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Rethinking Corpus Christi

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Corpus Christi Bay was named by Spanish or French explorers in honor of the liturgical feast day of Corpus Christi on which the region was initially encountered during the sixteenth century. But the inland Corpus Christi, now the eighth largest city in Texas, did not come about and was not named until much later, during the 1840s. The standard assumption, that Corpus Christi is a toponym derived from Spanish (or French) colonial history should be reconsidered. The creation and naming of a place called Corpus Christi offers some fascinating insights into anxieties about religion, race and national identity during a critical period of nineteenth century US expansion.

KEYWORDS texas annexation, race, religion, politics, nation building, US and Mexico.

It has long been assumed that Corpus Christi is a straightforward case of what toponymists call a transfer or shift name. That is, its name was simply taken from the previously named Corpus Christi Bay to which it is proximate. The name of the bay was allegedly conferred by Spaniard Alonzo Alvarez de Pineda, who claimed it for the Spanish Crown in 1519 while mapping the gulf coast. As the story goes, the day Pineda encountered the shallow inlet happened to fall on the feast day of Corpus Christi, a day in the Latin church calendar to emphasize and ritualize the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the consecrated host (Chipman 1967; Weddle 1985). Evidence for the Pineda legend, besides being laden with class and ethnic distinctions, is thin indeed, and other sources tell more or less the same story but instead credit French explorer René-Robert Cavalier Sieur de La Salle (Lessoff 2015, 84–86; Yoakum 1856). While the exact origins of the name of the bay are uncertain, it is clear enough that its name derives from some European contact. The inland Corpus Christi, on the other hand, did not come into existence until later, in the decade between the Texas Revolution (1835–1836) and the Mexican American War (1846–1848). Not until 1845 or 1846 do maps begin to show an inland place named Corpus Christi in addition to the bay of the same name (The Center for Texas Studies 2007).

Like so many other biblical, religious, and classical place names in the US, the toponym Corpus Christi has largely been regarded as simply leftover from a colonial history. In fact, it exemplifies the "importance of understanding place naming as a contested

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spatial practice rather than … transparent signifiers of a predefined geographical space" (Rose-Redwood, Alderman, and Azaryahu 2010, 455). Neither inevitable nor innocent, the naming of Corpus Christi offers some fascinating insights into anxieties about religion, race and national identity during a critical period of nineteenth century US expansion. The light shed by critical theory on the social politics of place naming provides an opportunity to reconsider the straight line usually drawn between the name of the bay and the name of the now eighth-largest city in Texas, Corpus Christi. Place naming transforms space into place, a process "contingent on social dynamics," and one that often results in reflecting "the mental images of the dominant culture" (Yeoh 1992, 313, 321).

Before the area was called Corpus Christi it was known by other names. During the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, various small settlements of Natives such as Karankawas, Tonakawa, Penateka Comanche and Lipan Apache were among the permanent residents. As a result the region was sometimes called *The Old Indian Trading Grounds* (Givens 2012). As trade ramped up between Mexico and the US in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it was also called *El Desierto Muerto*, because it was "nothing but sand, entirely void of timber, covered with scrubby thorn bushes and prickly pear" (McCampbell 1934, 2). Beginning in the 1820s, "Mexican Texas began taking on Anglo features as whites from the US began arriving by the hundreds," a number that soon turned into the thousands (de León 1982, 4). "Between 1834 and 1847 the population of Texas grew sevenfold from about 20,000 people to just over 140,000" (Smith 2005, 161). Among those who immigrated to Texas (many of them illegally) was a man named Henry Lawrence Kinney. Kinney is often credited with founding (and naming) Corpus Christi sometime around 1839. A land speculator and entrepreneur who left Illinois under rather dubious circumstances involving bad real estate deals during the US financial crisis of 1837–1838, Kinney settled on present day Corpus Christi. The site he chose was uninspiring, but it squarely met the first three requirements of real estate: location, location, location. In the wake of the Texas Revolution, trade on overland routes to Zacatecas and Durango grew exponentially, because taxes and tariffs were collected from goods arriving on ships, but not from those arriving by land. "It was where traders landed contraband goods on the beach to avoid paying customs duties, then loaded them onto pack trains to carry into [and out of] Mexico" (Givens 2009). Kinney saw opportunity aplenty by establishing himself at just this critical point on the route increasingly used to transport wool, hides, copper, lead, tobacco, textiles, and guns. He and his partner, W. P. Aubrey, built a "fortified house, about a half-dozen stores, and a grog shop or two," and hired armed guards to protect the cargo (Givens 2009; Lessoff 2015, 61–2). Until the early part of the 1840s, it was known by the eponym *Kinney's Trading Post,* or *Kinney & Aubrey's Rancho*. Though a promoter took credit for being the first, in 1842, to refer to Kinney's Trading Post as Corpus Christi (Givens 2012), only after the arrival of the US Army in 1845 did the name Corpus Christi replace Kinney's name.

