



Book review: *The Politics of Place Naming: Naming the World*

Felix de Montety

INRAE, Laboratoire EcoSystèmes et Sociétés En Montagne, Université Grenoble Alpes,
2 Rue de la Papeterie, 38402 Saint-Martin-d'Hères, France

Correspondence: Felix de Montety (felix.de-montety@inrae.fr)

Published: 3 January 2025

Giraut, F. and Houssay-Holzschuch, M. (Eds.): The Politics of Place Naming: Naming the World, ISTE/Wiley, London/Hoboken, 304 pp., ISBN 978-1-394-18829-1, EUR 141.10, 2022.

In one of his poetry collections, Kei Miller¹ narrates the encounter between a Jamaican Rastaman and a British cartographer, during which the former introduces the latter to the “strange ways and names of this island”. This story concludes *The Politics of Place Naming*, a thorough volume edited by Frédéric Giraut and Myriam Houssay-Holzschuch on the political geography of place-naming processes.

Rich in such artistic references as well as reflections stemming from diverse areas of contemporary philosophy, critical theory, and postcolonial thought, *The Politics of Place Naming* is a well-structured collection of original essays on place-naming processes that is based on deeply researched case studies from across the globe and contributes to the recent dynamism of the field known as critical toponymy. From the introduction by the coordinators and through 10 empirical chapters and a conclusion, its backbone is a multifaceted and thought-provoking set of reflections on the interconnections between the use of proper nouns in the practice of power over space, the daily interactions between people and their environment, and the negotiated transformations of such relations.

Researchers preoccupied with postcolonial, constructivist, or processual approaches to place names have long been confronted with the important theoretical and methodological challenges associated with the place–language–power conundrum in which they situate toponymic production. Gi-

¹Miller, K. (2014). *The cartographer tries to map a way to Zion*. Carcanet.

raut and Houssay-Holzschuch note that the field “has been traversed since its beginnings by the tension between the daily and lived experience of toponymy and the intense conflicts of renaming symbolic places – a country, a capital or metropolis, a major street, a mountain peak, between places of daily life and high places” (p. 264). So how can analyses of place names “go beyond simple binaries: endo-exo, top down-bottom up, producer-user” (p. 16)? To overcome the epistemological side effects of such duality, the editors suggest in their introduction that place names can be seen as a spectacle projecting “norms” which “are incorporated, claimed or reproduced from below, by the spectators who participate fully in the construction of the scenery” (p. 16). This situationism-inspired approach appears particularly relevant to the study of contemporary societies. As well as giving “a political dimension to the questions of reception, appropriation and even subversion and performance”, it “allows for inventing situations for which alternative toponymy, as diverse as it can be, offers new horizons for struggle and play, which might include and empower” (p. 17).

Derek Alderman’s contribution (chap. 2) looks at a feminist renaming campaign in Paris to explore the “narrative”, “affective”, and “material” capacities of commemorative place names. He demonstrates that the potential “reparative” capacities of name removal and renaming campaigns depend on the possibility of letting local and minority voices be heard in toponymic debates. Sébastien Boillat (chap. 3) offers an analysis and literature review of some of the links between place names and the linguistic conceptualization and representation of the environment in a given social group. In his own chapter (chap. 4), Frédéric Giraut deals with colonial and imperial place naming and provides key arguments that look beyond the conceptual opposition between endonym and exonym. He shows that most place-naming situations

ultimately blur the lines between the outside and the inside and the local and the global and calls for a more nuanced appreciation of processes of negotiation, hybridization, and reappropriation. Chapter 5, by Reuben Rose-Redwood, Anton Tantner, and Sun-Bae Kim, proposes a fascinating analysis of street addressing, an often-overlooked place-naming process that deserves further examination considering its growing importance in a world filled with geospatial technologies. This is followed by Jani Vuolteenaho's contribution (chap. 6), which deals with the commodification of place names through the lens of branding and naming rights, providing stimulating examples as well as a subtle discussion of naming as an extension of the notion of property and as a frontier of the contemporary commodification of culture.

