



## Book Review

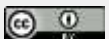
**The Address Book: What Street Addresses Reveal about Identity, Race, Wealth, and Power.** BY DEIRDRE MASK. 2020. New York: St. Martin's Press. Pp. 326. \$26.99. ISBN 978-1-250-13476-9.

In *The Address Book: What Street Addresses Reveal about Identity, Race, Wealth, and Power*, author Deirdre Mask interviews a man named Anton Tantner from Vienna, described as “the world’s leading expert on house numbers” (91). We also encounter Dr. John Snow, using maps of London to pinpoint the origins of a cholera epidemic in the 1830s, and Donald J. Trump, seen playing fast and loose with Manhattan addresses for personal gain in 1997, long before his political career took off. Mask makes house numbers, street addresses, and the mission of those striving to correct the problems of “addresslessness” (34) urgent and compelling as she travels the globe and across time in this informative, entertaining journey of a book.

Ultimately, it is better to have an address than lack one. Starting with the most urgent needs in areas of extreme poverty like the slums of Kolkata and Haiti, Mask illustrates how addresses can mean life or death. You *want* to be found by the ambulance or delivery service. But she also sees addresses as a double-edged sword, for “[a]ddresses aren’t just for emergency services. They also exist so people can find you, police you, tax you, and try to sell you things you don’t need through the mail” (9). Addresses, or the absence of, since “most households in the world don’t have street addresses” (4), “tell a grander narrative of how power has shifted and stretched over the centuries” (14). While each chapter reflects the need for assigning addresses, it also discusses obstacles to getting there and the ambivalence some feel about an address imposed on them.

Mask organizes her book by theme, with sections on *Development* and *Origins* of street names and addresses, then chapters clustered under the headings *Politics*, *Race*, *Class*, and *Status*. Each section is also ostensibly about a particular part of the world. At first glance, this design seems logical. But soon the organic quality of both humans and naming comes into play, the interrelatedness of each chapter takes hold, and the book reveals itself to be contoured more like a meandering country lane than the grid of an urban center. What is consistent across chapters are the many profiles of individuals’ stories, people who function as a kind of fountain in the town square, i.e., a point of centrality from which Mask starts, widens out her exploration and narrative, and then loops back to in the end. The chapters wrap around these navigating landmarks, these people dedicated to addresses, folks who know that an address has “the power to name, the power to shape history, the power to decide who counts, who doesn’t, and why” (13).

Addresses aid in fighting disease. A cholera epidemic in 19<sup>th</sup>-century London led to the formation of “disease detectives” who used maps to track the geography of cases (39). “Addresses made pinpointing disease possible” (41). Sometimes obstacles to assigning addresses arise due to clashes of cultures. In Kolkata (then Calcutta) under British rule, an initiative to conduct a census led to



numbering houses. However, “no one could agree on what a ‘house’ was” (21). What if a building sheltered a different family in each of its rooms? Would you need one or multiple addresses? The concept of “house” did not always translate. Ultimately, something very mundane led to the project’s failure: the plastic address placards handed out for families to post on their doors would fall off in the rainy weather and be munched on by cows.

When a street is named, how is that name chosen? In 18<sup>th</sup>-century England, street names were more descriptions than anything else. The *London Road*, for example, went to London. Locals and travelers alike would know where to find certain businesses, such as a hat shop on *Haberdasher Street* and a bootmaker on *Booty Lane* (although so too could be found local jokes about “rude” street names). These descriptive names persisted even when an area changed, so that *Seven Sisters Road* is still called that long after the eponymous seven elm trees have disappeared. Perhaps lack of imagination, or loyalty to royalty, led to much ineffective naming. London in 1853 had 25 *Albert* and 25 *Victoria Streets*, and probably as many named *Queen*, *Princess* and *Duke Streets*. Eventually, the postal service in Britain led address reform to facilitate mail delivery. A Dead Letter Office was formed, comprised of workers (called “blind officers”) who functioned as another type of detective. Faced with vague addresses on letters, such as one to “My dear Ant (sic) Sue as lives in the Cottage by the Wood near the New Forest,” these postal workers were surprisingly successful at finding the rightful recipient (81). Some correspondents (including Queen Victoria’s private secretary) would even test the blind officers by embedding in an address cryptic clues to be solved, in a sort of intellectual challenge. Speaking of the mail, a Philadelphia postal worker named Robert Moon invented in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century the ZIP code, an acronym for zoning improvement plan, adding another layer of specificity to an address (although those more recent extra four digits to a ZIP code seem less popular).