Between the Texas Revolution in 1836 and the annexation of Texas by the US in 1844–1845 came the end of Mexican rule in Texas, with trade and markets increasingly dominated by the US, and a large uptick in the number of US Anglos immigrating to Texas, often bringing with them slaves. The same period was characterized by intensifying debates about the annexation of Texas and the territorial boundaries between

the US and Mexico – debates that focused especially in the trans-Nueces region, where present-day Corpus Christi is located (Reséndez 2005; de León 1982; and Montejano 1987). The treaty of Texas annexation by the US in 1844, to which President Tyler had put his remaining presidential influence, was perceived by Mexico as a baldly hostile act. When James Polk was elected later the same year, Mexico cast an even warier gaze on the exuberantly expansionist new administration. As expected, Polk moved rapidly on the tracks laid by the prior administration by hotly pursuing permanent acquisition of Oregon and Texas. In his first months in office, Polk dispatched General Zachary Taylor from New Orleans by boat to the Texas coast to find a suitable site to signal American readiness for war. Taylor chose the "west side of the Nueces near a hamlet called 'Kinney's Rancho,' which eventually came to be called Corpus Christi" (Thonhoff 1966, 8). The area both provided sufficient room for an enormous number of troops, and it was at the mouth of the Nueces River, the northern border of Mexico and the southern boundary of Texas. The Polk administration, however, used the treaty signed by General Santa Anna after his defeat at San Jacinto (the so-called Treaties of Velasco, which were never ratified by the Mexican government) to argue that the Rio Grande, not the Nueces, was the legal boundary between Mexico and Texas (Binkley 1952; Fowler 2007). In July of 1846, after Polk's dollar diplomacy with a debt mired Mexican government failed to secure for the US the acquisition of northern Mexico, Polk ordered Taylor to the Rio Grande, effectively instigating war. Polk had hoped to provoke "a messy little incident," and by putting the US into disputed territory, he counted on the Mexicans throwing the first punch (Greenberg 2012, 76–7). When Brigadier General Zachary Taylor chose the site in 1845, it was known as Kinney's Ranch, but by the time his Army of Occupation headed for the Rio Grande some seven months later, it had become a place known as Corpus Christi (Pierpaoli 2013, 172).

A rise in anti-Catholic rhetoric and activities provides the backdrop for Polk's political thrusts and parries with Mexico. Immigrants from Germany and Ireland came in large and growing numbers to cities such as New York, Philadelphia, Boston and Baltimore. In reaction, anti-Catholic broadsheets and newspapers began circulating more widely, and voluntary societies such as the American Bible Society and the American Tract Society began concerted efforts to oppose Catholic institutions and to sketch Catholic immigrants as a threat to American civil liberties. The famous Presbyterian orator, Lyman Beecher, warned his Boston audience that sending their children to Catholic schools was a grave mistake, and that Catholics inherently undermined the liberty and republicanism that the US represented, since they took their orders from the Pope. It probably should not have come as a surprise that such fiery rhetoric sparked physical violence. In 1834, a mob in Charleston, Massachusetts burned an Ursuline convent and school. Beecher had by then left Boston to serve as the president of Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati, Ohio. While denying any responsibility for mobilizing a mob to violence he simultaneously doubled down on his anti-Catholic position with the publication of *Plea for the West*. Published as a score of sermons that Beecher had delivered in Boston newly wrapped in his emergent conviction that white Protestant expansion to the West was both essential and endangered, Beecher's *Plea* sounded an alarm against the "influx of immigrant paupers … corrupting our morals, quadrupling our taxation, and endangering the peace of our cities, and of our nation." Protestant parents should be ashamed of sending their children to Catholic schools, he wrote, instead of establishing "schools, academies, libraries, colleges, and all the apparatus for the perpetuity

