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Toponyms of a Different Type: Metaphors as Placenames and Place Nicknames

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Some placenames and nicknames should be understood metaphorically and not literally. The nicknames of two well-known places — "Hell's Kitchen" and the "Dust Bowl" — illustrate this by using contemporary theory of metaphor to explain them. The work of two sociologists, James Skipper and Paul Leslie, supports this argument, although they never used the word *metaphor* in their analyses. The similarities between their studies and this article strongly suggest that metaphoric analysis provides a way of understanding the names and nicknames of some geographic locations.

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Historians of New York City tell a story explaining how "Hell's Kitchen" — located between 58th and 34th Streets, Eighth Avenue, and the Hudson River — got its name. Two cops were watching a riot develop and, as events unfolded, one said to the other: "This place is hell itself." To which, the other replied: "Hell's a mild climate. This is 'Hell's Kitchen'" (Amell, 2010; Ikeda, 2008; reddit, 2015). Perhaps this story is a fable, but it is appealing because it makes sense and because of its imagery. Unless there is a hell, and unless it has a kitchen, there can be no "Hell's Kitchen." Unless cops stand around watching disastrous events develop, rather than quelling them, the tale is a fable. The tale only adds up because of its metaphoric consistency. According to dictionaries, *furnace* and *inferno* are synonyms of hell and, since the kitchen is oftentimes the hottest room in a house, the words *hell* and *kitchen* work together to reinforce the idea of the heat of the place, i.e. its horrific environment.

Historically, metaphors have received little respect, often being somewhat derisively called "figures of speech," nothing more than describing one thing in terms usually used for another, like calling an urban slum a "jungle." This understanding of *metaphor* began changing in 1980 when George Lakoff and Mark Johnson first published *Metaphors We*

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Live By. In it, they argued that metaphor is a crucial tool to structure our conceptual system. Metaphor is not a matter of "mere language." Much of "our social world is understood in metaphorical terms" and "our conception of the physical world is partly metaphorical." The use of metaphor "plays a very significant role in determining what is real for us" (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003: 159–160).

By 2006, the ideas of Lakoff and Johnson had been widely accepted. In that year, Murray Knowles and Rosamund Moon summarized the new conceptualization of metaphor by saying that "metaphor permeates all language, and other methods of communication" (flyleaf). They characterized metaphors as "instances of non-literal language that involve some kind of comparison or identification: if interpreted literally, they would be nonsensical, impossible, or untrue" (Knowles and Moon, 2006: 7).

Understanding metaphor in this way makes a name like "Hell's Kitchen" intelligible and suggests a way of understanding placenames and nicknames. Sometimes, understanding the metaphoric basis of a name or nickname like "Hell's Kitchen" is relatively straightforward, but, at other times, understanding such a name can be mystifying and understanding its metaphoric intricacies can require exhaustive investigation. Such is the case with the name "Dust Bowl."

This name refers to about 100,000,000 square acres that encompass the Panhandles of Oklahoma and Texas, the southwest corner of Kansas, the southeast corner of Colorado, and the northeast corner of New Mexico (Joel, 1936: 1). During the early and middle years of the 1930s, this region experienced extreme drought that dehydrated the soil. Under these conditions, the heavy winds which characterized the area generated enormous dust clouds that blackened the skies. The worst of these is frequently said to have occurred on "Black Sunday," April 14, 1935.

After newspaper reports appeared nationally the next day, the name "Dust Bowl" became commonly used. The best evidence for this is how quickly national newspapers began using it. The *New York Times* repeated it on 15 occasions in 1935, 97 in 1936, and 92 in 1937. The *Los Angeles Times* also used the name frequently — 23 additional times in 1935, 65 in 1936, and 152 in 1937 (Proquest Historical Newspapers, *Los Angeles Times*; Proquest Historical Newspapers, *New York Times)*. The term first appeared in a government document the following year (Joel, 1936: 4).

