



Book Review

Names of New York: Discovering the City's Past, Present, and Future Through Its Place-Names. BY JOSHUA JELLY-SHAPIRO. New York: Penguin Random House. 2021. Pp. 243. (Hardback) \$22.00. ISBN 13: 978-1-5247-4892.

Readers, wanderers, geographers, and toponymists can get their armchair fill of the byways and waterways of America's largest city in Joshua Jelly-Schapiro's latest cultural geography, *Names of New York: Discovering the City's Past, Present, and Future Through Its Place-Names*. In 8 chapters, Jelly-Schapiro covers over 750 unique place names (itemized in an 11-page index) that comprise the maps and linguistic landscapes of perhaps the most iconic city in the nation.

Jelly-Schapiro hails from Vermont, but, now visiting scholar at the Institute for Public Knowledge at New York University, he has lived in New York City for years and describes it as "the city I know best" (7). A professional geographer, he appreciates the ties between mapping and naming. He includes in his first chapter a thumbnail definition of toponymy as "the study of names" (5) and acknowledges the seminal place that George R. Stewart holds for *Names on the Land*. When interviewed by Anders Holst for an *Art Insiders New York* podcast on his latest title, he enlarges on a geographer's—and, many *Names* readers would add, an onomastician's—role as interpreter of culture in highlighting the stories behind place names (Holst).

Jelly-Schapiro's chapters address the names of his adoptive city thematically and in roughly chronological order. Chapter 1, "The Power of Names" (3–21), serves as introduction to the volume and takes up the notion of names with the conversational rapport that a storyteller might establish with an audience. Cities, he writes, are "generators of tales" (7), and from the trove of New York's stories he teases out a variety of openers, from Donald Trump's new address at One Central Park West to the ways that *Manhattan* is now not just an island but a drink and *Broadway* not just a street but an idiom for theater worldwide. He recalls New York's past as a slave port and notes that at least 70 streets in Brooklyn still carry the names of slave owners. Places and place names are basic to human ecology, he suggests; books like *Home*

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Ground, reviewed for *Names* by Thomas Gasque (2008), remind readers of language's power to "vivify context and bind us to place" (13). So Jelly-Schapiro proposes for his volume too.

In Chapter 2, "The Names Before" (23–46), and Chapter 3, "Navigators and Duyvils and English and Kings (On Colonial Names)" (47–73), he celebrates some of the city's earliest names, including *Manhattan*, which derives from the native language of the Lenape and whose meaning remains uncertain, perhaps "'place where we gather timber for bows and arrows'" (26). It is ever challenging, Jelly-Schapiro asserts, to work backwards from "transliterated renderings, often flawed" (35), that proliferated after indigenous names faded while sixteenth- and seventeenth-century explorers claimed naming rights of their own. What the Dutch called *New Amsterdam* the English after 1664 called *New Netherland*, and they anglicized such names as *Brede weg*, which became *Broadway*; *bowerij*, which became the *Bowery*; and *Conyn Eylandt* 'rabbit island', which became *Coney Island*. More recent nods to the past gave the city the *Verrazzano Narrows Bridge*, after the Florentine Giovanni de Verrazzano, the first known European to enter New York's harbor, and *Rip Van Winkle's Bridge*, drawn from Washington Irving's famous fiction.

Chapter 4, "The Americans" (75–102), takes up the project of "'de-Englishing'" (92) the city's landscape after the Revolutionary War, when *Crown Street* became *Liberty Street* and *Little Queen Street* and *Great Queen Street* were subsumed into *Cedar Road*. Meanwhile, the city enriched its patriotic toponymy with names of the new country's patriarchs. The area around Fort Washington, built in 1776, has been known as *Washington Heights* ever since, just one of many examples Jelly-Schapiro offers in recognition of the man whom he calls "one of earth's most toponymically honored humans" (82). In 1802, the owner-developer of Williamsburg hired as engineer the great-nephew of Benjamin Franklin, Jonathan Williams, who promptly named many of its new streets for signers of the Declaration of Independence—Clymer, Ross, Rush, Penn, and more—while *Madison Avenue* and *Hamilton Heights* extended the reach of Founding Fathers across the city.

Every New York borough includes dozens of islands and islets, Jelly-Schapiro notes as he opens his exploration of nautical names in Chapter 5, "Leaving Shore: City of Islands" (103–135). *Rikers Island*, since 1932 home of the city's largest jail, receives passing mention in connection with *Blackwell's Island*, which turned into *Welfare Island*, familiarly called "damnation island" (121), after it became home to the New York City Lunatic Asylum in 1839, as well as a prison, workhouse and charity hospital; it is now known as *Roosevelt Island*, renamed in 1973 for Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Jelly-Schapiro delights in recounting islands' naming histories, with anecdotes about *Hart Island's* past as a Confederate prisoner of war camp and training ground for what were called the US Colored Troops during the Civil War, and *Barren Island*—connected to Brooklyn by fill since the 1920s—with its *Dead Horse Bay*, where a glue factory saw the end of many a worn-out horse from the city's streets.