The Age of Enlightenment, with its obsession (for better or worse) over “order and classification” found Europeans numbering streets and houses (91). Once numbering took hold in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Paris, it was hard to stop; everything was numbered, including the horses. Geneva caught the fever, numbering people, vehicles, and (yes) the horses. Yet the enlightened were not always so orderly: Vienna gave a new house the lowest available number, regardless of where the house was located. So “number 1521 could sit (un)comfortably next to, say, number 12” (97). Still today, some municipalities assign two numbers per house. In the Czech Republic, one number is for the owner’s personal business and one for official government regulation; in Florence, one number is for residential matters and another one for business dealings.

Philadelphia’s William Penn introduced the improvement of assigning odd numbers to one side of a street and even numbers to the other, keeping a range of numbers (say 200-299) within the same block (and hence called “the 200-block”). He also started the grid layout we now find in many US large cities. A grid was logical and mathematical, and the philosophy was Quaker. Thus, the Philadelphia plan steered away from named streets honoring people and instead relied more modestly on numbered streets. The perpendicular cross streets in the city were named for things in nature -- but only growth that was spontaneous (so no *Lettuce Street* or any other farmed crops). In fact, “numbered streets are a peculiarly American phenomenon,” says Mask (114). Guess the most common street name in the US. It’s *Second Street* (because *First Street* is usually called *Main Street* and sometimes there isn’t a *Third Street*). In contrast, Estonia makes it illegal to number streets, believing that it is a waste of an opportunity to pay tribute to someone instead.

A named street is indeed a chance to pay tribute. So why is there a *Bobby Sands Street* in Iran? Mask connects the Troubles in Ireland and IRA fighter Bobby Sands to anti-British sentiments in Iran and a movement to memorialize those who have fought the British anywhere in the world. The opposite of memorializing a person or people is to erase them. Many street names in Germany with *Juden* in them (*Jew*) were erased by renaming under Nazi rule. So-called “J Street” names became illegal in 1938 (along with many other aspects of Jewish lives). “Street names are, in a way, the perfect propaganda tool” (163). Susan Hiller, head of the J Street Project, looks to return J street names to Germany.

Besides commemorating or erasing a person, people, or event in the past, street names can help rewrite history. Hollywood, Florida, was a Ku Klux Klan hotspot in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and has a street named for the Klan’s first grand wizard, Nathan Bedford Forrest. Benjamin Israel, an African American resident, has been fighting to change that, with little success. A judge even suggested to him once to simply think of the name as *Forest* without the extra “r.” Why is it that “in the South, more than a thousand streets bear the names of Confederate leaders” (181)? Is this all in the service of reconciliation of a country? Some say yes. Mask interviews folks who believe that they can still be against slavery and honor those in the South whom they see as fighting for their homes. Mask is told by a woman that there is nothing wrong with the name *Lee Street Apartments* because, after all, history is dead. But “memory is alive” and “social,” points out Mask, and memories are manipulable (184). Others she interviews, such as Israel, say use of Confederate names is for keeping Confederate principles front and center. We see this especially in times of social change. Civil War monuments peaked twice, says Mask, first when Jim Crow laws were being established in early 20<sup>th</sup> century and later, in the 1950s and 1960s when Jim Crow was challenged by the civil rights movement. These statues (and street names) seem to offer a sanitized, romantic view of the past, a route to quell social change. Now, with the #BlackLivesMatter movement, Confederate names are again being challenged.

A chapter on streets around the world honoring Martin Luther King, Jr. starts with the story of Melvin White, an African American resident of St. Louis. White tells Mask that *MLK Drive* and a similar large thoroughfare in his city are the epitome of separate and unequal. The former is down-at-the-heels in contrast to the thriving Delmare Blvd. Delmare is even 10 degrees cooler in summer than MLK because it has more trees planted along it. There are around 900 *MLK Streets*, *Avenues*, and *Boulevards* in the US, all mainly placed in Black neighborhoods. “MLK streets have become a code name for a certain kind of urban, black decline” and “bad for business” (200). Melvin White is working hard to change that narrative.

The book comes to its conclusion with the ways two American cities perpetuate inequity. The concept of Manhattan vanity addresses is illustrated by a 1997 Donald Trump requesting from the city an illusory address for his newest high rise. While the building is technically at 15 *Columbus Circle*, Trump got the city to change the address to 1 *Central Park West* (in a time when *Columbus Circle* was nothing more than a noisy traffic roundabout). “Trump knew the best marketing tool of all was an address” (239). The real estate mantra of location, location, location is modified to “You don’t need the best location, just the best deal” (226).