of republican institutions." Catholics threatened the religious and political destiny of the nation. (Beecher 1835, 175, 24).

The anti-Catholicism aimed at mostly Irish and German immigrants had a direct impact on Texas. The debates about whether or not to annex Texas repackaged the anti-Catholic rhetoric that formerly targeted European immigrants to depict Mexico as a threat to westward expansion and American republicanism. Democrats, for their part, pushed for annexation. US control of Texas would not only prevent British designs on the region but would allow, as the senator from Arkansas argued, the US to "'monopolize through the instrumentality of slave labor, the productions of cotton and sugar and other southern productions, not only for the supply of our own markets, but the markets of the world'" (Qtd in Hietala 1985, 66).

Opponents of annexation, especially Conscience Whigs and abolitionists, argued that "acquiring Texas would ignite war with Mexico and set the nation on a path of empire building," and that extending slavery through Texas would "corrupt the civic foundations of the republic" and weaken it from within, even they agreed that "Mexicans were too barbarous or superstitious to rule over Anglo-Saxons or even to live among them" (Rathbun 2001, 459; Pinheiro 2014, 38). The utility of such anti-Catholic rhetoric was apparent in annexation debates, even for – especially for? – opponents of annexation. Northern Whigs, seeing it as a beard for the extension of slavery, nevertheless agreed that Protestant Anglo-Saxons had a special responsibility to the world and a special mission. They preferred a gradual and so-called peaceful process of incorporating Texas (in other words, just moving in and taking over), hoping that Anglo Saxon Protestant immigration would simply whitewash and expel the problematic residents of Texas. They "doubted whether portions of northern Mexico or Cuba could become full-fledged states or whether the Catholic, Indian, and mixed denizens should be welcomed to the US" (Hahn 2016, 124). A sudden embrace of Texas meant internalizing a threat that until then had been embodied by Catholic immigrants. They did not so much disagree about whether or not to expand the US, just how much and how fast. Anti-Catholicism proved capable of depicting the government of Mexico as a villainous threat to the US, a dark and popish other to "a white Protestant and republican race uniquely blessed by Divine Providence" (Pinheiro 2014, 49).

The problem was that a country touting religious liberty could hardly frame the Texas issue in such terms, as President Polk realized. However much anti-Catholicism proved useful for the Democrats' designs on Texas, President Polk had to be careful. He and his Secretary of State, James Buchanan, perceived that too much anti-Catholic rhetoric could "produce the kind of prolonged conflict they did not want" (Pinheiro 2014, 72). He and his Secretary of State James Buchanan worked to counteract the anti-Catholic framing of annexation and the war against Mexico. Such an idea came dangerously close to putting the US in a position very much like the tyrannical church-state in Europe, against which the US modeled itself. Even Beecher agreed that the civil and religious rights of Catholic citizens should not be violated (Beecher 64). More pragmatically, Polk could not afford to alienate a large and growing number of Roman Catholic Americans because he needed them as army recruits, the mostly German and Irish immigrants who joined "as a means of becoming American" (Pinheiro 2014, 69). Secretary of State James Buchanan met with Bishop John Hughes of New York and Bishop Mathias Loras of Dubuque to assure them that the war with Mexico was in no way a religious war,

and that they wanted to appoint Catholic clerics as army chaplains. In return, the Polk administration hoped the Catholic clerics could assuage American Catholics' anxieties about the seemingly religious impetus for the war against Mexico. Polk was loudly and repeatedly criticized for this, and his efforts to reassure urban Catholic constituents was nearly hijacked by the increasingly shrill peals of anti-Catholic rhetoric, recently taking form in Army recruiters' implied suggestions that in addition to a steady salary of $7.00 a month, soldiers might well gain from plundering and looting Mexican churches (Pinheiro 2014, 70–2). He also needed to avoid a public relations disaster that could easily erupt if the war were framed as a war against Catholics. The question of what to do about Texas "presented a number of challenges to a union of American states imbued with enormous – and widely shared territorial ambitions but at odds with the sort of union they wished to be" (Hahn 123).