Chapter 6, "Brokers and Powers (and Neighborhoods, too)" (137–167), returns to dry land to tell stories of New York's many neighborhoods, from the *Village*—*Greenwich Village*, after the Dutch *Groenwijk* 'green district'—to the New York City Housing Authority's first project in 1936 and on to today's proclivity for toponymic syllabic combinations that produce *Soho* (South of Houston Street), *TriBeCa* (Triangle Below Canal Street), and *DUMBO* (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass). Above the land, too, New York claims space: in a contentious "'upzoning'" (166) move, Chase Bank has bought the air rights over St. Patrick's Cathedral.

Jelly-Schapiro concludes with the thematically related Chapter 7, "Honors and Sounds" (169–200), and Chapter 8, "Making Place: Names of the Future" (201–228). First, he takes up honorary names, opening with a stretch of West 63rd Street renamed *Sesame Street* to mark the show's 50th anniversary. He salutes Local Law 28, which since 1972 has enabled such "honorary 'co-names'" (172) to be proclaimed without requiring the city to change official maps; with over 1,700 such designations granted, the ordinance has become a practical necessity. For keeping track of names new and old, he credits Gilbert Tauber, the retired city planner who launched *Oldstreets.com* (<http://www.oldstreets.com/>), invaluable for its blend of history and geography.

More importantly, Jelly-Schapiro uses these two chapters to call attention to the politico-cultural foundation for New York's toponyms. Place names both formal and informal reveal the city's identity and intentions, as he demonstrates in a book *Kirkus Reviews* calls "an entertaining education in the ways of a city that never stops transforming." In the twenty-first century, New York continues to rename itself with and for its inhabitants, as it welcomes wave after wave of new citizens; today visitors can whet their appetite not only in Little Italy and Chinatown but in Little Brazil in Manhattan, Little Haiti in Flatbush, and Tibet Place in Queens. Worldwide, naming and renaming, whether ridding maps of a city called *Stalingrad* or removing statues to Confederates, are vital acts, says Jelly-Schapiro. As he asserts in his podcast, "we are living through a really vital reckoning with history" that challenges the world to ask "what histories are visible and which ones are made invisible" (Holst); societies must add new monuments (and new toponyms) to new heroes.

Not surprisingly, the city itself, in its local media, has hailed *Names of New York*. Even before the book's April 13, 2021, release, Holst hosted Jelly-Schapiro for his podcast on March 1, and the *New York Review of Books* carried a short adaptation, culled largely from the concluding chapter, on March 24 (Jelly-Schapiro). Weeks later, post-publication, Jelly-Schapiro was interviewed by Anna Lucente Sterling for NY1 on May 21, 2021, and David Askt, reviewing for the *Wall Street Journal*, pronounced *Names of New York* "a vivid toponymic history of an ever-changing metropolis."

At the same time, Askt admits that he finds the content sometimes "mind-numbing" in its multiplicity. Jelly-Schapiro's approach is more of a recursive meander than a disquisition. Detours, both geographic and metaphoric, are frequent. From commentary on the lost meanings of New York names, such as the uncertain origin of *Jamaica Bay*,

he directs readers to the Wyoming Valley in Pennsylvania and the western state, both attributed to the Lenape word for “flat place” (36). From the mouth of the Hudson River he diverts to cities such as Syracuse, Ithaca, and Troy with Greek names in upstate New York (37). Nor are all detours actually toponymic. He departs from place names entirely to decry the decline of legendary diners, recount a 2016 tribute to carrier pigeons outfitted with LED lights, alert readers to the going rate for fiberglass boat rentals on City Island, and hail the Billion Oyster Project with its goal of reviving the endangered oyster population.

Given all that this free-wheeling book encompasses, its style marks it for a popular rather than an academic audience. While references to outside sources are plentiful, the volume contains no formal citations, not even when direct quotations are involved, and no bibliography. More surprisingly, it includes no maps, although it offers a colorful pen-and-ink drawing of the cityscape, by artist Richard Mummell in 1911, on the front cover. For Jelly-Schapiro, creative license inspires wide-ranging exploration that follows different pathways than he might pursue in a classroom. His choices allow him to crowd the book with stories, as he takes narrative liberties not unlike the cartographic liberties in the inventive *Nonstop Metropolis: A New York City Atlas* (2016), co-authored with Rebecca Solnit, who invokes his assertion that “every map is a story, and by implication every story contains a map” (11).

With this style, he highlights the central connections between names and culture. He quotes novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen to claim “we change these United States of America one name at a time” (215). In the book’s closing pages, he cites geographer J. B. Jackson, who acknowledges, “Landscape is history made visible” (227). Jelly-Schapiro then concludes, “If landscape is history made visible, the names we call its places are the words we use to forge maps of meaning in the city” (228).

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