

Review

Native American Placenames of the Southwest: A Handbook for Travelers. By William Bright. Edited and Introduction by Alice Anderton and Sean O'Neill. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press. 2013. Pp. 143. \$19.95 (PB). ISBN: 9780806143118.

William Bright, well known to readers of *Names*, enjoyed a long and distinguished career as a linguist specializing in Native American and South Asian languages before his death in 2006. Bright's research began with fieldwork on the Karuk of Northern California. According to *The New York Times* obituary, the Karuk conferred on Bright the name *Uhyanapatanvaanich*, which means "little word asker" (Fox, 2006). It was an apt name and one that characterized him throughout his life. Bright taught for almost 30 years at UCLA, where he published many books and articles about linguistics, including expansive reference works such as *American Indian Linguistics and Literature* (Mouton, 1984) and *International Encyclopedia of Linguistics* (Oxford University Press, 1992). He also served as editor of the Linguistic Society of America's flagship journals *Language* and *Language in Society* and was elected that guild's president in 1989.

Bright retired in 1988, moved to Boulder, and was appointed adjunct professor of linguistics at the University of Colorado, where his research interests turned to onomastics. He produced *Colorado Place Names* (Johnson Books, 1993), revised Erwin Gudde's classic in his *1500 California Place Names* (University of California, 1998), and compiled the masterful *Native American Placenames of the United States* (University of Oklahoma, 2004), from which this book partially was derived. Although Bright intended to publish this user-friendly traveler's guide to Native placenames of the Southwest, he died before the work could be completed. His colleagues and mentees Alice Anderton (a linguist and former instructor of the Comanche language) and Sean O'Neill (professor of linguistics at the University of Oklahoma) took up the unfinished manuscript to honor Bright by finishing the book. They added new entries and maps but otherwise kept it close to Bright's original intent to publish "a handy resource in which to look up the meanings and histories of placenames they [travelers] come across on the road" (ix). The results are a compact and useful compendium of Native placenames which a driver might encounter in Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma.

The cover of the book features a photograph of an official white-on-green road sign with typical Southwest scrub vegetation in the foreground and desert mountains in the background. The sign contains an upward-facing arrow and the word Tucumcari (i.e., the place Tucumcari lies ahead). The editors were clearly signaling with their choice for the cover, as the entry for Tucumcari reads: "Probably from Comanche.... 'to lie in wait for someone or something to approach'" (114). The contents follow a standard onomastic dictionary formula, beginning with introductory essays that discuss the scope and purpose of the book and general information about placenames. These are followed by brief guides to the book, cueing readers to common Southwestern geographical features to which such names might apply (such as *arroyo* or *mesa*), pronunciation, spelling, and translation. Four state maps (Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma), each lined with counties, precede an alphabetical listing of Native placenames. Each entry begins with a bolded headword, followed by the location (by state and county), pronunciation, and etymology.

While one does not read a dictionary as one would a novel with a plot, nevertheless, a theme does emerge as one reads the entries. Rather than aver the origins of these Native names with canonical authority, Bright and the editors take great care with these words. Such hedges as "probably from Navajo," "perhaps transferred from," or "said to be" occur throughout the text. Because the names emerge from a broad linguistic swath of diverse Native languages in a region of layered Native, Spanish, Mexican, and Anglo colonial histories, this sensitivity is important. It builds on Bright's

sociolinguistic approach to language as part of an alive and complex cultural system. Together, the cover and the contents set a tone of respectful encouragement, assuring the reader that whole worlds await the curious travelers and word-askers.

Dictionaries, however, are not innocent alphabetical lists, but inevitably reductionistic of the complexities of lived language. Critics of onomastics and toponymy rightly point to the unfortunate tendency of word researchers to maintain a narrow focus on origins or etymology at the expense of historical and political contexts in which these words emerge and exist. Bright was clearly aware of such issues. In a brief article exploring debates about placenames with the word “squaw,” he argued that the “S-word” was derogatory in practice because it emerged from ongoing anti-Native racism in American culture and would be better off eliminated from maps (Bright, 2000). More of this social intelligence would have been quite welcome in this volume. A book that covers Native placenames in Oklahoma would seem an ideal opportunity for at least a brief, introductory discussion of the political and cultural significance of Native placenames in an area which, until quite recently (1907), was “Indian Territory,” a repository for Natives forced off their lands by the US’s vicious “Indian Removal Policy.” Over the nineteenth century, that territory shrank by way of rewritten treaties until it was diminished in size to what is now the state of Oklahoma. It was occupied by the so-called “Five Civilized Tribes” (Cherokee, Choctaw, Muscogee, Chickasaw, and Seminole), whose territorial boundaries were transferred to Oklahoma and, in some cases, are still observed today. In the post-Civil War era, legislation like the Dawes Act further stripped Natives of territorial allotments for the convenience of encroaching white settlers. Yet no discussion of this recent and violent history behind the imposition of this US territory *cum* state — or any of the other states covered by the book — obtains. The entry for *Caddo* reads: “An Indian group that formerly occupied northeastern Texas, southwestern Arkansas, and the Red River Valley of Louisiana, southern Arkansas, and southeastern Oklahoma; the Caddos now live in Oklahoma” (17). Between the lines of this text lie displacement, erasure, and genocide. “The Caddos now live in Oklahoma,” in its bland neutrality, implies that the Caddos, who were not native to Oklahoma, might have moved there on the basis of better weather or employment opportunities. It is this understatedness that prompts many to express frustration about placename methods and theories which lack consideration of the way words, especially placenames, can disguise or illuminate national strategies of power, marginalization, and distributive (in)justices.

Notwithstanding this critique, the book is a dictionary and as such cannot be held responsible for addressing all such issues obtaining in the Native American Southwest. In fact, its utility as a dictionary is its most compelling contribution. Bright’s last volume hands to English-speaking travelers a passport to worlds they would not otherwise encounter, and perhaps as a result they will begin to ask critical questions about their own world. Bright assumed it is human to be curious about and to ask about words, especially words that confound or defy dominant (English) grammatical and linguistic expectations, as many Native names do. Beyond its approach of bringing knowledge to the glovebox, *Native American Placenames of the Southwest*’s most important contribution denaturalizes English-language placenames and destabilizes the solidity of a national language by providing an alternative guide to Native languages and landscapes. Documenting, listing, and explaining meanings of Native names for places forces the English-speaking reader of the land to become aware of Tukumcari, Jwa Qwaw Gwa, Amusovi Mesa, and Vainom Kug. Any reminder that English is only one of the languages that have been used to name Southwest places is welcome and necessary. Bright’s infectious interest in asking about words causes those who encounter this text to join him on the word-asking journey, to reflect on the power of language and its limits. Ultimately, the book reflects that placenames are not sacrosanct, permanent, or indelible, but markers of human interactions with the land — and with other humans who inhabit it.

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