

## Panel Discussion: The Politics of Place and Sea Names Revisited

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Place names bring meaning and order, but they also manifest power. As Confucius (551 – 479 BC) phrased it, “the very first task of a true statesman is to rectify the names” (Kostanski & Puzey 2016: xiv). At the same time, place names – and not the least sea names – often stir strong emotions. For collectives and individuals, place names are anchors of meaning that transform abstract space into specific places. Even so, once place names achieve a recognized status, they tend to become “commonsensical” in a sense that we often use them habitually, without reflecting upon them consciously. In this discussion paper, I will provide some theoretical and personal reflections on recent critical scholarly approaches to the power of place naming. On this basis, I will then shortly speculate on possible futures of the *East Sea/Japan Sea* naming conflict.

A politically oriented turn has characterized part of newer place name research. As a geographer otherwise specialized in postindustrial urban developments, the politics of place naming has been an inspiring side-interest of mine during the last ten years. In this research field, the questions of place naming have been explicitly tackled as questions of power (Withers 2000: 533). As distinct from traditional place name research (toponomastics) focusing on historical, etymological and linguistic aspects of toponyms per se, “critical toponymists” have challenged the seeming political innocence of naming and instead concentrated on social and political processes as well as unequal power relations behind the authoritative practices of naming. As undoubtedly my most significant contribution to this field thus far, several years ago I co-edited with Lawrence D. Berg (University of British Columbia) *Critical Toponymies: The Contested Politics of*

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Place Naming (Berg & Vuolteenaho 2009). Among other politically charged themes, the book explored the key role of naming in the colonial silencing of indigenous cultures, the canonization of nationalist ideals in the nomenclature of cities and maps, the construction of commodified neoliberal urban landscapes, and the formation of more or less fluid forms of postmodern and postcolonial identities. In the meanwhile, the book's geographical coverage bordered on the truly global, as it brought together case studies from Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, North America, the Pacific, and even the virtual landscapes of the Internet.

Despite a host of perspectives opened in *Critical Toponymies* on how power relations inhere in naming practices, I have in retrospect realized that the entire collection said next nothing about sea names, an inherently complex and political toponymic category. What a lacuna in a book that allegedly adopted a global approach to its subject matter! A fortunate thing is, however, that place name scholars and critical theorists have provided a number of generalizable insights that can facilitate the understanding of the politics of sea names, too. As a starting point, as appellations for water bodies that invariably exist in an interstitial and inter-relational space between territorial powers, sea names have both intriguing differences and commonalities with "terrestrial toponyms" as the objects of politically oriented inquiry. In the following, I will concentrate on some theoretical discussions and viewpoints that seem particularly relevant in this connection: the culturally integrating versus discriminatory aspects of toponymic power; the seeming innocence of place names; and the crucial role of state power in the linguistic engineering and territorialization of space.

I'll begin with a perspective that scholars sometimes dub the "place aspect" in the politics of naming. If evaluated from the inside of particular communities (of whatever scale, from small place-grounded social groups to the "imagined communities" of modern nation states), this aspect represents the "generative power" of place naming. In this role, as above all anthropologists and phenomenological philosophers have accentuated, place names facilitate the creation of "shared existential space out of a blank environment" by acting "as mnemonics for the historical actions of individuals and groups" (Tilley 1994: 18; Tuan 1991). In his wonderfully rich ethnography *Wisdom Sits in Places*, for instance, Keith Basso (1996) depicted how the oftentimes intricate toponyms of the Western Apache were memory aids to carry on narratives

about places from generation to generation. In Basso's (1996: 74) words, toponyms carry culturally integrating functions as the 'bits and pieces of a common worldview'. Or as Pierre Bourdieu's (1991: 105) *Language and Symbolic Power* echoes the principally same standpoint from a sociological perspective: "the act of naming helps to establish" the social world "by structuring the perception which social agents have" of it". It is easy to arrive at the conclusion that the communally generative or integrative function of toponymy (with its inextricably power-related aspects) bears relevance to locatable communities of all kinds, whether based on personal acquaintance, or mainly anonymous social ties (as in the case of modern nation-states). In short, names claim unity, a shared speaking position of "us" (Laclau 2005).

The darker side of the coin is the discriminatory power of place naming. At the simplest level, this is a direct result of the lack of one's own (place) names or opportunities to use them legitimately. During the history of Western colonialism across the globe, hundreds if not thousands of indigenous minorities have suffered from the silencing of their names by the colonizers, which has posed a serious "ontological" threat to their very cultural existence. One can think here of the Sami in Scandinavia and the Kola Peninsula, the Maori in New Zealand and various First Nations in the Northern American context (e.g. on the Sami: Nickul 1963; Rautio-Helander 2009). During North America's post-Columbian history, for instance, the "Indian" nomenclatures became largely erased, or Anglicised orthographically (Harley, 2001: 142-146; 174-187). In these and very many other cases, the hegemonic (colonizing) communities confiscate the right of naming from subaltern (colonized) communities in favor of a "master toponymy" that is henceforth exclusively circulated in property records, maps, atlases, road signs, street names, newspapers and basically all public communication. A gloomy side-effect of what might be called "toponymic modernization" has been the erasure of the inherited heteroglossia of local names (the ethno-linguistic diversity of toponymy) and even definite "toponymic silencing" (Harley 2001) of many indigenous cultures and their inherited, language-mediated practices of place-making.