Like "Hell's Kitchen," the name "Dust Bowl" seems absurd if considered literally. A dust bowl cannot exist. A bowl cannot be fabricated from dust like a glass bowl or a wooden bowl, and it is almost impossible to imagine someone collecting dust in a bowl like a sugar bowl or cereal bowl — unless one is considering gold dust.

In order to make sense of the name "Dust Bowl," one has to deconstruct the term in the same way as "Hell's Kitchen." The words *dust* and *bowl* both have metaphorical meanings. When the two words were conjoined, they evoked powerful, vivid images of large cosmic events. In conjunction, they conjured up images of the coming Apocalypse, the End of the World. The name "Dust Bowl" reflected the apprehensions of many Americans that God was beginning the final judgment.

This interpretation of "Dust Bowl" emerges from analyzing the metaphorical meanings of the words individually and the implication of putting them together. By the middle of the nineteenth century, *dust* had come to possess much more ominous implications than those little particles of stuff that land on horizontal surfaces. Some of this new connotation of dust can be attributed to Catharine Beecher. Her 1841 book, *A Treatise*

on Domestic Economy, obliged women to maintain sparkling, clean homes. Throughout its many reprintings in the nineteenth century, Beecher's *Treatise* maintained that being a good homemaker was one of a woman's primary responsibilities, and Beecher's central goal was to provide explicit, comprehensive explanations about how to clean and maintain every part of a woman's home (1841: 308–384).

Beecher did not explain the imperative for women to follow this regime of cleanliness, but many of the advice-givers who followed her and reiterated her admonitions justified their instructions easily. They considered dust to be a form of dirt and dirt was filth that threatened the health of a woman and her family (Campbell, 1881: 35–67; Elliott, 1907: 157–197; Frederick, 1921: 65–95; Leavitt, 2002: 1–15; Nesbitt, 1918: 43–65, 132–154; Parloa, 1898: 61–125, 262–311; Plunkett, 1885: 9–16, 165–202; Richards and Talbott, 1911: 7–76; Sklar, 1973: 139–167). Urban and sanitary reformers like John Griscom in New York and Edwin Chadwick in London, both champions of improved public sanitation, concurred with and buttressed these ideas (Chadwick, 1842; Griscom, 1845).

At about the same time, the exposition of the germ theory of disease also emphasized the need for domestic cleanliness. During the 1850s and 1860s, two of the founders of modern microbiology began identifying invisible microorganisms that could destroy the health of other living creatures. Louis Pasteur, a French chemist, identified the microorganisms that had killed the silkworms of France and caused milk to spoil, and Robert Koch, a German medical professor, isolated the bacteria responsible for tuberculosis, cholera, and anthrax (Brock, 1988: 27–38, 117–139, 195–214; Geison, 1995: 26–7, 32–33, 90–109, 276; Gradmann, 2009: 12–16; Temple, 1986). As a group, microbiologists implied that the universe was a battleground suffused with unseen adversaries which had to be extirpated. Dust and dirt were breeding grounds where ruthless microorganisms reproduced and then wreaked havoc on the world (Amato, 2000: 97). In order to protect her family's health, a woman had to cleanse her home of dust and dirt. The same belief accounted for the multiple cleaning devices being hawked to American women and the shelves of cleaning products becoming available in American stores (Amato, 2000: 89; Giedion, 1948: 548–553; Horsfield, 1997: 100).

Other "scientific" discoveries in the nineteenth century increased the apprehensions about dust and dirt. One was the conceptualization of occupational disease. It had long been recognized that men in some occupations were more likely than others to contract certain diseases (Hoffman, 1918; United States Bureau of Mines, 1995: 63). Among the most dangerous occupations were those like mining and stone cutting that involved creating and inhaling dust. During the 1880s, all of the respiratory diseases associated with exposure to dust were lumped together and conceptualized as *phthisis* or *consumption*, and later as *silicosis* (Hayhurst, 1915: 18; Hoffman, 1918; Rosner and Markowitz, 2006: 30–31; United States Bureau of Mines, 1995: 63; Warren and Sydenstricker, 1916: 8). The cause of all these conditions was thought to be inhaling large quantities of deadly dust. Coal was the most toxic, but others were hazardous, too.

