Rethinking the Agenda of Political Toponymy

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A new narrative is beginning to take shape that charts the rise of "critical" approaches to the study of toponymy, which emphasizes the spatial politics of naming and the social production of place. This shift toward the "political" in toponymic scholarship is significant, especially for "a field that has traditionally been characterized by political innocence to say the least" (Vuolteenaho and Berg, 2009: 1). Yet, as the contributors to the current intervention forum have demonstrated, there are still many thematic areas that remain undertheorized in the "new" political toponymies. It is therefore important to re-examine these issues in greater detail as part of a renewed critical agenda for political toponymy. In what follows, I extend the discussion of new directions in critical toponymic research by highlighting two case studies that address many of the themes outlined in the preceding commentaries as a preliminary attempt to move the dialogue forward in a constructive manner.

Any attempt to set a new "agenda" for a field of study is inevitably a product of its times and must be attentive to both the subtle and substantive shifts currently underway at the present historical conjuncture. If the first decade of the twenty-first century is any indication of things to come, one of the major transformations that will likely reshape the toponymic landscape of the next century is the commercialization of public place-naming systems. The corporate

"branding" of public infrastructure through the financial acquisition of naming rights is still in its infancy, yet a glimpse of the pending corporate "take-over" of the public namescape is nowhere more evident than in the city of Dubai, a rapidly growing municipality in the United Arab Emirates. In 2006, the city began construction of a new metro rail system to cope with projected population increases, and to partially offset the cost of building and maintaining the Dubai Metro, the Roads and Transport Authority (RTA) of the Government of Dubai devised a plan to sell the naming rights to 23 of the original 47 metro stations to corporate sponsors. The RTA then launched a public relations campaign both in Arabic and English targeting potential corporate sponsors with the motto, "إجعل علامتك التجارية محط الانظار (Turn Your Brand Into a Destination)" (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. A glimpse at the not-so-distant future of the commercialized toponymic landscape, Dubai, United Arab Emirates. (Source: Courtesy of the Roads and Transport Authority of the Government of Dubai, 2010).

According to the RTA's promotional materials, the project to sell the naming rights of Dubai metro stations is the "ultimate branding and marketing opportunity" for national and international corporations seeking greater visibility in the fast-growing city. "What's more," they contend, "it is an *immersive* marketing opportunity that allows you to communicate and interact with your consumers at various touch points spread across the station/Metro network" (Roads and Transport Authority, 2010, italics added).

The process of converting a city's public spaces into a medium for corporate marketing is by no means something new, as consumers have long been bombarded with advertisements on billboards and by commercials on the public airwaves. However, the commodification of naming rights for public infrastructure systems (as opposed to privately-owned properties) is indeed a significant

extension of the "immersive" powers of corporate marketing in reshaping the publically-sanctioned, official toponymic landscape. In recent years, this has *already* resulted in the commodification of toponyms associated with public infrastructure systems in numerous cities worldwide, with the Canadian city of Winnipeg being a prime example (*CBC News*, 2010). By turning public places into branded "destinations," such public-private partnerships serve to legitimate corporate power and have the potential to reconfigure toponymic systems in cities around the world into new "spaces of capital" (Harvey, 2001). If Dubai metro stations are to be branded in the name of their corporate sponsors, the RTA asserts that the new metro system itself will enhance the global visibility of Dubai as a "world class destination" (Roads and Transport Authority, 2010). In devising their naming rights initiative, the public authorities in Dubai took much of their inspiration from the multi-million dollar naming rights deal between Sprint/Nextel Communications and the Las Vegas Monorail as well as various other naming rights agreements in selected countries across the globe (Roads and Transport Authority, 2009). Yet, through their general criteria for selecting corporate sponsors, the RTA sought to adapt the "global" naming rights agenda to "local" circumstances by requiring that sponsorship only be granted to financially-stable companies that have a presence in the United Arab Emirates and respect the "values and culture of Dubai."