A noteworthy aspect in all this is that is the privileged members of hegemonic (colonizing) communities tend to collectively forget historical crimes and symbolic violence haunting behind the official toponymy. Indeed, as Lawrence and I (Vuolteenaho

& Berg 2009: 11) argued in our introduction to *Critical Toponymies*, in societies that are characterized by a homogenous population and a high level of cultural integration (it is, wherein minorities with their “other” naming traditions have been effectively marginalized or assimilated), it is very often the case that the place names acquire a taken-for-granted status. Once the place names become a part and parcel of people’s intuitive “common sense”, they may appear to them as totally politically neutral and innocent cultural symbols. On the contrary, in situations where socio-cultural and/or political tensions prevail (where the assimilation remains incomplete), toponymic conflicts may surface in a variety of ways: from organized re-naming campaigns to the spontaneous use of alternative names and pronunciations, struggles against the renditions of history in official toponymies, refusals to unlearn marginalized names, and so on. In recent decades, the latter situation has characterized very many de-colonization initiatives all around the world, as indigenous groups such as the Sami and the Maori have started to vocally defend equal rights for their language as well as naming traditions that encapsulate their emotional ties to and generations-long habitation of particular ancestral areas and places (e.g. Berg & Kearns 2009; Rautio-Helander 2009).

All this leads us to the last theoretical viewpoint I want to bring to the fore in this paper, namely the interconnections between the state power, territoriality and toponymic systematization. Only in a very marginal sense, the naming of places remains today “everybody’s business” – in the way it used to be, for instance, in the medieval towns and villages of Europe where “no communal authority cared” (Langenfelt 1954: 331). Instead, above all, the sovereign state powers enjoy the legitimate monopoly to name on their respective territories. Especially in the course of the last two centuries, the institutionalization and standardization of toponymies has played a crucial role in the linguistic territorialization of space which has in turn contributed to the consolidation of modern nation-states as principally unquestioned politico-territorial units. Tellingly enough, the current norm is that “each country has a national geographical state authority to standardize and disseminate its names” and even the UN-coordinated international standardization “must of necessity be based on national standardization” (Raper 1995: 263).

However, even in the contemporary production of territorial spaces, systematic place naming is not only about technocratic legibility, but also culture and identity. As has always been the case with local cultures, to name is to claim historical rootedness in the contemporary world of nation-states, too. Indeed, an overarching tendency in the forging of a state-sanctioned national toponymies has been to build these on the antecedent vocabularies of proto-national cultures, seen as land-etched benchmarks of cultural continuity. Operating in tandem with other processes of territorial place-making (including the delineation and guarding of national borders, the implementation of laws, knowledge-production from map-making to property records, and so forth), the state apparatuses' discursive "seizures" of older naming traditions have opened for the nation-states important avenues to remake the world in their own image. In at once both culturally generative and discriminatory fashion, the consolidation of emerging states like Norway and Finland in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through linguistic and toponymic "engineering" produced legible and culturally homogenous territories, yet ones in which hegemonic national settlement narratives subjugated histories of other ethnic-linguistic origin. For instance, a cruel example from the northernmost parts of Scandinavia is that native Sami names were long treated by state governments as "foreign" toponyms (see e.g. Rautio-Helander 2009; Aikio 2007). Also in newer states such as Israel, a host of technical experts, linguists, historians, archaeologists and geographers have been consulted in the "cultural engineering" (and ethnic-historical homogenization) of the country's nomenclature since the turn of the 1950s (Azaryahu & Golan 2001). Unquestionably, territorial states are presently the most powerful arbiters of toponymies and the historical narratives embedded within them.

Then, what do sea names have to do with the power-infused territoriality of space and the culturally generative/discriminatory aspects of the naming of geographical entities? Due to the very trans-territorial connectivity of waterbodies such as seas (not to speak of oceans), their names at the first sight escape an "easy" either/or -logic of territorial ownership. Flanked by different territorial powers, seas are also flanked by differing geopolitical and economic ambitions, interpretations of history, and associated language and naming policies by coastal states and people who inhabit them. By

their very nature, seas and their names are simultaneously potential bones of contention. In multiple ways, state- and culture-specific naming conventions associated with the sea enter the world of foreign relations and quests for international recognition.

