



(Inter)national Naming: Heritage, Conflict and Diaspora

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In May 2009 a new bridge was slowly maneuvered into place in the center of Dublin, Ireland's capital city. The latest addition to the succession of bridges that span the river Liffey, it is known as the Samuel Beckett Bridge in honour of the Nobel Prize-winning Irish author and dramatist. When opened in 2009, this new bridge joined the James Joyce Bridge and the Sean O'Casey Bridge, unveiled in 2003 and 2005 respectively, and so-named to commemorate two more of Ireland's most famous literary figures. The attachment of this literary triumvirate to three of Dublin's most recent, large-scale infrastructural developments stands in sharp contrast to the names that were in vogue in the decades that followed the achievement of Irish political independence in 1922. It is also richly suggestive of a new trend at work in the practice of place naming, one that compels us to interrogate more closely the links between the contemporary commodification of the past and its representation in street and place names.

In the heady days of the post-independence period, local authorities used nomenclature to inscribe a specific version of Irish national identity into the landscape. In a process that has been mirrored in countless post-revolutionary contexts, a series of symbolic acts of reclamation were set in train. New streets were named, and existing thoroughfares renamed, many of them in honour of Irish revolutionaries and political figures. Dublin's most central thoroughfare, for

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example, was changed from Sackville Street (after a Lord Lieutenant from the British administration) to O'Connell Street (after a leader of constitutional Irish nationalism, Daniel O'Connell) in 1924, a grand symbolic gesture that signaled the emergence of a new and independent era (Whelan, 2003). Throughout the decades that followed, the municipal authorities engaged in a gradual and at times quite piecemeal process of renaming particular streets in the capital, while the development of suburban housing estates in pockets of land throughout the greater Dublin area provided a fresh canvas upon which new symbolic layers of meaning were to be imprinted.

The naming and renaming of streets that characterized this period in Ireland underscores the symbolic potency of the street name. Not only signs to the city, street names are very much signs *of* the city, which generate a supply of symbolic capital that cities spend in many different ways and with varying degrees of success. The spatial distribution of names and the individuals or events that they commemorate, when set within the context of other aspects of the built environment, also serve as sensitive indicators of the links between politics and the cultural landscape. And so debates over naming can be read as symbolic representations of much larger power struggles between competing interest groups. In their ability to transmit meaning, street names are integral to the iconography of landscape. The highly contested political context that prevailed in Ireland before and after independence also exposes the significance of language in the representation of street names. In a manner that is mirrored in many other post-colonial contexts, the contentious issue of bilingual naming and the prominence afforded to the Irish language, alongside English, on name plates was a hotly debated issue in the decades before and immediately following independence. What is striking, however, when we look to the contemporary city, and especially cities that are some distance in time from revolutionary moments in their history, is how a rather different set of concerns now govern the choice of place names.

The ways in which naming is being used in the current context, the commemorative choices embedded in naming practices, and the policies adopted by municipal and local authorities, all imply a very different set of priorities. These concerns are perhaps more readily related to the demands of cultural heritage and the broader tourism industry. Just as public art rather than political sculpture has come to dominate the monumental landscape, so too is there a clear move towards a more distinctly apolitical toponymy, one that draws, for example, on figures of the cultural and literary realm rather than the political. In an Irish context this trend was signalled in 1992 when a series of new banknotes was introduced which did not reference aspects of the country's contentious past, but focused instead on a selection of literary, religious and nineteenth-century political figures. More recently, the streets of the capital have witnessed the unveiling of statues and monuments dedicated to among others the black rock star, Phil Lynott, and the writers Oscar Wilde and Brendan Behan, while in the center of the city a giant steel spike, the Spire of Dublin, which commemorates nothing in particular, has come to

dominate the Dublin skyline. This trend towards a distinctly non-political iconography is echoed in the selection of bridge names referred to at the outset of this piece, and in the names that are attached to Dublin's suburban development schemes. Where once the names of the seven signatories of the 1916 Proclamation were regularly invoked on street signs, today's increasingly apolitical toponymy gestures towards a post-nationalist and increasingly secular Ireland, one that looks outwards to Europe and beyond, rather than backwards to contentious aspects of its past.

All of this suggests that there is much scope for a renewed interrogation of the naming strategies at work in contemporary urban spaces and of the ways in which naming has become embroiled in the commodification of the past and subject to the vagaries of the heritage industry, especially in "post-nationalist" contexts. Heritage has become a hot topic, one that has sparked the interest of historical and cultural geographers alike. To be distinguished from history by virtue of its very present-centered nature, heritage encapsulates a wide variety of landscapes, buildings and aspects of material culture. But at its core, heritage is also highly selective, culturally constructed and whether tangible or intangible, official or unofficial, fulfils a variety of oftentimes competing functions. While the political, economic and cultural uses of the past in our landscapes of the present have all come under scrutiny in a wide range of geographical contexts, and at a variety of scales, rather less emphasis has been placed on the role of naming as a significant dynamic in the heritage process. It would seem, therefore, that there is room for a greater engagement between place-name research and the contemporary politics of cultural heritage as we seek to understand what kind of cultural heritage is being woven into the fabric of contemporary cities, what that might represent and just whose interests it may serve.

