five minutes at the end of the road, his head in his hands, trying to think of a name.

“It’s like trying to name a baby, isn’t it?” I asked him.

“Except that you don’t have nine months to do it in,” he said with a sigh.

Not that there hadn’t been citizen input. Raleigh County required that residents on a street agree on its name. Residents in other counties took a more, let’s say, eclectic approach. Someone, apparently, really wanted to live on Crunchy Granola Road. Another community fought to keep their street’s local name: Booger Hollow. And when neighbors can’t agree? “I threaten them with Chrysanthemum,” one addressing coordinator told me, with a wicked grin.

One homeowner tried to call her street “Stupid Way.” Why? “Because this whole street name stuff is stupid,” she declared proudly.

Which leads me to a broader point. Many people in West Virginia really didn’t want addresses. Sometimes, they just didn’t like their new street name. (A farmer in neighboring Virginia was enraged after his street was named after the banker who denied his grandfather a loan in the Depression.) But often it’s not the particular name, but the naming itself. Everyone knows everyone else, the protesters said again and again. When a thirty-three-year-old man died of an asthma attack after the ambulance got lost, his mother told the newspaper, “All they had to do was stop and ask somebody where we lived.” (Her directions to outsiders? “Coopers ball field, first road on the left, take a sharp right hand turn up the mountain.”)

But as Keller told me, “You’d be surprised at how many

people don't know you at three in the morning." A paramedic who turns up at the wrong house in the middle of the night might be met with a pistol in the face.

One 911 official told me how she tried to talk up the project with McDowell County's elderly community, a growing percentage of the population now that young people are moving to places with more work. "Some people say, I don't want an address," she told me. "I say, what if you need an ambulance?"

Their answer? "We don't need ambulances. We take care of ourselves."

"Addressing isn't for sissies," an addressing coordinator once told a national convention. Employees sent out to name the streets in West Virginia have been greeted by men with four-wheelers and shotguns. One city employee came across a man with a machete stuck in his back pocket. "How bad did he need that address?"

Some people I spoke to saw the area's lack of addresses as emblematic of a backward rural community, but I didn't see it that way. McDowell County struggles as one of the poorest counties in the country, but it's a tight-knit community, where residents know both their neighbors and the rich history of their land. They see things outsiders don't see. In Bartley (pop. 224), for example, residents pivot directions around the old Bartley School, which burned down twenty years ago. I, on the other hand, now use GPS to navigate the town I grew up in. I wondered whether we might see our spaces differently if we didn't have addresses.

And far from being outlandish, the residents' fears turn out to be justifiable, even reasonable. Addresses aren't just for emergency services. They also exist so people can find you, police you, tax you, and try to sell you things you don't need through the mail. West Virginians' suspicions about the addressing project were remarkably similar to those of eighteenth-century



Europeans who rebelled when governments slapped numbers on their doors—a story this book will tell.

But many West Virginians, like Alan Johnston, also quite reasonably saw the benefits of being found on Google Maps, just as those same eighteenth-century Europeans learned to love the pleasing thud of mail pushed through a slot in the door. I spoke to Alan a few weeks after I left West Virginia. He had called the 911 office and described his house to an employee, who had found his new address on the map.

Alan now lives on Stacy Hollow Road.

One last story for now. Not long after I wrote about West Virginia, I was house-hunting in Tottenham, a largely working-class area in north London. My husband and I had recently moved to the city but we couldn't find much we liked in our budget. Tottenham is a lively, diverse place, where Caribbean takeaways, kosher shops, and halal butchers line the same streets. Around 78 percent of its residents are minorities, with more than 113 ethnic groups crammed in a space 3 percent the size of Brooklyn.

Tottenham's fortunes have often wavered. In August 2011, riots which killed five and spread through England started in Tottenham, triggered by the police-shooting of a twenty-nine-year-old man. Carpet shops, supermarkets, and furniture stores were set on fire, and police arrested more than four thousand people for looting, arson, and assaults. Today, unemployment and crime in Tottenham are still disproportionately high. But when we visited friends who had just moved there, their neighborhood was full of young families from around the world. Soon after, I went to see a two-bedroom terraced house that had just come on the market.

The street was tidy, and I saw potential neighbors clipping hedges and planting flowers in their front yards. At one end of

the road was a friendly looking pub; on the other end, a grand-looking state school with a garden classroom and swimming pool. A grassy park with a small playground, tennis courts, and paths shaded with plane trees was just five minutes' walk away. The house sat squarely in the most diverse postcode in the United Kingdom, and probably all of Europe.

The agent, Laurinda, let me in and the house was as lovely as she said it was on the phone—stripped wood floors, bay windows, and a fireplace in every room, including the bathroom. She swept me through quickly; there were of ers on the house already, so we would have to move fast.

