Critical Interventions in Political Toponymy

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On 26 March 2009, representatives of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey held a press conference at which they announced that the agency would refrain from using the name "Freedom Tower" to officially designate the building currently under construction at Ground Zero and would instead refer to the built structure by its legal address, "1 World Trade Center" (Bagli, 2009; Dunlap, 2009). The ostensible purpose of the press conference was to notify the public that the new building had acquired its first commercial tenant, Vantone Industrial Co., a Chinese real estate company that signed a 23-year lease to occupy several floors in the skyscraper once completed in 2013 (Kokenes, 2009). This led some to conclude that the decision to dispense with the "Freedom Tower" moniker had been made chiefly for financial reasons with little consideration given to the symbolic resonances associated with the name. After all, even the Port Authority's chief

public affairs officer, Stephen Sigmund, emphasized that it would be "most practical to market the building as 1 World Trade Center," despite the fact that "[m]any will always refer to it as the Freedom Tower." New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg later concurred, stating: "If they could rent the whole thing by changing the name, I guess they're going to do that and they probably, from a responsible point of view, should" (as quoted in Dunlap, 2009: A19). It is not so much that marketability has trumped symbolic meaning per se but rather that the symbolic capital associated with a name has become so inextricably bound up with the economic logic of capital accumulation that the symbolic naming of a "place" is itself increasingly being *enlisted* as an integral strategy of maximizing profitability.

This brief vignette underscores how the naming of places has become, among other things, one of the next "frontiers" in the neoliberalization of urban spaces. From New York to Dubai, public authorities have opted for selling the naming rights of public places to corporate sponsors. In an age when the right to name everything from prominent buildings and subway stations to entire towns is being commodified, there is clearly a need for a more nuanced critical theory of *political toponymy* that moves beyond the long-held belief that place naming is a strictly "cultural" phenomenon which is somehow disconnected from the political, economic, and social struggles over the production of "place." Now more than ever, it is not the time to be content with the dusty revelations of arm-chair toponymy or to remain silent as the public authorities use their delegated power to auction off the toponymic identities of places large and small, thereby effectively privatizing the public sphere. The received wisdom that the study of toponymy, or place naming, entails nothing more than the compilation of an "endless, meaningless repetition of lists of towns" (Freeman 1961: 205, as quoted in O'Loughlin, Raento, and Sidaway, 2009: 1) has led many geographers to dismiss toponymic study as irrelevant to the pressing political and economic concerns of the present. Such a narrow view of toponymy, however, has itself unwittingly contributed to the *depoliticization* of naming as a place-making strategy when what is needed is instead a critical exploration of the social struggles over place naming within the context of the current politico-economic restructuring of toponymic practices.

The contested politics of place naming are now well documented in the geographical literature, with much of this work focusing on questions of nationalism, (post)colonialism, identity politics, and the spatialization of collective memory (Berg and Vuolteenaho, 2009; Rose-Redwood, Alderman, and Azaryahu, 2010). This focus on the politics of place, identity, and naming has gone a long way toward *repoliticizing* the geographies of toponymic inscription. However, it has also had the inadvertent effect of sidelining various other important themes that do not fit neatly into the problematic of identity politics. This intervention forum seeks to redress a number of these "blind spots" in the current literature on critical

toponymies by highlighting several thematic areas that deserve further attention as part of a renewed critical agenda for the study of political toponymy.

First and foremost, there is a growing need to critically assess the *commodification of place naming rights* as part of a broader critique of the "spaces of neoliberalism" (Brenner and Theodore, 2002). A thematic focus on the political economy of place naming offers several productive directions for future critical toponymic investigation. As the case of the Freedom Tower illustrates, political leaders and public officials are increasingly willing to view toponyms strictly in terms of their *exchange value* rather than the *use value* they acquire as an integral part of the public sphere. Another clear example of this trend is the recent decision by New York City's Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) to rename one of the busiest subway stations in Brooklyn after the London-based bank, Barclays, in exchange for $200,000 annually over the next two decades (Grynbaum, 2009). This is likely only the beginning of New York's naming rights auction, since it has been reported that the MTA "wants to follow the Barclays example with stations throughout the system" (Gomes and Dunn, 2009). Similar deals to rename public places in exchange for monetary compensation have already been made in other U.S. cities as well as internationally, and this political movement to privatize the public domain of naming rights could very well lead to the wholesale commercialization of public space if left unchecked. One crucial strategy to challenge this privileging of the *toponym-as-commodity* is to revalorize the use-value associated with creating and maintaining more inclusive place-naming systems through a democratic decision-making process as well as the various informal practices of toponymic inscription.