Perhaps putting Trump in perspective, Mask tells us that “New Yorkers had already been bullshitting street names for more than a hundred years” (226). In the 1870s, street names were manipulated to gentrify an area and attract a better class of renters and buyers. Consider the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where the numbered avenues of midtown suddenly become more poetically named: 8<sup>th</sup> *Ave.* becomes *Central Park West*, 9<sup>th</sup> *Ave.* is *Columbus*, 10<sup>th</sup> *Ave.* is *Amsterdam*, and 11<sup>th</sup> *Ave.* becomes *West End Ave.* “If you want a posh street, give it a posh name” goes the strategy (228). In present day New York City, a new high rise building by the Zeckendorf brothers has a Park Ave. address, but try to find the front door; it’s on *E. 60th Street*, 150 feet away from Park Ave. The address was bought from a church on Park with \$30,000 for the right to take it over. Other Manhattan examples abound. An address that is truly on an avenue (Madison) is called *E. 74 St.* to sound quaint. And “[y]ou can’t even reach the atrium of 237 *Park Avenue* from Park Avenue, because it’s actually on Lexington” (230). You can perhaps scoff at a sushi delivery person getting lost due to these

fabrications, but Mask tells us that, unfortunately, vanity addresses also thwart ambulances from finding the right home. We are actually back to the original problem of “addresslessness,” not this time in slums but in penthouse triplexes.

The other end of a continuum that starts with vanity addresses leads to New Haven, CT, where Sarah Golabek-Goldman works with the homeless. In her numerous interviews with many individuals, she finds the root of all their troubles is the lack of an address. No address means no identity. Even when filling out a job application, the applicant is asked for an address (even though nothing will ever be sent in the mail). But the inability to complete an application continues the cycle of poverty. Here are all the important tasks you cannot complete without an address in the US or UK: obtain an ID card, be issued a passport, get a marriage license, rent a PO box, apply for store credit, and in the UK receive your unemployment benefits since the government agency still sends appointment letters through the mail.

While Mask does a masterful job of connecting people, projects, history and human needs, the logic of those connections can sometimes seem dubious. For example, she writes that due to Manhattan’s grid arrangement, “[p]eople might feel so at home in New York, so ready to call themselves New Yorkers, because they never have to stand on a corner staring at a map like a despicable tourist” (122). She attributes a difference in the assigning of addresses between the West and in Japan to a different spatial mindset, instilled early on by the way children are taught to write. In Tokyo, streets are not named. Instead, areas of the city, or blocks, have names. Streets are “simply the spaces between the blocks” (130). How does this relate to writing systems? Kanji is taught to children by having them fill in boxes, not lines on a page, as in the West. Thus, the Japanese see space more in terms of area, not linearly. While orthography might or might not determine mindset, apparently GPS is westernizing the way Japan is being navigated anyway, eliminating the differences. Maybe Eastern addresses will change as well. Mask gives space to speculation that, while you might not find a bootmaker any longer on *Booty Lane*, odds are that you are more religious if you live on a *Church Street* than your neighbors on around the corner. “Perhaps we make the street names, and then the street names help make us” (87). (Having grown up on *80<sup>th</sup> Street*, I would quote - as does the book - from the television series *The Prisoner*: “I am not a number; I am a *free man*.”)

In the end, Mask shows her bias toward the poetic name, the emotional over the logical. She wraps up with a discussion of What3words, a start-up for assigning addresses to every part of the planet. If you are a rock band, heading to a concert in a field somewhere in the countryside, what address do you plug into your GPS? What3words takes each 3-meter x 3-meter unit of the globe and assigns a random and unique combination of words. For example, the Eiffel Tower’s address in this system is *daunting.evokes.nappy*. Such a system is a boon to emergency vehicles and delivery services (and rock bands). These futuristic addresses are growing, with Google and Facebook getting into the mapping act. A digital address can help the homeless, the problem Mask started with. Yet Mask has doubts. What3words is a profit-making company, the names are not very romantic-sounding, and the concept threatens to erase a sense of community. I looked up my What3words address in Brooklyn, NY; I am *issue.bonus.adding*, my neighbors to the right of me are *joined.deal.expect*, and to the left are *future.scores.served*. Not much motivation for a block party.

Will the future actually dehumanize us with such address projects? Maybe not. Mask concludes with a profile of Chris Hildrey, a Londoner with a new way of thinking about addresslessness: “[A]n address does not have to be connected to an actual home” and, in fact, “You own your home, not the address” (251, 253). Hildrey heads a campaign to use addresses of empty homes in the London area to get homeless, addressless people on the map. In England, “more than 200,000 houses sit empty for more than six months – and at least 11,000 are unoccupied for more than ten years” (252). Once assigned an empty address, addressless individuals can request that their mail be forwarded to a shelter, without revealing their actual residence (and situation) on a job application. The idea might not be romantic, but it is clever.

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