My next case study shifts the focus from land to sea and draws connections between the role of naming in the political construction of scale and the cultural struggles over linguistic hegemony along the Pacific Northwest coast of North America. For over two centuries, cartographers have labeled the waterways of the region with the toponyms established by European explorers such as Charles Barkley and George Vancouver during expeditions in the 1780s and 1790s (Clayton, 2000). The waters of the Pacific Northwest have, according to custom, been divided into three main water bodies: the Strait of Georgia, named in honor of King George III; the Strait of Juan de Fuca, which commemorates a Greek explorer who sailed under the Spanish flag in the late sixteenth century; and Puget Sound, named after a crew member on Vancouver's expedition. In 2009, however, the Washington State Board on Geographic Names, as well as the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, approved a measure to join these three water bodies under a single designation as the "Salish Sea," and the name change has recently become official on the Canadian side of the border as well (Fig. 2).

The new toponym was proposed by Bert Webber, a retired biology professor at Western Washington University, as a means of raising awareness of the ecological interrelations within the marine environment along the coastal border zone between the United States and Canada. By consolidating these waterways in

Figure 2. Toponymic rescaling and the performative enactment of the "Salish Sea." (Source: Courtesy of Stefan Freelan, WWU, 2009).

toponymic terms, a new conceptual "object" is currently in the process of being constructed through a spatial practice that might be referred to as *toponymic rescaling*. The act of toponymic rescaling is not definitively achieved, once and for all, by official government declarations alone but should rather be seen as a performative enactment of place-identity (Rose-Redwood, 2008). Webber appears to have grasped the significance of this performative aspect of place naming, when he explains that, "Songs have already been written . . . . More songs will be written. Books will be written, poems will be written, and there will hopefully be a fabric that weaves through the culture that allows people to identify with that name [Salish Sea], and by identifying it see that this whole system is important" (as

quoted in Alcoba, 2009). As this example clearly illustrates, the performative enactment of toponymic rescaling is a normative strategy for reframing the spatial identities of places, which has a considerably bearing on what is deemed to be worthy of public attention.

The case of the Salish Sea also offers insights into the contested politics of linguistic hegemony, place naming, and the struggle for indigenous rights. Although critics have pointed out that the term "Salish" is itself a European construct, devised by anthropologists as part of their classification of indigenous languages, the term is nevertheless widely used today as a means of self-identification among various First Nations groups, including the Coast Salish peoples in British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon. According to a Coast Salish representative Chief Gibby Jacob, the "Salish Sea" designation has gained enthusiastic support among the Coast Salish First Nations, since the new toponym signifies a symbolic "acknowledgement of presence" (as quoted in Alcoba, 2009). The name has been vigorously contested, however, by those who view the change as a direct challenge to the British "legacy" in the region. For instance, one member of the Monarchist League of Canada, Keith Roy, has lambasted the name change as "disrespecting the historical significance of the monarch who funded the expedition when the waterway was discovered" (as quoted in Alcoba, 2009). Putting aside for a moment the problematic notion that Europeans somehow "discovered" a region that had been inhabited by indigenous peoples for thousands of years, the proponents of the "Salish Sea" name change anticipated such criticisms with their decision not to "erase" the existing European toponyms; instead, the new name will simply be "overlaid" upon the existing toponymic landscape in an attempt to discursively unify the different water bodies into a new overarching geographical "entity."