A second major theme that deserves greater attention in political toponymy is the widespread attempt to create an "uncontestable" landscape by means of *banal naming practices*. While it is generally acknowledged that place naming plays an important role in reshaping the spaces of everyday life, critical place-name scholars have typically focused on the most dramatic political conflicts over place naming while ignoring those namescapes that present themselves as apparently beyond contestation due to their utter banality. Yet, those names that at first glance appear "neutral" and "apolitical" often obscure, and hence fetishize, the unequal power relations that all-too-often underpin the naming process. For instance, the numbering of streets is often touted as an effective means of taking "politics" out of the street naming process, since numbered streets are allegedly more "neutral" than street names. The problem with this argument, however, is that it confines itself to the supposed qualities of the toponym itself while ignoring the broader set of political processes at work in the production of toponymic landscapes. To illustrate this point more clearly, consider the following example: the World Bank began promoting the use of street numbering as an "apolitical" method of spatially organizing African cities in order to cope with the social problems associated with the structural adjustment policies that the Bank itself helped impose on such countries in the 1980s and 1990s. The banal logic of "number" inscribed in

geographic space was, in short, the spatial counterpart to the calculative economic rationalities that the World Bank and IMF dictated from Washington. According to a recent World Bank report, the primary advantage to the banal practice of numbering, rather than naming, streets is that the "neutral" appearance of numbering systems minimizes the likelihood that the Bank will encounter political tensions over the development process (Farvacque-Vitkovic et al., 2005). It is this strategy of using banal naming practices to construct an "uncontestable" landscape that requires critical scrutiny as part of a renewed agenda for political toponymy.

There are, of course, various other new directions that political toponymy as a field of study might explore, but two issues which have both received relatively little attention among place-name scholars should be the focus of critical analysis: the *scalar politics of toponymy*, on the one hand, and the question of *linguistic hegemony*, on the other hand. Scale is central to the political construction and contestation of social space, and place naming plays an active role in the politics of mobilizing certain conceptions of scale over others. For example, a growing number of U.S. cities are mandating that schools only be named after "local" historical figures who lived, worked, or had a direct impact within their community, thus reversing a long trend of identifying schools with presidents and other national heroes (Mathews, 2007). In this respect, school naming has shifted somewhat from its traditional nationalistic function to become a tool for local boosterism and place promotion. Yet, place naming can also be carried out with a "global" strategy in mind. The Gandhi Monument Council, an interfaith organization of clergy founded in 2007, recently asked mayors in 185 cities across 39 countries to name a major street in their respective communities for Indian peace icon Mahatma Gandhi. While Zurich, Switzerland, has agreed to honor Gandhi with a road, officials in Canberra, Australia, have rejected the request, citing legal guidelines that require "roads and public places to commemorate Australians and things Australian" (*News Blaze*, 2008). These and many other examples point to the fact that toponymy does not simply occur *at* different scales. Rather, place naming is a symbolic conduit through which various scales of political identity are constructed and legitimized.

Finally, while the study of political toponymy requires a more critical engagement with scale, it must also address the broader politics of language. An unequal balance of power characterizes the geography of language in the world, where the hegemony of certain languages grows at the cost of minority linguistic systems. The disappearance of indigenous languages is accelerating dramatically under the weight of the global dominance of English and other major world languages. It is estimated that half of the world's 7,000 languages are expected to be extinct by 2100, which will have a direct impact on the presence of competing ways of naming and hence knowing places (National Geographic Society, 2009). The literature on political toponymy has, in some respects, contributed to this linguistic hegemony by focusing so intently on the toponymy of the English-speaking world, often at the expense of studying the social struggles over naming

places in Latin America, Asia, or Africa. As linguist Wendo Nabea (2009) has demonstrated in his examination of public reaction to language policy in Kenya, the hegemony of English and Kiswahili as the country's official languages has not gone unchallenged by Kenyans, who have mediated and contested this linguistic supremacy in their writing through the abrogation of English and the assertion of African languages. One would suspect that such contestations and mediations would also be evident in the way in which the country's residents name and identify places, yet such questions cannot be satisfactorily answered unless a greater effort is made by critical place-name scholars to "internationalize" the focus of toponymic research through studying the politics of language beyond the hegemony of the Anglophone world.

The contributors to this forum provide a series of concrete and innovative ways in which to deepen the dialogue between political toponymy and critical human geography, drawing upon many of the new directions and thematic concerns outlined above. While each of the contributions charts a somewhat different course for future studies in political toponymy, the authors are united in the belief that it is not enough to simply recognize that there is a "politics" to the naming of places. Rather, if critical place-name studies is to live up to its name, it must consider how the changing practices of naming continue to reframe the scale of the "political" in unexpected ways, particularly during times of political, economic, or social upheaval.

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