Consequently, sea names as well as the naming of maritime and coastal geographical entities are affected by the logic of territoriality in complex and indirect ways. While this is not a place to delve into the international Law of the Sea and the intricate conditions under which coastal states can extend their jurisdictions beyond the standard of 200 nautical miles from coastline (see Dodds 2010), recent territorial claims and associated naming strategies fueled by the effects of climate warming in the Arctic Sea are a case in point. For instance, Canada's attempts to ascertain its interests as regards the Northwest Passage and the area's natural resources have been accompanied by a hitherto unforeseen saliency of Inuit toponyms on official maps and public speeches, intended to convince international audiences and above all the UN Commission on the Limits on the Continental Shelf of the state's cultural presence in the Arctic (see Peplinski, 2009: 43–48). In the words of the Canadian Prime Minister: "Government's first obligation is to defend the territorial integrity of its borders. This is Nunavut – "Our Land" – just as Yukon and the Northwest Territories and the entire Arctic Archipelago are "Our Land" (Harper 2006; quoted in Dodds 2010). As another type of example, the sea name coinage Salish Sea on the Pacific coast is a recent manifestation of the status of the U.S. and Canada's federal and provincial naming authorities (see Kerfoot 2000) as the final arbiters of official appellations for cross-border geographic features (Tucker & Rose-Redwood 2015). Intriguingly, however, the authoritative bodies initially took a discouraging stance toward the proposed name for a new "bioregional unit" eponymous to the indigenous Coast Salish people. Intense campaigning by non-governmental activist groups and repetitious invocations of the Salish Sea in various media in the 1990s and 2000s (strategically aimed to expose that the name was in common usage) eventually nonetheless persuaded the authorities to ratify the name into the official map nomenclature.

In principle, of course, sovereign state powers may call their surrounding waters by whatever names they want to. International recognition is another matter. For sure, things may start to look unfair and discriminatory if the international community (other states and especially superpowers, transnational organizations, and globally

operating publishing houses and corporate giants such Google) privileges a rivaling appellation that seems historically unjust or otherwise illegitimate (needless to stress, the *East Sea/Japan Sea* –name dispute is probably the best known instance of this). By contrast, in the part of Europe I have grown up in, such bitter feelings emanating from controversial sea names seem to be only present by their absence. As we know, the waterbody in-between the nine surrounding Baltic Sea Region states has multiple nation-specific appellations. Generally speaking, these diverse sea names do not stir strong antagonistic emotions among their populations. For instance, even though the Finnish name *Itämeri* ('East Sea') is a geographically absurd appellation inherited from a time the country was a Swedish colony (in strict directional terms, the Finns should instead call their 'East Sea' the 'South Sea' or 'West Sea'), this name is hardly ever questioned. Neither have I heard Estonian complaints about the internationally recognized Gulf of Finland (the Estonian term for this waterbody is similarly *Soome laht*, 'Gulf of Finland'). For whatever reasons, the variable names of the Baltic Sea and its bays, sounds and straits have acquired a largely taken-for-granted, politically "innocent" status in the perceptions of us northern Europeans. Only at speculative level, I can imagine sea names stirring geopolitical quarreling in this corner of the world. In an unlikely situation that any of the area's territorial powers would start to campaign to re-name and re-make the internationally recognized, multi-cultural Baltic Sea in its own image, the contemporary consensus might break up and turn into disputes over a "proper" sea name.

While I am admittedly a dilettante as regards the complexities of the *East Sea/Japan Sea* naming issue, let me conclude this intervention by very shortly speculating on possible futures and solutions of the dispute. I guess a rather unlikely and idealistic prospect is that the current situation would quickly resolve into a broad, tensionless acceptance of the co-existence of dual/multiple names for one maritime entity à la the Baltic Sea Region. Loaded with deep-rooted emotions and historical meanings, politically "hot" names do not mutate into "banal" ones overnight (Jones & Merriman 2009). If I am not totally mistaken, a more feasible vision is that the rivaling names will continue their frictional co-existence, more or less in a way they temporarily do. As distinct from this status quo alternative, the bleakest scenario is of course the

escalation of the quarrel into more serious forms of mutual intolerance. Alternatively, international lobbying and other peaceful forms of “toponymic warfare” might pave the way for a victory of either of the counterparts. This would mean that basically all foreign governments and major publishing houses would recognize the legitimacy of (say) *East Sea* in international usage, automatically privileging it in texts, atlases and databases distributed worldwide. Again idealistically, even the adverse side would eventually digest this end result, in the face of international pressure if not otherwise.

Finally, it could be possible that a mutually acceptable “third solution” will miraculously resolve the petrified dichotomy. As sources of inspiration, for instance, witty name proposals might be based on re-interpretations of the area’s existing “cross-cultural” features. Alternatively, a new “bioregion” (à la the Salish Sea) with a digestible name for both parties might be invented. While I assume collaborative committees and seminars with an assignment to invent a new name for the *East Sea/Japan Sea* have already convened, let me also use this opportunity and make a (probably utterly naïve) name suggestion: while perhaps unnecessary long, “The Sea of the Rising Sun” could be at once suitably evocative and politico-historically neutral appellation for the interstitial space between (the) Korea(s), Japan and Russia. In this case, the name’s geographical “absurdity” from the Japanese perspective (cf. above on ‘East Sea’ for the Finns) would be compensated through a nostalgic reminder of the country’s ancestral, internationally known nickname. Optimistically thinking, this name proposal could open a common horizon for all involved parties. My own suggestion aside, I expect that true connoisseurs of South East Asia will be able to discover even more functional “third solutions” to halt the potentially never-ending name dispute.

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