In addition to being dangerous if inhaled, dust became seen as dangerous and fearful because of its explosive qualities. Miners had known for centuries that massive explosions shook coalmines, but they attributed these blasts to the methane which collected in mine shafts. In about 1900, however, experiments in England and Wales showed that coal dust itself could explode (Rice, 1910: 23–29; Verakis and Nagy, 1987: 342–343). At the beginning of the twentieth century, other kinds of dust explosions started receiving

attention. Americans learned about "spontaneous" explosions in sawmills, flourmills, and other places where large quantities of dust-like materials were stored. It was first believed that a spark must have ignited here or that the explosions were "spontaneous," but it was now demonstrated that such explosions resulted from the huge surface area produced if the surfaces of each particle of dust were measured and agglomerated. The potential for explosions in places like flourmills was unimaginable (Pant, 2014).

The existence of this hazard was reported in newspapers and widely circulated. The *New York Times* reported more than 20 explosions in flourmills between 1869 and 1893. One article that undoubtedly generated great fear was printed in 1913. In describing an explosion at one flourmill, it quickly pointed out that this explosion resulted from a common substance found in every kitchen — flour. The frightening implication could not be overlooked. Every home contained a substance that could explode without warning, maiming or even killing people and destroying all of their possessions. Thus, the word *dust* had much graver and far more frightening implications than we commonly think of today. Of course, the huge dust storms in the southern Great Plains had disastrous consequences, but their fearsome qualities were heightened because of their conceptualization as *dust*storms rather than mere *wind*storms.

The word *bowl* also had metamorphic implications although from a less-obvious source. This meaning derives from the New Testament, specifically from the Book of Revelation and new translations of it that appeared in the nineteenth century, especially after 1870. Revelation is a prophetic work that foretells the coming Apocalypse and reveals the details of how it will occur. At a crucial moment during the advent of this earth-shattering event, seven angels suddenly appear in heaven carrying the seven last plagues of God. Four strange beasts now emerge and hand the angels seven gold containers filled with the wrath of God. In the oldest Greek manuscripts, probably written in the fourth century, the word used to designate these containers is *φιάλη* (pronounced fee-ah-lay), which the *Oxford Greek-English Lexicon* translates as *bowl* or *cup*. Soon afterwards, when St Jerome translated Revelation from Greek to Latin around 400 C.E., he called these containers *phiala* (s.) or *phialae* (pl.), which the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* defines in a similar way as a shallow drinking vessel, cup, or bowl. But, when St Jerome's version of the New Testament was translated into English during the 1500s, the containers given to the angels were called *vials*. That word appeared in the King James version of the Bible (1611) and every other English version published before 1840.

Although a *vial* is a container, its shape fundamentally differs from that of a cup or bowl, being somewhat squat and wide rather than high and narrow. Why the English translators substituted *vial* for *bowl* is unclear. However, one might logically infer that those translators were unfamiliar with the word *phiala* which appeared rarely in Latin manuscripts. In seeking an English equivalent for this uncommon Latin word, they might well have considered *vial* to be a cognate of the Latin word and therefore synonymous with it. This seemingly insignificant misunderstanding in translation has great significance for the metaphorical meaning of the name "Dust Bowl."

The *phialae* handed to the seven angels in Revelation were not empty. They contain God's wrath and, after the angels receive them, a voice commands them to: "Go and pour out the seven bowls of God's fury upon the earth." They do so, and catastrophic consequences ensue. Repulsive wounds erupt on people's skin after the first vessel is emptied. The ocean waters turn to blood, and every creature in them dies after the second is

drained. The contents of the third container turn the water of rivers and wells to blood. Emptying the fourth causes the sun to torment humans with heat and fire, and the sun itself disappears with the draining of the fifth, blackening the skies and turning day into night. When the sixth angel empties its vessel, water drains from the Euphrates River. All of which is the prelude to emptying the seventh container after which a voice thunders from heaven: "It is done" (Rev. 16: 1–6).