Christophe Gauchon (chap. 7) then looks at the entanglements between place naming and tourism and convincingly analyses the idea of touristic toponymy as an element of place branding and territorial restructuring. Lucas Destrem (chap. 8) offers a minute examination of transport toponymy or "stathmonymy". It shows how some actors use transport toponymy "to satisfy their desire for new commemorations without resorting to a cleansing of odonymy" (p. 158) and suggests research perspectives delve further into this long-overlooked and now emerging subfield. They are strikingly relevant for place-name studies in general, notably the role of toponymic commissions, the use of toponymic databases at various levels, and the question of naming competence as a juridical issue. In chap. 9, Melissa Wanjiru-Mwita offers a welcome focus on informal settlements in the Global South, areas typically characterized by the intertwinement of work and personal life, as well as limited visibility in public representations of space, notably maps and road signs. The names of informal settlements are especially interesting in that they provide "a window for assessing naming processes that occur from the 'bottom' involving marginalized groups especially in urban areas" (p. 176), including layered processes of opposition, displacement, formalization, identity construction, and commemoration. Revolving around the idea of cartographic sovereignty, Matthieu Noucher's thought-provoking chapter (chap. 10) shows why being sovereign with maps also means exerting control over names. It introduces alternatives to state spatial data production and circulation. Using the example of French Guiana, Noucher shows that opening "algorithmic black boxes" and exploring new mapping practices, notably online, can help bypass the state and contribute to challenging its cartographical hegemony. The last chapter, by Michel Ben Arrous and Liora Bigon, is not as concerned with a specific theme as much as with the ambitious goal of "taking critical toponymy out of its comfort zone" (p. 217). Focusing on Africa, it argues that "critical place-name studies" could be marred with predictability, notably because of too narrow a definition of the kind of names this field ought to be concerned with, and uses diverse and original examples from Senegal, Gambia, Mali, South Africa, Cameroon, Mozambique, Mauritania, and Algeria to present

forms of "spontaneous", "mobile", or "heterogeneous" place naming that help to think about such processes outside of or beyond officiality and hegemony associated with the nationalist paradigm.

Giraut and Houssay-Holzschuch's conclusion brings together the main outputs of this edited volume and provides a stimulating and optimistic assessment of the field as it stands today. *The Politics of Place Naming* comes as a welcome prolongation of 3 decades of key ideas in critical place-name studies, a "multidisciplinary [...] and deeply political" (p. 262) field which has kept on growing and getting more diverse since the publications that accompanied and theorized its rise in the early 21st century (see notably Berg and Vuolteenaho, 2009; Rose-Redwood et al., 2010; Basik, 2023).

The continued progress in this field, from its background in political and cultural geography to a now wider base, has prompted most of the researchers involved in it to consider it "sufficiently solid to broaden its perspectives, even to proceed towards a profound theoretical renewal" (p. 262). It also calls for some form of synthesis of its key themes and underlying ideas, which Giraut and Houssay-Holzschuch's book certainly provides. It is therefore a highly recommendable addition to the field of critical place-name studies and a very good introduction to issues surrounding place names for geographers and social scientists in general.

One of the volume's main strengths lies in its cohesiveness around a shared set of notions and theoretical approaches. In addition to that, the perspectives opened by some of its chapters are just as stimulating and call for renewed attention to the political dimension of nominative processes and their impact on the daily construction of place and space. In contrast with the enduring traditionalism of erudite heritage-oriented approaches to toponymy (see for instance Brunet, 2016), its theory-heavy but empirically founded developments provide a stimulating defence of political approaches to space, mapping, and planning. While they do not hint in which direction place-name studies could or should go to widen its horizon, its most striking arguments or their silences remind us that place names are not just traces of linguistic practices: they constitute an integral part of language and ignoring the main ideas, methods, and tools of the language sciences leaves us largely unequipped to adequately deal with them.

Getting acquainted with formal language training and methods, developing collaborations with colleagues in linguistics, and encouraging them to contribute to critical place-name studies could help geographers and social scientist look at place-naming practices beyond the politics of space and their own epistemological strengths and professional conditioning. A better understanding of the multiple transformations names go through within language itself could be the first step towards a deeper appraisal of place names as spatialized language and contribute to more progressive onomastics and, ultimately, to the rise of truly interdisciplinary critical place-name studies.

Disclaimer. Publisher's note: Copernicus Publications remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims made in the text, published maps, institutional affiliations, or any other geographical representation in this paper. While Copernicus Publications makes every effort to include appropriate place names, the final responsibility lies with the authors.

References

Basik, S. (Ed.): *Encountering Toponymic Geopolitics. Place Names as a Political Instrument in the Post-Soviet States*, Routledge, Abingdon, ISBN 9781032274928, 2023.

Brunet, R.: *Trésor du terroir. Les noms de lieux de la France*, CNRS éditions, Paris, ISBN 9782271088161, 2016.

Berg, L. D. and Vuolteenaho, J. (Eds.): *Critical Toponymies: The Contested Politics of Place Naming*, Ashgate Press, Aldershot, ISBN 9781138267756, 2009.

Rose-Redwood, R., Alderman, D., and Azaryahu, M.: Geographies of toponymic inscription: New directions in critical place-name studies, *Prog. Hum. Geogr.*, 34, 453–470, 2010.