I did really like it. But I had a nagging problem: could I really live on Black Boy Lane?

Nobody really knows how Black Boy Lane got its name. Though the biggest waves of black immigration in the UK occurred after World War II, Britain had a black population long before that. Shakespeare wrote two black characters, and Elizabeth I had black servants and musicians. Among the upper classes, it was apparently fashionable to acquire a black child. Often they were mere “human ornaments,” serving the same decorative function as tapestries, wallpaper, and poodles.

The British were among the most prominent slave traders in the world, but the vast majority of British-trafficked Africans did not end up in England. (British Africans were servants, England deemed by a court to have “too pure Air for Slaves to breathe in.”) Instead, British slave ships left from ports like Bristol and Liverpool full of British goods to buy African slaves. Crammed with men and women, the ship would then travel to the Americas, and swap the human cargo for sugar, tobacco, rum, and other New World goods to bring to Europe. By some estimates, the British carried 3.1 million people in this way across the ocean.

The abolitionist movement included former slaves like Olaudah Equiano, whose 1789 bestselling autobiography about his capture from Nigeria was one of the earliest books by an African printed in England. But easily the most visible leader of the antislavery movement was politician William Wilberforce, the wealthy son of a wool merchant. Wilberforce, whose self-described “intense religious conversion” inspired his abolitionism, was only five foot four, but he found other ways to boost his stature. “I saw what seemed a mere shrimp mount upon the table,” James Boswell, Samuel Johnson’s biographer, wrote. “But as I listened, he grew, and grew, until the shrimp became a whale.” For eighteen years, Wilberforce introduced bill after bill eradicating the slave trade, before it was finally passed in 1807. The House of Commons gave him a standing ovation. Twenty-six years later, he learned that a law freeing all slaves in the British Empire had been passed as well.

Wilberforce was then on his deathbed, drifting in and out of consciousness. At one point, he woke up briefly. “I am in a very distressed state,” he told his son, Henry. “Yes,” Henry apparently answered, “But you have your feet on the Rock.” “I do not venture to speak so positively,” Wilberforce replied, “But I hope I have.” Wilberforce died the next morning, and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

We didn’t put an of er on the house on Black Boy Lane. Maybe it was the dated kitchen, maybe we just weren’t ready to commit, or maybe it was the street name, after all. I’m African American; my ancestors were in the bellies of those ships. And the street’s name conjured up a time in America not so long ago when every black man, no matter how old, was known as “boy.” (I mean “not so long ago” literally. “That boy’s finger does not need to be on the button,” Kentucky representative Geof Davis

said, in 2008, about America's nuclear arsenal. "That boy" was Barack Obama.)

But others have argued that the name has nothing to do with the slave trade, that it was actually just a nickname for the dark-skinned King Charles II. And no one I ran into who lived along the street seemed particularly uncomfortable with the name. When I mentioned it to an elderly man tending his front garden, he just laughed and said the name was a frequent conversation starter.

All the same, I was delighted when we finally bought a flat one postcode away in Hackney, another diverse area in north London, near a different leafy park, with a kitchen just as dated. But this time the street name only sealed the deal: Wilberforce Road.

After I wrote about West Virginia in *The Atlantic*, people began to share their own addressing stories—a street in Budapest that changed names with the political winds, the hazards of navigating without addresses in Costa Rica, a petition for a street name change in their town. I wanted to know why people cared so much, and why it made me so happy that Alan Johnston got to live on Stacy Hollow Road, a name that had meaning for him.

This leads me back to the question I opened with. "Why are leaders of the community spending time worrying about the naming of a street?" Mr. Miraldi had asked about Sonny Carson Avenue. I suppose I wrote this book to find out. Street names, I learned, are about identity, wealth, and, as in the Sonny Carson street example, race. But most of all they are about power—the power to name, the power to shape history, the power to decide who counts, who doesn't, and why.

Some books are about how one small thing changed the world—the pencil or the toothpick, for example. This is not that kind of book. Instead, it is a complex story of how the

Enlightenment project to name and number our streets has coincided with a revolution in how we lead our lives and how we shape our societies. We think of street addresses as purely functional and administrative tools, but they tell a grander narrative of how power has shifted and stretched over the centuries.

I make this argument through stories, for example, of streets named after Martin Luther King Jr., the way-finding methods of ancient Romans, and Nazi ghosts on the streets of Berlin. This book travels to Manhattan in the Gilded Age, London during the reign of Victoria, and Paris during the Revolution. But to understand what addresses mean, I first had to learn what it means not to have one.

So, let's start in India, in the slums of Kolkata.