

# Joseph Mitchell and Names: A Postscript

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Recent installments of Joseph Mitchell's uncompleted memoir, published in *The New Yorker*, strongly support and extend claims made by Michael Adams in "The Course of a Particular: Names and Narrative in the Works of Joseph Mitchell," published in *Names* 63 (2015). Mitchell explicitly describes lists of names as possessing a lyrical quality, so that such lists — lyrical inserts — would exhibit prosodic features out of tempo with the surrounding narrative. And the fragment of memoir titled "Days in the Branch" suggests — in the dissonance between topographical and genealogical views of experience and personal history — why names had the epistemological, ontological, and finally affective significance Adams claimed they had for Mitchell.

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Joseph Mitchell's "Days in the Branch: Remembering the South in the City" (Mitchell, 2014), the second posthumous installment of his memoirs published recently in *The New Yorker*, appeared too late for consideration in my article on names and narrative in Mitchell's work (Adams, 2015), but it bears significantly on issues raised there, and deserves some attention, as a postscript to the earlier article.

Mitchell cared more about names than most writers do. Names figured greatly in his narrative strategies and they had a deep personal resonance, so that what for another writer might be merely a narrative device had unexpected epistemological and ontological value for Mitchell. Narratively, Mitchell was a compulsive lister of names (Adams, 2015: 4–5 and 13n4–n5). I characterized that tendency as "not so much cultural or narratological, as unexpectedly — perhaps paradoxically — both logical and lyrical" (Adams, 2015: 12). Reading Elizabeth Macklin's poem, "To Author Re: Insert" (Macklin, 1997), which is dedicated to Mitchell, we are bound to ask what is inserted. Although many things can count as inserts in writing — a chart or table, an illustration — we might also consider "the lists of names that permeate [Mitchell's] *New Yorker* style as inserts in narrative structure" (Adams, 2015: 12).

In “Days in the Branch,” Mitchell writes about his continuous recourse to the *Robesonian*, the newspaper of Robeson County, North Carolina, where he grew up, where his family was from. He had the newspaper sent to him in New York City for decades. Among other departments in the paper, Mitchell explains,

I always read the advertisements of auction sales of used farm machinery and equipment. To me, the lists in these advertisements are lyric, they are suitable to be sung by the lyre: “one Roanoke Tobacco Looper, one Subsoiler, one Gang Disk, one Bush and Bog Disk Like New, one Leveling Harrow, one I H C Super-H Four-Row Cotton Sprayer, one Stalk Cutter, one Lime Spreader, one Ditch Bank Scoop, one Middle Buster, one Blue Duster, one High Drum Piker Head, one Water Rank Mounted on a Trailer. (Mitchell, 2014: 41/c)

Even though the items listed are more descriptive than most names we encounter in Mitchell’s work, the comment preceding this list confirms my previous critical proposition. Lists of names are lyrical because they exhibit prosodic features out of tempo with the surrounding prose, which is why they count as inserts in that prose, as any poetry would. Of course, one can interpret Mitchell’s lists as lyrical and as structural insertions without his endorsement, but it matters that Mitchell guides his readers to understand names as he understands them. Such conscious craft or technique is surely one reason critics have considered Mitchell a writer’s writer, as raising journalism to the position of high art (Adams, 2015: 3–4 and 13n2).

So, this new installment of Mitchell’s fragmentary memoir confirms previous speculation about his writerly relationship with names, but it also invites new speculation about the role names played in his life, a life reflected either in his writing or, mid-career, his inability to write much at all (Adams, 2015: 3, 8, 11–12, and 13n1). In the first installment of the memoir, Mitchell wrote of his mounting alienation:

I used to feel very much at home in New York City. I wasn’t born here, I wasn’t a native, but I might as well have been: I belonged here. Several years ago, however, I began to be oppressed by a feeling that New York City had gone past me and that I didn’t belong here anymore [...] Ever since I came to New York City, I have been going back to North Carolina for a visit once or twice a year, and now I began going back more often and staying longer [...] and then I began to be oppressed by a feeling that things had gone past me in North Carolina also, and that I didn’t belong down there anymore, either. I began to feel painfully out of place wherever I was. (Mitchell 2013: 69/b–c)

Mitchell’s *New Yorker* journalism is replete with street, station, saloon, and landmark names, oyster names and flora names. “Such names,” I suggested, “mark New York’s topography, but they also mark the topography of Mitchell’s experience. He walks in relation to the things he names: they are real to him because he names them, but he is real — or knows he is real — because he is present among things with names. So, Mitchell’s narrative naming strategies are of existential importance” (Adams, 2015: 13).