Every English translation of Revelation published before 1840 called the angels' containers *vials*. A translation made in 1840 called them *cups* and, when this translation was revised in 1849, the translator called them *bowls* (Tregelles, 1857–1859), which was apparently the first use of that word in this context. Twenty years later, in 1870, a Convocation of the Anglican Church enjoined a new translation of the entire King James version of the New Testament. When it appeared ten years later, it contained new translations of 30,000 Latin words. One of them replaced *vial* with *bowl*. When a revised translation of the New Testament was published in the United States in 1880, it also used the word *bowl* rather than *vial*.

The significance of this new translation of a single word cannot be overstated. Revelation is replete with highly visual symbolism. When people read it or hear it read, vivid images flash before their eyes. The new translation caused them to envision the events in Revelation differently. Millions of Americans who accepted the divine origin of the Bible now imagined the angels emptying bowls instead of vials. The magnitude of this different way of "seeing" the events in Revelation becomes more evident and is emphasized by recognizing the enormous similarities between the events prophesied in Revelation and the events depicted in the Book of Exodus. Biblical scholars have commented for several centuries that the story of the "seven bowls" is a reworking of Exodus (Beale and McDonough, 2007: 1080–1083; Gallus, 2007–2008: 22–26; Winchester, 1794: 443–460). And, while the two episodes are not absolutely identical, in both sequences of cosmic devastation God afflicts the wicked by turning water into blood, causing severe bodily harm, generating severe thunder and hail, and darkening the daytime and turning it into night. One can also infer that both stories include tremendous human death.

Recognizing the similarities between God's plagues in the Old Testament and those foretold in Revelation highlights other parallels in the two narratives. A central theme of both is that God's fury at human wickedness is communicated by messengers who deliver the plagues — in the earlier story by Moses and Aaron, in the later by the seven angels. In both accounts, even after God's emissaries have delivered their clear messages, people fail to heed their warnings and God destroys them. These annihilations freed God's favored from his adversaries.

Residents of the "Dust Bowl" who apprehended the common elements in Exodus and Revelation interpreted contemporary events in the "Dust Bowl" as part of the unfolding of Revelation's prophecy. Untold numbers of Americans who lived in the "Dust Bowl" believed that the monstrous dust storms of the 1930s, and especially the one that they endured on "Black Sunday," April 14, 1935, indicated a critical moment in the coming of the Apocalypse (Duncan, 2012; Guthrie, 1940; Lookingbill, 1984; Parfit, 1989; Public Broadcast System, 1998; Reifenberg, 1985; Skyways, 1998; Stallings, 2001).

This analysis of the word *bowl* clarifies the meaning of the name "Dust Bowl" and sheds light on why that name became so widely adopted and used during the 1930s. According to the translations of Revelation made after 1880, bowls are the depositaries

for God's plagues and where they are safeguarded before being strewn onto earth. The Lord's punishments are kept there until God enjoins the angels to disperse them.

The name "Dust Bowl," with all of dust's fearful associations with death and disease, functions as a metaphor for God's plagues, their storage, and their distribution. When the great aggregation of God's fearsome powers and terrifying punishments is deposited in bowls, a bowl becomes a formidable object possessing awesome, terrifying power. To the large fundamentalist population of the United States, especially the great number of evangelical Protestants in the "Dust Bowl," the term "Dust Bowl" was not a meaningless phrase — it was a real place. Dust bowls could, and did, exist and they knew that from their own experiences in the "Dust Bowl." To fundamentalist Christians, the name "Dust Bowl" was an evocative, powerful reference to the holy books of Exodus and Revelation and corresponded to their own understandings of dust, of scripture, of God, of history, of current events, and of the future.

This way of analyzing events in the United States during the 1930s suggests a new way of understanding names and especially nicknames of places, but also of people. Names can have metaphoric meanings that reveal how people perceive places and how people interpret the character of places. Metaphors reflect people's *mentalité* and portray their feelings and perceptions, and they should not be understood literally.

