



## Book Review

**Place Names: Approaches and Perspectives in Toponymy and Toponomastics.** By FRANCESCO PERONO CACCIAFO AND FRANCESCO CAVALLARO. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2023. Pp. 298. (Paperback) \$34.99. ISBN 13: 978-1-108-74824-7.

The authors of *Place Names* ambitiously aimed for their volume to function both as a textbook for an undergraduate or graduate level onomastics course and as a thought-provoking scholarly work. Indeed, I was excited upon flipping through the Table of Contents and References, as they promised exactly that. Unfortunately, however, problems with structure and analysis mean that the authors' ambition is not fully realized.

In keeping with the authors' aims, *Place Names* is structured as a textbook, with the nine chapters after the introduction divided by topic and followed by a glossary of key terms. The work outlines a programmatic vision of toponomastics, dividing the field into three subfields of "historical toponomastics" (reconstructing the history of a name using written records in well-documented languages), "diachronic toponymy" (reconstructing the history of a name in under-documented and unwritten languages), and "synchronic toponymy" (effectively socio-onomastics). This programmatic vision is where I encountered the first problem with the volume: historical toponomastics and diachronic toponymy cover basically the same field, distinguished only by the data sources available to the researcher. The overarching similarity between these fields is made manifest in the volume; for example, Tables 3.1 and 5.1, which outline the research process in both proposed subfields, are nearly identical. In effect, this means that the authors' distinction between the two proposed subfields is that European languages are studied in historical toponomastics, while indigenous languages of the Americas, Australia, and so on, are studied in diachronic toponymy. By creating this artificial division between European

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and other languages, the program of study outlined by the authors is inherently and inexcusably colonialist in outlook. This is too bad, as the authors do make a concerted effort to consider a wide range of cross-linguistic examples from around the world in their coverage of diachronic and synchronic toponymy. In another version of this volume, these examples would have been a valuable contribution to efforts to decolonize academia, but their value is lessened in the context of the division between historical toponomastics and diachronic toponymy.

The problem in the authors' conception of the field extends to the organization of the volume. The content is roughly divided such that a third falls in each toponomastic subfield as they divide the discipline. However, because two of the subfields are in fact one, this means that *Place Names* is more accurately divided as about two-thirds historical linguistics and one-third socio-onomastics. While not necessarily problematic for scholarly work, because this division compresses the socio-onomastic content in comparison to the historical linguistics content, it would be difficult to use the volume as the main text for a course on toponymy. Beyond this, I found the choice of chapter topics strange at times. For example, multiple chapters overlap quite a bit, which results in some research within toponomastics (particularly the politicized re-naming of streets) recurring across multiple chapters. The repetitiveness in the volume is widespread, suggesting that perhaps using other topics as chapter tentpoles would have led to a more cohesive work.

An interesting tension between the historical and socio-onomastic approaches to toponymic studies emerges through the joint focus on the two. The historical approach taken by the authors treats toponyms as purely linguistic objects which label a space, the form and etymology of which can be traced back to the original naming of the space and literal meaning of the name. The authors' socio-onomastic approach, meanwhile, treats toponyms as a social phenomenon available for creative interpretation and (re)contextualization of what the place labeled by the toponym is. These two views are contradictory: if the meaning of a name can be traced to its original literal meaning, then there is no room for the name to have social meaning. At the same time, if the use and interpretation of a name is tied to its social context, the literal meaning of the name (and, potentially, how that name was first given) is not particularly useful from a scholarly perspective. This tension is well known within toponymic studies (see for example Berg and Vuolteenaho 2009) and arises from the turn within human geography to distinguish space from the social construction of place (Johnstone 2004). However, the authors do not substantively engage with this tension.

Instead, the authors attempt to resolve the tension by asserting a clean break between modernity and its preceding history. For them, socio-onomastic concerns and the wide range of naming practices available to speakers (see for example Blair and Tent 2021) are a modern phenomenon. In contrast, the authors claim that ancient (the post-ancient, pre-modern period having been set aside) speakers solely assigned toponyms to describe local water or geological features, and these toponyms have persisted to the modern day as "linguistic fossils" (xv and throughout). This claim is odd to me, and the modernist chauvinism that it implies sweeps aside well-documented evidence of ancient cultures' complexity and richness to assert an inescapable primitiveness.

There is a bigger problem with the claim that ancient speakers only described physical features in their naming practice: this appears to be a completely unsubstantiated assumption. In fact, the historical linguistic work behind the authors' reasoning appears to be based on several unfounded assumptions, which are used in service of a thesis that modern toponyms and earlier written usage of them can be used to reconstruct the Neolithic toponym. There is a nugget of accuracy in the reasoning behind this thesis. Place names can indeed change rather slowly over time and show evidence of who named that space; for example, Old Norse morphology in English toponyms offers evidence of the extent of a centuries-ago Viking settlement (Lindsay 2023). However, such examples can and should be corroborated by archaeological evidence and contemporaneous written documentation.