This attachment to “a named surrounding” (Adams, 2015: 11), however, may be only part of a more complicated existential crisis, one in which names are even more significant than I had supposed. For, while his onomastic relationship with New York City was largely topographical, that with Robeson County was largely genealogical — his

orientation in New York was spatial and public, but that in Robeson County was temporal and personal and had to do with the web of family names that reticulated through the generations and structured both the community and Mitchell's identity as rooted there. What was real — or most saliently real — shifted from place to place. The ontologies underlying Mitchell's experience are not necessarily exclusive of or even competitive with each other, yet conceptually they do not map onto each other, either. Mitchell falls into that ontological gap at a certain point in his life, and so falling is possibly the source of his infamous writer's block, as well as the malaise he records in the memoir.

Mitchell was a reporter. Although he was so evocatively observant and so sympathetic with his human subjects, he nonetheless wrote in a reporterly, dispassionate style. Thus, his passionate engagement with family names in the second installment of memoir is overwhelming. "It is odd, to begin with, that I ever had any connection with New York City at all," he writes, and while "dawdling" in the Local History Room of that great city's great public library, he reconnected with his Robeson County origins:

I came across a set of volumes on each of whose spines was lettered: "CENSUS 1790/ HEADS OF FAMILIES." I opened the first volume and saw that the full title was "Heads of Families at the First Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1790." I got down the volume for North Carolina and took it over to a reading table and looked up Robeson County and found it, and then I looked up the section in the lower part of the county in which I was born and grew up and in which most of the people in my family still live and found it, and then I started going down the columns of names. (Mitchell, 2014: 40/b-c)

On the face of it, Mitchell's approach to census records is not different from anyone else's, for any of us would ask of the 1790 census, "What does this have to do with me?" We would attempt to find an inkling of ourselves in the past.

Quickly, though, we realize that names mean more to Mitchell emotionally than they do to most casual readers of the 1790 or any other census. "I had not gone far," he writes, "before I began to smile with the pleasure of recognition, for many of the old names suddenly and unexpectedly come upon were very familiar and dear and magical to me" (Mitchell, 2014: 40/c). Perhaps even more important than this description of his emotional response to Robeson County family names is his — by now familiar — compulsion to list them:

1790 names are [...] the most numerous and the most characteristic names of the countryside today — Pitman, for example, although now generally spelled Pittman, and Lewis and Inman and Grimsley and Musslewhight or Musslewhite (now spelled Musselwhite) and Hedgepath (now spelled Hedgepeth) and Griffin and Grantham and Thompson and Mitchell and Ashely and Townsend and Atkinson and Bullock and Purvis and Legget and Jenkins and Page and Oliver and Barnes and Gaddy and Rogers and Strickland and Harding (now spelled Hardin) and McMillen (now spelled McMillan) and Ivey and Watson and Hunt and Hill and Stephens and Oxendine and Stone and Davis and Britt and Lockileer (now spelled Locklear) and Taylor and Turner and Lee and Lowry. (Mitchell, 2014: 40/c)

Here are the hallmarks of Mitchell's onomastic style, the long, lyrical list itself, the annotations about spelling, the willingness to push the reader's patience to the limit in order to serve his onomastic interests and the narrative practices they promote.