At this point in time, it would be fruitless to speculate about how often or how many placenames or place nicknames developed as metaphors, but names like "Hell's Kitchen" and "Dust Bowl" clearly illustrate that this has occurred. It is possible that only a small number of placenames are metaphoric, but it is also possible that many toponymists have not incorporated metaphor into their conceptualization of placenames or nicknames. It is also clear that students of placenames have been more interested in studying formal or legal names rather than unofficial names or nicknames. Neither "Hell's Kitchen" nor "Dust Bowl" has ever been adopted as the formal name of a place despite their widespread usage.

Scholars who study names have rarely given much attention to nicknames — very little to the nicknames of people and even less to the nicknames of places. Two important exceptions to this generalization are James K. Skipper, Jr and Paul L. Leslie, who published many articles about personal nicknames during the latter part of the 1980s and early 1990s (Leslie and Skipper, 1990; Skipper, 1984, 1985a, 1985b, 1985c, 1989, 1990; Skipper and Leslie, 1988a, 1988b, 1988c). While most of Skipper and Leslie's articles focus on the nicknames of celebrities in various fields, they also wrote one seminal article in which they urged students of names to move "Toward a Theory of Nicknames" (Leslie and Skipper, 1990). Their analysis is so similar to the one being presented here that it is worthwhile discussing it at some length and quoting exactly what they were saying about nicknames.

To begin with, one should note that Skipper and Leslie were sociologists who framed their research in the context of sociological theory, saying that names and nicknames "signify status, achievement, privilege, and meaningful social organization" and can also "communicate ethnicity, social status, and social prestige." Even though the body of their work centered on personal nicknames, their conclusions resemble those presented in this article about the metaphoric basis of the names and nicknames of places. One of the first conclusions in "Toward a Theory of Nicknames" was that "names cannot

be understood without revelation of situational and contextual exigencies" (Leslie and Skipper, 1990: 274). When a person receives a nickname, the meaning of that name can only be determined by first understanding the social conditions within which the term emerged. They also assert, again as in this article, that "the subject matter of nicknames is rendered intelligible by revealing its internal rationality" (Leslie and Skipper, 1990: 274). In other words, even if a nickname seems to make no sense when interpreted literally (like "Hell's Kitchen" or "Dust Bowl"), such a name has an inherent logic, and researchers need to discover the rationality embedded in those names (Leslie and Skipper, 1990: 276).

Leslie and Skipper also aver that the "meanings of nicknames are not to be found in dictionary definitions or even necessarily in their origins." And again, as with "Hell's Kitchen" and "Dust Bowl," it is possible that a person who uses a nickname is "not necessarily conscious of the social process through which…. the nickname" was produced (Leslie and Skipper, 1990: 276–277). One of the final insights presented by Skipper and Leslie is that "shared agreement of the meaning of a nickname is achieved by recognizing that it was bestowed according to a normative rule." These everyday rules have "latitude for interpretation," and "there are no final arbiters for the meanings of nicknames, only our faculties of observation" (Leslie and Skipper, 1990: 278–279).

Skipper and Leslie summarize their conclusions in the middle of a paragraph near the end of the article. "We construct our sense of nicknames through a social negotiation rather than give rise to them as merely epiphenomena to living." They go on to state: "if nicknames and nicknaming are bounded by normative rules, then analysis should focus on discovering and exposing the characteristics of those rules." It is the "job [of]…. serious scholars of names to bring to the level of consciousness the taken-for-granted rules of nicknames and reveal their characteristic properties" (Leslie and Skipper, 1990: 279).

Skipper and Leslie were true pioneers in the study of nicknames. Few scholars before them had studied the nicknames of people and even fewer the nicknames of places. The attention given to nicknames was so slight that they felt compelled in many of their articles to explain their definition of *nickname*. Like the majority of research being done at that time by toponymists, much of Skipper and Leslie's work was descriptive. That is, they tended to gather and present information about how many people had nicknames and the nature of their distribution, without explaining a great deal about their origins and meanings. In analyzing and writing about the nicknames of baseball players or entertainers, for example, they tried to determine how many of their subjects had identifiable nicknames, the racial distribution of those subjects who had nicknames, the years in which nicknames were most commonly used, and so on.