Certainly the Polk administration was aware of the issue of how ironic and potentially dangerous it was for the war against Mexico to be framed as a religious war. The ideal of religious liberty loomed large, for one thing. For another, Catholicism had long been part of the landscape in the trans-Mississippi West and the Northwest. "From Minnesota to Vincennes, to New Orleans, settlements of French Catholics had long preceded the Protestant Anglo-Saxon" (Hinckley 1962, 127). Place names like St. Paul, Minnesota and St. Louis, Missouri witnessed to that. Furthermore, an expanding diversity of Protestant types was visible and vocal. Indeed, by the time Polk went to war against Mexico, "the diversity of American Protestantism had created a denominational liberalism quite beneficial to Roman Catholics" (Hinckley 1962, 130). Both Protestant diversity and the ideal of religious liberty mitigated against rendering the war in such stark religious opposition.

In 1845, Polk was on the cusp of adding to the US a territory that nearly doubled the size of the current United States, a move that a sizeable majority opposed. He wanted the conflict with Mexico to end decisively and quickly. Intent on expanding the borders of the US, the coasts were extremely important. By taking the name of the Bay, the inland site previously known as Kinney's Rancho implied American borders that extended beyond the land to include bays, inlets, rivers, and coastlines. Perhaps even the opponents of the war would feel that it had been worth it when they benefitted from expanding US coastal borders. Referring to the site as Corpus Christi rather than Kinney's Place denominated the expansion that General Taylor was attempting to enact on the ground. Furthermore, Corpus Christi is Latin, not Spanish. The power and efficacy of mottoized Latin was long familiar in national and state seals, such as "E pluribus unum," "Annuit Coeptis," and "Novus ordo seculorum." Corpus Christi would have been a familiar bit of Latin, and not just to those with a Catholic background. As with other Latin phrases, its meaning would have been readily understood since Latin was widely taught and broadly recognized. To be sure, elites in particular practiced the arts of what Caroline Winterer calls "classicism," but the use of Greek and Roman antiquity in symbol, material, and linguistic forms was shared by less classically educated US citizens as well. Corpus Christi was useful *qua* Latin because it functioned as a symbolic "antidote to … civic degeneracy." (Winterer 2002, 98). The civic degeneracy foremost in the minds of many American as regards to Texas was constellated of a shifting set of religious and racial anxieties.

Proponents of annexation highlighted the sacrifices already made on behalf of Texas, specifically the events of the Goliad massacre in 1835 and the Alamo in 1836 (Haynes and Morris 1997). Framed as examples of selfless sacrifice, these events provided a handy defense to the criticisms of annexing Texas. Would these patriotic Texan heroes have given their lives merely out of avarice or because they were at heart immoral? No, those at the Alamo and Goliad had laid down their lives "for a transcendent national purpose" (Nackman 1975, 57). Casting these Texas events in terms of blood spilled and sacrifices made was articulated early and often. In 1836, when Sam Houston was elected president of the nascent Texas Republic, he said, "Our soil is consecrated by the blood of martyrs and we will defend it or perish" (Houston 1842, 490–1). During the period of the Texas Republic (1835–1845), those who died at the Alamo and at Goliad were likened to the brave patriots of the American Revolution and to the Greek and Roman noble deaths of antiquity. In the press and literature, the Alamo became the "Texian Iliad" (Hardin 1994, 246). *The Telegraph and Texas Register* referred to the struggle of Texas against Mexico as "contending for principles for which our common ancestors have fought and bled," and published in 1835 the "'Declaration of the Congress of the United Colonies, showing the causes which impelled them to take up arms against Great Britain (1775),' as well as extracts from the history of the American Revolution" (Kökény 2004, 286). In song, analogies between Texas and famous battles of antiquity emphasized the nobility of Texas death. *The Hymn of the Alamo* linked the deaths of the Texas rebels to the deaths of Greeks at Thermopylae (Kökény 2004, 291). This rhetoric of blood – patriotically spilled blood – both rationalized anti-Mexican sentiment and soldered the links between Texas and the US. The editors of *The Telegraph and Texas Register* emphasized the importance of annexing Texas, "first and foremost, because she is a nation of the same blood with the people of the US" (Kökény 2004, 298). So, when Polk addressed Congress about his plans to go to war with Mexico in 1846, his use of the patriotic annihilation narrative was by then familiar: he repeatedly emphasized in his rationale that "Mexico … has shed American blood upon American soil," and using the inclusive first person plural that recent Texas statehood afforded him, that Mexico had "shed the blood of our fellow-citizens on our own soil" (Polk 1846).