But, looking into the list's internal structure, we see those practices at work in articulating an obsession — really more than one obsession, for Mitchell uses names obsessively to signify his Robeson County identity, on which he then dwells obsessively in this installment of his memoir. One suspects that he dwelt on it generally at the time he found life away from Robeson County hardest to bear. The paratactic structure of the passage strips everything down to the names — there is no other meaning beyond the associations brought to mind, not by the names individually, but by the names in additive relation to one another. Nothing else matters in a list the lyrical rolling of which mesmerizes readers in the reading, much as it self-mesmerized its author in the telling. The paratactic *and* is thus a node reiterated across a web of onomastic associations. And, significantly, *Mitchell* is placed carefully, not first or last as in a hierarchy, and not in isolation — not in its own clause, for instance — but more or less in the middle of the list, meaningful not in itself, but by its connections through the list to other, related names. While this is an account of *Mitchell* and the web of names in Mitchell's narrative, by implication it is also an account of Mitchell's identity as rooted in the North Carolina community of his origin.

Mitchell oscillated between two identities, and it was so psychically uncomfortable that he sought and found a remedy for that discomfort: "Shortly after I came to New York City," he writes, "I subscribed to the *Robesonian*, out of homesickness, and I still subscribe to it; it is as necessary to me and as much a part of my life as the *New York Times*" (Mitchell, 2014: 40/c–41/a). Mitchell divided himself between New York City and Robeson County, even with his feet firmly planted in the metropolis. Though he visited North Carolina annually, the *Robesonian* identity was increasingly a matter of the imagination, and it manifested itself in imaginative performances like those in the memoir. Lists of names were not just evidence of Robesonian knowledge but a self-reassuring performance of the Robesonian identity, which Mitchell did not want to lose on the streets of New York, even if he felt at home there.

Mitchell skipped the *Robesonian*'s front page in pursuit of local information that would confirm his sense of identity. As he put it,

I am looking for scraps and crumbs and odds and ends and bits and pieces of news about people down in my section of the county — people for the most part bearing the family names that I have just mentioned, people that I am linked to by blood or marriage or old associations, people that I know in fact and people that I know only by hearsay [...] and people that I don't know from Adam [...] but whose names, both family and given (a great many given names are repeated generation after generation down there), put together with the names of the communities they live in, tell me beyond any doubt exactly who they are (Mitchell, 2014: 41/a)

and also within the web of names and associations they tell Mitchell who he is, too, though perhaps, given what we know, not "beyond any doubt." These names were an antidote to debilitating homesickness:

every now and then something I saw or heard or tasted or smelled or touched would remind me of something at home and I would have a spasm of homesickness so sudden and so startlingly painful that I would have trouble breathing and would feel as if my insides were caving in and would have to take a deep breath and keep on taking deep breaths until I got over it. (Mitchell, 2014: 41/a)

Names in the news from Robeson County and what Mitchell made of them were necessary to his mental health.

But they were not sufficient, because Mitchell did not live in Robeson County and did not write about it, for the most part, except in fragments of memoir. He suffered from a cognitive dissonance that reflected an onomastic dissonance, bells rung by New York City placenames out of tune and tempo with those rung by family names from North Carolina. The dissonance was not always extreme, nor was the difference in name types underlying it: he framed his New York identity in part from popular song titles, his North Carolina experience from the names of farm implements — associations were not always and only matters of place or person. Nevertheless, they often were, and thus his onomastic points of reference were inconsistent. Mitchell found it difficult to build an identity from both sets at the same time or to maintain two differently oriented identities. Anyway, as he explained in the third, most recent installment of memoir, for several decades, he was “living in the past.” And, he wrote, “when I say the past, I mean a number of pasts, a hodgepodge of pasts, a spider’s web of pasts” (Mitchell, 2015: 32/a–b). Time attenuated the associations he knew by name into a distance from which he could not recover them.

Names were significant in Mitchell’s life as well as in his narrative practice. First, they were significant for their present, palpable connection to lived experience; later, they became ominously significant as markers in the structure of memory. Perhaps within memory, the incompatibility of the topographical name matrix and the personal name matrix — their struggle for cognitive superiority, the organizing authority — made it difficult, if not impossible, for Mitchell to narrate his life, except when confronting that inconsistency itself, as in the memoir. Names, unexpectedly powerful, were existentially significant. Earlier in his life, they helped to make him who he was and provided him a means of knowing and owning an identity. Later, the memoirs suggest, they disrupted both identity and career.

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