Both of these brief vignettes raise a series of thematic concerns that point toward a new agenda for critical place-name studies. The Dubai Metro naming rights initiative highlights the need to rethink toponymic inscription not solely as a "cultural" phenomenon but also as an integral strategy of entrenching neoliberal corporatism within the banal materialities of public space. As public officials increasingly envision the official namescape as a "commodity," it is imperative that critical place-name scholars call attention to the *political economy* of toponymic practices. To the extent that the naming of public infrastructure is taken out of the political arena and viewed primarily in economic terms, this is a clear attempt to produce what Lawrence Berg calls a toponymic landscape of "legitimacy-without-controversy" (this issue). Yet, it remains to be seen whether it is truly the case that, in the last instance, "banality conquers all," as Berg rather pessimistically suggests. Banal naming practices can, of course, be repoliticized to challenge the "apolitical toponymies" constructed as spaces of immersive commercialism or the symbolically sanitized heritage destinations highlighted in Yvonne Whelan's commentary (this issue). In San Francisco, for instance, the Board of Directors of the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system voted against selling the naming rights

of metro stations in 2001 (Ferdinand, 2001), thereby demonstrating that the commercialization of public toponymies is by no means inevitable if the political will exists to challenge such brazen attempts to commodify public toponymic systems.

Josh Hagen's (this issue) call for an examination of the "scalar politics of toponymy" is also crucial to understanding many place-naming practices, including the two case studies mentioned here. The corporate branding of Dubai Metro stations is perceived by RTA officials as essential to rescaling the city of Dubai into a "world class destination," yet restrictions were put in place to ensure that the image of corporate globalism would be tempered by a sensitivity to "local" codes of conduct. Similarly, officially designating the waters of the Pacific Northwest of North America as the "Salish Sea" is an attempt to use toponymy in order to construct a new scalar "object" that conceptually unites what had formerly been perceived as three disparate water bodies, which may potentially have future implications for environmental governance and management along the U.S./Canada border.

These two case studies also draw attention to naming projects that move beyond a narrow focus on the Anglophone world alone, although the complexities of linguistic hegemony are anything but straightforward. In Dubai, newly branded metro station names will be listed in both Arabic and English, indicating that corporate power can speak in different "tongues" when appropriating public toponymies in diverse regional contexts. The "Salish Sea" moniker is even more linguistically and culturally complex, with "Salish" being a European construction to classify an indigenous language group, which has subsequently been adopted as a marker of self-identity by various First Nations peoples. Is the "Salish Sea," then, merely an Anglophone toponym dressed up in indigenous garb or is it a legitimate "acknowledgement of presence" of indigenous peoples in the Pacific Northwest? Some have argued that the Salish Sea designation is merely a case of U.S. cultural imperialism, suggesting that "[i]t's just another one of the American efforts to erase the border. And I oppose that, and I think a majority of Canadians oppose it . . . . It's a silly idea. We [already] have beautiful names" (Vautier as quoted in Cornwall, 2009). It is precisely such sweeping generalizations and off-the-cuff reductionist explanations that often dominate public debates over place naming, which is all the more reason to call for a renewed agenda to *critically* analyze the spatial politics of toponymic practices.

Azaryahu (this issue) provocatively insists that such "critical" approaches to place-name studies are merely a new form of political functionalism. He contends that the recent focus on toponymic politics has itself taken a reductionist turn and runs the risk of becoming too predictable and, hence, rather "uncritical" of its own theoretical assumptions. Consequently, Azaryahu seeks to move beyond the "critical turn" in place-name studies by placing greater emphasis on the *communicative meanings* of toponymic inscriptions. I must confess that I am not entirely convinced that a "communicative turn" in critical toponymy necessarily

offers the theoretical toolkit needed to address and *critique* contemporary toponymic practices, particularly the commodification of place-naming rights. Nor am I convinced that critical toponymic studies can so easily be characterized as a return to reductionism. The recent attention devoted to the "political" in toponymic scholarship has less to do with attempting to decipher the singular political *meaning* of a spatial text than it does with examining how the performative imposition of toponymic "order" is itself a contested process. In other words, critical toponymies have sought to challenge the functionalism that underlies attempts to construct "official" toponymic systems, which are often portrayed as being *beyond* politics because their primary "function" is to provide a means of spatial orientation. It is precisely in response to this depoliticization of place-naming practices that critical place-name scholars seek to repoliticize the toponymic landscape by emphasizing the socio-spatial struggles over the toponymic production of place.

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