In the press, in song, and in political oratory, Americans learned to apotheosize Texas martyrs and to regard Texas as a symbol of the nobility of laying down one's life for the nation, of victory even in death. These narratives helped to create a cultural climate increasingly receptive to the annexation of Texas and later the war against Mexico. Stories of bodily sacrifice in Texas served "mythologically as a second birthplace for the American, who undergoes a regeneration in the sacrificial death inside the Alamo image" (Brear 1995, 2). Though a considerable distance in geographic miles from the events in Goliad and San Antonio, Corpus Christi linguistically and imagistically was situated quite close to this commemoration of the dead and religio-nationalist rhetoric of laying down one's life for one's country. "Nothing connects us affectively to the dead more than language" (Anderson 2006, 145). The language of blood linked Texas with the US, and seemed to elicit from the patriotic martyrs their blessing for the arrogation of Texas and the increasing possibility of war with Mexico. The rhetoric of sacrifice rationalized and legitimated US expansionism not as conflict but as consummation of America's Anglo-Saxon Protestant national destiny. Even today, the language of "the

blood of heroes" and "the sacrifice that forged a nation" features prominently in historical literature about the Alamo (Donovan 2012).

This evocation of sacrifice was, it is clear, also racialized. This is no surprise. Ethnicity and nationalism offer mutual reinforcement, and were much in play precisely because Revolutionary-era Texas was a site of "exceedingly fluid identities" (Reséndez 2005, 1). The myth of the Alamo advanced a "racialized binary of brave and freedom loving Texans and tyrannous Mexicans," that is "totally incorrect" (Flores 2000; 91, 95). The Alamo myth did, however, accurately echo the then popular discourse of "an Anglo-Saxon nation … bound to glory; [and] the inferior, decadent Indian race and the half-breed Mexicans [bound] to succumb before the inexorable March of the superior Anglo-Saxon people" (Montejano 1987, 24). However false and opportunistic it was, the Alamo myth helped to fulfill what was not just the construction of a separate national identity but simultaneously the project of whitening and Americanizing Texas (Montejano 1987).

Perhaps even more than shore up a starkly racial binary between Anglos and Mexicans, which historian Richard Flores argues happens quite a bit later in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth (2002), the language of sacrifice generated an important intra-racial distinction that helped to shift support for US annexation of Texas. Such distinctions were clearly important. "Texas Mexicans, for example [distinguished between] Tejano, Mexicano, Indio, Castilian, Spanish, Latin American, Chicano, and Hispanic … Likewise, Anglo-Americans and European immigrants in Texas … included otherwise non-whites like Irish, Italian and Jewish" (Montejano 1987, 10). As annexation propagandists eulogized those killed at the Alamo and at Goliad, they merged Anglo deaths into national destiny: "nations, like individuals must live up to their destiny" (Rathbun 2001, 475). By focusing on exemplary, noble deaths, on the blood spilled and sacrifices already made in Texas, the annexation advocates shifted the associations that those opposed to annexation held about Texas – a place surely bound to weaken the roots of the republic by extending imperial aims, by continuing the immorality of slavery, by rewarding avaricious land grabbers, and not least by diluting the blood of the "white race." After all, people from both sides of the debate about annexation worried that "incorporating 'Anglo-Gallo-Americans' of the Southwest would threaten the integrity of Anglo-Saxon culture" (Rathbun 2001, 471). By the time of the war, "America's identity seemed most intelligible only when defined in contradistinction to Mexico: Protestant, not Catholic; Anglo-Saxon not Indian/Mestizo/Spanish; republican not tyrannical; industrious not slothful" (Pinheiro 2014, 65).