While heritage and the naming of places have the potential to locate and bind people both geographically and historically, so too do they have the power to exclude. And this brings me to the second key theme that I want to raise here, one that relates to naming in more contested cultural and political contexts. While the Samuel Beckett Bridge was being placed in position in Dublin, over 170 kilometres north of the city in Belfast, Northern Ireland, the question of naming was also on the minds of members of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Specifically, the Assembly was engaged in a debate about the contentious issue of erecting bilingual street signs on motorway routes across the province's six counties. While in the Irish Republic the Irish language took on a position of prominence on street and road signs in the aftermath of political independence, in Northern Ireland by way of sharp contrast, the language has been marginalized. The signing of the Good Friday (or Belfast) Agreement in 1998, however, advocated resolute action to promote the Irish language in public life and points to the potentially restorative and palliative role of naming in conflict and post-conflict contexts, to the ways in which naming can actually create a mechanism for giving voice to multiple traditions. The very naming of this political accord is in itself indicative of the contentious nature of

naming in the north of Ireland. Widely referred to as the “Good Friday” Agreement among nationalists and republicans, for unionists and loyalists, the term “Belfast” Agreement is often favored. This privileging of religion over place, and vice versa, points to a form of semantic sectarianism that prevails more broadly across the province. Since the agreement was signed, the question of representing the Irish language, alongside English, on street signs around the province has sparked fraught and contentious discussion. The Assembly debates underscore the powerful role of naming in highly fractious political contexts, but they also bring into sharp focus the pivotal role of language in the naming process and the potentially restorative role of bilingual naming in conflict contexts. Of course, the territorial conflict in the north of Ireland is longstanding and bitterly contested and the Troubles, as the conflict there is often referred to, have been characterized by a whole range of territorial struggles that have been played out across this contested terrain. The territory of the six counties as a whole has been at the heart of the conflict, along with the border territory that separates these counties from the remaining counties of Ulster and the Republic of Ireland. But these larger-scale territorial disputes are in many ways sustained by a wide variety of what we might term micro-scale symbolic strategies across the cultural landscapes of the province. Territorial signifiers, chief among them place names, have been employed by both communities in order to represent and reaffirm group identity, as well as to create clearly demarcated boundaries between communities.

Alongside the calls for motorway signs to be represented in both the Irish and English language, naming has also been a significant issue in several territorial disputes in various towns across the province (Nash, 1999). The name of the city of Derry/Londonderry, for example, has long been hotly contested along political lines, with nationalists opting for “Derry” and unionists referring to the city as “Londonderry.” This contestation was starkly underscored in 2007 when a Canadian tourist set about buying a bus ticket to the city, only to be informed by a company employee that Derry “didn’t exist” (*Belfast Telegraph*, 2007). As the province moves slowly into a post-conflict context, however, various city and town councils have been active in writing policy documents relating to naming and which address the role of language. In Derry, Belfast and Coleraine, for example, policies have been put in place whereby the authorities now have the discretion to erect street nameplates that show the name of a street in a language other than English. Such policies also afford citizens the right to initiate proposals to make name changes and to propose an alternative language for those names. Northern Ireland, of course, is just one example of a highly contested political and cultural context in which naming has proved to be highly fraught. But in many ways it encapsulates some of the contentious issues that prevail when it comes to a consideration of naming in conflict, post-conflict and multi-cultural contexts, issues that merit further research and critical scrutiny (also see Jones and Merriman, 2009).

While debates were taking place in the Northern Ireland Assembly about the erection of bilingual street signs on the province's motorways, thousands of miles away in New York, West 53rd Street was renamed "U2 Way," albeit for just one week, in honour of the Irish rock group. While this temporary renaming had more to do with generating publicity for the release of their new album and forthcoming world tour rather than with any serious attempt to honour the band, it nonetheless provides a useful segue into the final theme of this piece, one that draws attention to a potentially fruitful dialogue between place-name studies and diaspora scholarship. For emigrant communities in particular, the desire to re-imagine spaces of the homeland has engendered a variety of commemorative and heritage-based practices. Migration and displacement, as Lowenthal (1998) argues, sharpen nostalgia and foster a hunger for heritage. After all, "displaced persons are displaced not just in space but in time; they have been cut off from their own pasts. . . . If you cannot revisit your own origins – reach out and touch them from time to time – you are forever in some crucial sense untethered" (Lively, 1994: 175, cited in Lowenthal, 1998: 9). For many diasporic communities, therefore, naming and claiming spaces of the cultural landscape takes on particular significance.

A case in point which illustrates this phenomenon relates to the Irish diaspora in North America. For those Irish people overseas who trace their ancestry to the three-quarters of a million Irish who made their way to the United States during and after the Great Hunger of the mid-nineteenth century, the commemoration and representation of their past holds a great deal of cultural and political significance. The material geographies of such diasporic communities have assumed much greater prominence in recent decades of academic scholarship, in concert with the increased visibility of the diaspora in Irish cultural life in general (Kelleher, 2002). Long before this, however, memory and its manifestation in monuments, street iconography and public processions proved to be an important identity resource throughout many sites of the Irish diaspora. For these migrant communities, the desire to re-imagine spaces of the homeland engendered a variety of commemorative practices whereby collective memory was distilled into visual icons which were made to stand in for complex histories, thereby symbolically underpinning shared narratives of identity. Although a burgeoning body of literature has shed new light on the diasporic experience, paying particular attention to the role of literature in forging narratives of migrant identity, there is also much scope for a closer and more sustained analysis of the materiality of diaspora, one that probes, for example, the politics of official and unofficial toponymy that has been woven into diasporic landscapes, as well as the monumental iconographies of such spaces. Although the maps of homeland and diasporic settlements may reveal at a glance the imprint of immigrant communities on the local toponymy, there is scope for a more sustained examination of the ways in which names are used, often unofficially, to claim spaces in diasporic contexts.

In sketching out three broad trajectories for future research on place naming, this short piece has sought to highlight some potentially useful points of

contact and intersection between naming and heritage, diaspora and contested cultural contexts. Ireland's history of emigration, the conflict in the north of the island, along with the contemporary preoccupation with packaging the past, all combine to make it a fertile terrain for pondering these future directions and productively expanding research on naming places.

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