Place-Framing for Wider Distribution

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Extracting a new order from geographic experience calls for a
jump from specifics to the generic, over-leaping the bottomless pit of
specifics. It extracts commonalities; it forms generic conclusions; it
is a process of abstraction, a human invention: naming.

Anyone who attempts to organize geographic experience by
writing about it must fall back upon the roots of the English
language and their grasp on the soils and bedrock of everyday
life.[2] Thus, in writing *Real Places: The Unconventional Guide to
America's Generic Landscape*,[3] I have attempted to extract the
essence of manmade places by down-shifting from the specific to
the general, in search of their roots, their qualities-in-common. That
book is about the organization of geographic experience, and only
indirectly about the proper or improper organization of society.

Such an extractive process is a device for leaping over the
bottomless pit of specific places and, in that leap, discerning those
elements, traits and characteristics shared by all members of a
class, or genus, of places.

Which comes first, the chicken or the egg? The essence of the
genera? Or the common characteristics of the specific cases which
we pry out in search of commonality? This is an endlessly debat-
able matter, and can only be solved if we keep our minds fastened
on The Leap — on the act of forming a generic conclusion — a
genus — from specific examples. A generic name is a human
invention.

To discover (and thus to create) a genus requires us to
repeatedly ask the question: "What is it that is going on here?"
And to answer requires a process of abstraction — that is, of

discerning common elements that occur among, and are shared by, specific place-examples. The manufacture of a genus consists of describing "what is common to a whole species, an abstract of individual characteristics" (Pirenne 133). This form of making-do is based upon the human ability to make something out of nothing; to grasp those shared characteristics or components of many specific places — what can be extracted from those specifics and assembled into a new form, which is a generalization expressed as a generic placename.

When I use a generic placename, I "mean such general characters as it shares with other objects, i.e., places, to which [I] apply the same name" (Childe 37).

Generic names, therefore, are social conventions, conveniences of and by mutual consent. They are also social inventions, injected into the stream of language by innovative, impromptu and sometimes deliberately inventive human speakers, jokers, or writers. Thus a generic place is a "socially sustained ordering of the environment" (Werner 272). And generic placenames need social sustenance and support to survive.

When most of us use generic names, we go into a widely-understood social routine — a shorthand sort of song-and-dance that signals broad implications. The generic name is itself a routine, an act that carries an extra load of meaning. Such a routine in this context is usually called "generification."

It occurs, this process of generification, when we use words to take over objects and places, and to assume a reality of their own — over and beyond the specific objects/places from which they emerge. We create this new reality by the generic class that we assign to a collection/group/genera of objects, situations, or places.

Keeping track of newcomers is no simple matter. My own helpful device has been to reward friends or others who contribute a new generic man-made place to my working vocabulary: *gig stop, puncheon camp, the takeout, nostalgia farm, high ditch, outport, party street, boutique ranch, moose country,* or *nowhere-in-particular*. These contributors get a certificate of membership in my band of "Topographic Irregulars" — which is a takeoff from William Safire's own "Irregulars," which in turn derives from Sherlock Holmes' "Baker Street Irregulars."

When placenames go generic, they carry extra sets of meanings. The word *field* in early Europe may well have had a specific meaning only; i.e., it probably meant a specific place. Most primitive folk were specific-minded. They showed little interest in, and perhaps were antagonized by, the first hifalutin generalists (Pirenne). But, as farmers cut into ancient forests to make openings, they gradually associated these openings, made for shelters, crops and pasture, with a wider range of place-types carved out by others. The usage of the generic term "field" broadened. Thus today we encounter fields of grain, hay, pasturage, vegetables; areas of professional or athletic expertise (the field of biology, or field sports) or other man-made overlays such as oil and coal fields, magnetic fields, fields-of-fire, fields of force and influence; as well as the verbal forms — to field a first-class ball team, or to field a tough question, etc.

Yet today, in remote, backwatered settlements, out-of-the-way places, bypassed communities, or passed-over social groups in ethnic enclaves, new and strange generic terms, while accepted on the outside, are often, if not always, unwelcome. In such groups, "There is no one to stand outside and create the generic term." (Brown 257). If used by outsiders, such terms — "remote settlement, backwaters, out-of-the-way, by-passed hamlet," or other, more judgmental labels like *East Jesus, Redneck Country, Dogpatch, Poletown* arouse antagonism if not stronger reactions. Outsiders go generic at some hazard.

All generification can be thought of, as it can be practiced, as a form of framing a subject for wider distribution and consumption. In a larger sense the contemporary word is "packaging." We use the generic mode for its power to "engulf and ingest" (Brown 257) specific, concrete examples, and to release or propel them into circulation in more inclusive forms.

But no single person, author, or even dictator alone can bring off this conversion from specific to generic. This is a social process. An author or TV show-talker may launch a new term, but unless it resonates with hearers' or readers' experience, it dies on the launchpad. Only collective experience can validate generic terms, for generic names are conventions, decided upon by a community as conveniences-by-mutual consent — an ordering of

the environment that is socially supported. All naming is a civilizing process, a step up from point-and-grunt. Generic names are by groups created, and only by groups sustained to become part of our general language. Lifetimes can be consumed in keeping track of the winners and losers.

It follows, then, that generic names, widely agreed-upon, are essential to all modern societies. Without them, people fail to connect, social bonds are loosened, consensus is impossible. Enlarging and keeping track of the generic vocabulary is an essential lubricant for the expanding human environment.

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Notes

1. This essay was, in early form, provoked by a reading of M. M. Backhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981.

2. In any such search, one need only look around, in Len Ashley's words, to "see largely untapped onomastic resources" that touch dozens of fields. It is in the spirit of his unfettered curiosity, let loose upon many of us at the Lexington, KY meetings of the American Name Society, that this essay is offered. It was originally intended as an introduction to my next book, *Real Places: The Unconventional Guide to America's Generic Landscape*. However, it was withdrawn in the interest of space, and I am delighted that in its revised form it can find a place here in such good cause and company.

3. To be published by the University of Chicago Press, September, 1994.

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