Worries about whiteness occurred not just because of the ethnic diversity of Texas and the potential for miscegenation, but because the Texas Republic, especially in its early years, had a bad reputation of attracting Anglo inhabitants who were "not exactly law-abiding citizens" (Kökény 2004, 294). White Americans who immigrated to Texas were often described in less than glowing terms. Popularly called *GTTs*, an acronym for "gone to Texas," they were often times outright criminals or morally flexible businessmen escaping debts and deals gone bad. The word rascal comes up repeatedly. Texas was a "rendezvous for rascals of all the continent," and "a place of refuge for rascality and criminality of all kinds – the sanctuary to which pirates, murderers, thieves, and swindlers fly for protection from the laws they have violated in other countries, and under other governments" (Leach 1952, 28; Nackman 1975, 9). Emphasizing the

racialized myths of the Goliad and the Alamo, Anglo Texan martyrs for the nation were foregrounded while the "lawless adventurers in Texas" were overlooked (Brown 1980, 147). In other words, the intra racial "spin" on Anglo Texans obfuscated opportunistic GTT land grabbing.

Henry Lawrence Kinney fit the GTT stereotype almost too perfectly. He fled Illinois for Texas to avoid paying his debts, awarded himself the title "Colonel" for his alleged involvement either in the Black Hawk War or in the Seminole War, though there was no evidence he actually took part (Haile 2012; Nelson 2012). Kinney settled on land that was not his, and after setting up his trading post, began an extralegal import/export business (García 1986; Jackson 1986; Nance 1963). By double-dealing with the Mexican and US governments, Kinney drew ire from both. The US accused Kinney of being "an informant for the Mexicans and indicted and tried for treason;" the "Mexicans for their part jailed him briefly as a spy" (Williams 2010; Lessoff 2015, 61). Amazingly, Kinney would go on to serve in the Texas Congress. Whether Kinney was a scoundrel or a savvy businessman; a hero or a hustler; or a mix of both, he had an aptitude for opportunism, not sacrifice (Williams 2010; Haile 2012; Nelson 2012). Sometime between 1842 and 1846, it ceased to be called Kinney's Trading Post and acquired instead the name Corpus Christi. It satisfactorily included the land and the bay; doffed a hat to the dominant Catholic cultural history of Texas, and evoked sacrifice, particularly the myth of Anglo sacrifice.

Corpus Christi serves as but one example of why biblical, classical, and canonical religious names, so often sidelined as colonial remnants, should be reconsidered instead as part of a broad and complex "strategy of nation-building and state formation" (Rose-Redwood, Alderman, and Azaryahu 2010, 457). Considering the pressures, anxieties, problems and questions that brought the name of an inland Corpus Christi into being foregrounds why place names reward consideration as performative and political practice.

Historian Alan Lessoff argues that Corpus Christi is a "twentieth-century Anglo city, a product of the extension of Anglo-American commerce, agriculture, industry, and tourism beyond the Nueces River," and that its name, "which evokes Spanish Catholic customs and attitudes, can deceive the unwary" (Lessoff 1997; 305; Lessoff 2015, 82). The choice of Corpus Christi as a place name simultaneously benefited from and aided in the production of rhetorical and narrative efforts meant to facilitate the inclusion of Texas into the US, particularly the effort to avoid depicting the war against Mexico as a religious war and to depict Texas as a particularly powerful site of sacrificial Anglo patriotism. Both efforts lubricated Texas annexation and rationalized the US war against Mexico in 1846–1848.

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