Perhaps because of their sociological orientation and interest in social phenomena, perhaps because knowledge about contemporary theory of metaphor had not yet become widespread, or perhaps because of their interest in how frequently particular nicknames were assigned to people, they devoted only slight attention to the analysis of unique nicknames given to single individuals. However, an analysis of only a few unique nicknames strongly supports the idea that names and nicknames can both be metaphoric. The similarities between the arguments of Skipper and Leslie and the arguments presented in this article also suggest that the nicknames of people and of places might well constitute a single data set and analyzing them as such might provide a useful approach to finding the "theory of nicknames" that Skipper and Leslie were ultimately seeking.

Just a few examples illustrate this clearly. This article refers to just a few of the many nicknames given to professional baseball players. They are particularly germane because Skipper and Leslie studied the nicknames of professional athletes, especially baseball players, in their research, and they provided part of the basis of their interpretations. Although many examples of nicknames could be drawn from the pool of professional baseball players during the years from 1920 to 1960, this article looks at two in passing and one in slightly more depth. Three of the greatest baseball players of all time were George Herman "Babe" Ruth (the Sultan of Swat), Ted Williams (the Splendid Splinter), and Joe DiMaggio (the Yankee Clipper). Ruth was called a "Sultan" because of his power at the plate and because he did not feel the necessity to observe all the rules of polite society. He could, and did, do what he wanted. Williams' physique — very tall and very thin, sometimes considered gaunt — determined that he was a "Splinter." Looking at DiMaggio's nickname a little more deeply reveals why he was the "Yankee Clipper." The word Yankee clearly refers to the fact that DiMaggio was the star right fielder of the New York Yankees baseball team throughout his entire career and perhaps their greatest batsman during that time. The second part of the nickname is not as transparent but can be determined. The announcer at Yankee Stadium apparently first used the nickname when he compared DiMaggio's speed and range in the outfield to the airplane recently introduced by Pan American Airlines, the Pan Am Clipper (Stein, 2005: 105). Calling DiMaggio a "clipper" is clearly an example of the type of metaphor in which the characteristics of a person or place are highlighted by comparing that person or place to a different location or individual having similar characteristics. Certainly, no one thought Joe DiMaggio was an airplane, but they could think of his speed and the distances he could run in the same way that they thought about an airplane. Likewise, no one thought that Babe Ruth was a "Sultan" or Ted Williams a "Splinter," but those words evoked certain images of the ballplayers.

These examples of metaphoric names and nicknames of people and of places support Skipper and Leslie's comments about the general characteristics of personal nicknames and reinforce the broader idea that nicknames of places and people can both be understood as metaphors. Given that understanding, it becomes plausible to suggest that two categories of nicknames which are usually considered separately — personal nicknames and place nicknames — can be analyzed as one single group.

Moreover, making that argument supports the idea posed vigorously by critical toponymists that it is possible to formulate general theory about the formation of names and naming. However, it should be pointed out that the analysis of nicknames and names presented in this article is not identical to theirs. Those scholars analyze the meanings of names and argue that names reflect social, political, and economic conditions and their consequences. The analysis presented here does not conflict with that, but it suggests neither names nor nicknames can be understood literally or with reference to dictionary definitions. That is not to say that names and nicknames do not have social, political, or economic implications, but there can be other meanings as well. It is also the case that the political, social, or economic connotations of a name or nickname might not be obvious just from looking at the name or nickname; those implications might be hidden deeply within a metaphoric structure and require intensive digging to uncover, like "Dust Bowl." All that is certain is that a great deal of research is still needed before we will begin to

have a deep understanding of either names or nicknames, or the processes by which they are created. To quote Leslie and Skipper once more: "there are no final arbiters for the meanings of nicknames, only our faculties of observation" (1990: 278–279).

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