In contrast, the reasoning in *Place Names* is typified by the following example: *Carcare*, Piedmont, Italy, is a settlement for which the earliest attestations of the name date to the 1100s (106). There is also some evidence that this space had a Neolithic settlement. Based on these two observations, the authors decide that *Carcare* was named by these Neolithic speakers, who spoke a form of Proto-Indo-European (PIE) or perhaps even an unknowable pre-Indo-European language. Therefore, they conclude that the etymology of the name is the PIE root \*kar- 'stone'. Note the massive logical hole here; there is no evidence of *Carcare* having this name for the entirety of the approximately 3,500-year gap between the Neolithic era and the 1100s, no evidence of the space being continuously in use during this period, and no evidence that early Piedmontese people were or were in contact with the supposed Neolithic namers. We would need evidence of each of these points to draw a firm conclusion, and as such the authors' conclusion regarding the etymology of *Carcare* is nothing more than unfounded speculation based on evidence-free assumptions. I have not cherry-picked this example; particularly with respect to their Piedmontese examples, the authors make extraordinary claims while providing no evidence to support them.

The methods used in this historical work appear to be misapplied as well. The authors correctly emphasize the importance of the comparative method to historical linguistics but appear to apply it in reverse. That is, for any European name they attempt to analyze, they select a PIE root and attempt to identify the linguistic changes necessary to obtain the modern name. If the comparative method were correctly used, they would have begun with modern names from a variety of languages and worked back to the shared root. Because

their examples are largely from one region of Italy and because the authors appear to conduct their analysis working backwards from their conclusions, the entirety of the work classed as historical toponomastics appears to be more of an ideological project than serious scholarship.

The section of the volume on what the authors call diachronic toponymy focuses primarily on toponyms in Abui, a language spoken in a small set of Indonesian villages, although chapter 6, “Landscape and Toponymy”, returns to Piedmontese examples in addition to Abui examples. To the extent that the authors attempt to link Abui toponyms to older roots, the Abui examples have some of the same flawed analysis as the Piedmontese examples. However, the authors also discuss the variety of naming practices in Abui, including the use of crops and mythology in assigning toponyms. This discussion presents interesting documentary work and is much stronger than the Piedmontese-style analysis. However, it is unclear how to interpret such data: are these toponyms counterexamples to the authors’ claim that ancient names were based solely on local water or geological features, or do the authors view these toponyms as relatively modern developments? Furthermore, how would we know one way or another, given that the language is underdocumented?

Granted, I am not a historical linguist. Suppose, as the authors would no doubt argue, that I have grossly misunderstood their work. If this is the case, it still does not reflect well upon this volume. The inability to clearly explain the research process, walk through how results are obtained, and summarize the historical findings would still render *Place Names* unusable as a scholarly reference, let alone as an introductory textbook.

Additional smaller issues with the volume affect its readability or usability. One example is the use of italics for every place mentioned in the volume. I found this made it difficult to distinguish between the crucial toponymic data and plain text. I was also deeply uncomfortable with the use of American and Australian examples which include the *n-word* in the discussion of renaming and decolonization. While I understand that such examples have scholarly value, I would not feel comfortable using the chapter with these examples as a classroom text. Indeed, there are perhaps better examples for a broadly targeted resource. For example, the authors discuss the renaming of *Negrohead Lake* as *Lake Henry Doyle* (229). The reader can understand from this example how renaming is used as a tool to address offensive ideologies embedded in the toponymic landscape without needing to be informed that the lake previously had an even more offensive name.

In contrast to the chapters on historical linguistics, I found the chapters devoted to what the authors call synchronic toponymy to be clear, well organized, and well suited to a reference work for students. Chapters 8–9 in particular, “Synchronic Toponymy” and “Place Names and Society”, respectively, cover a range of topics that are quite important to the socio-onomastic study of toponyms. These topics include how toponymy intersects with commodification, power, and cultural politics, among other things. The authors make good use of their own research into the colonial and post-colonial history of toponyms in Singapore as an illustrative case study. In addition, they draw on key research outputs no doubt familiar to *Names* readers to provide a global perspective on the issues they discuss. The authors also provide a good discussion of the politicization of street re-naming, although perhaps surprisingly, this discussion first appears in one of the historical linguistics chapters. I found the final chapter, “Toponymy and Cartography”, to fit in less well with the synchronic toponymy section, as it mainly reiterates the point that assigning toponyms is often an exercise of political power.

Frustratingly, because the socio-onomastics chapters conclude the book, their inclusion merely calls attention to the flaws in the preceding historical analysis. The authors’ discussion of their own research in Singapore (183) provides a good example of this. In showing that pre-colonial names were overwritten by the colonizers and that the toponymy of the country is deeply affected by social processes, the authors make clear that they understand the complexities of toponyms and their social history well. However, this interesting work merely made me wonder why the authors’ historical analysis insisted on the immutability of names over thousands of years and why their analysis completely ignored thousands of years of social change in Europe. Disappointingly, the socio-onomastics content and framing of the volume as a textbook read to me overall as a tool to smuggle scholarship that wouldn’t pass muster in venues such as *Names* into mainstream publication. For this reason, the merits of these chapters aren’t enough to recommend *Place Names* as a textbook or resource for active onomastics researchers.

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