

Toponymy & Environmental Identity

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Abstract

This article is the result of a study undertaken to compare indigenous toponyms in southern Chile (where I visited the UNESCO Cape Horn Biosphere Reserve with the Sub-Antarctic Biocultural Conservation Program) to toponyms in Texas (where I completed my dissertation research). Toponyms offer a means of understanding the relationship between people and the environments they inhabit. Toponymy as an expression of a cultural relationship to the environment has received little attention in the environmental philosophy literature, and it is the purpose of this article to help fill that void.¹ Due to the threats facing linguistic and cultural diversity, this paper also addresses the value of such diversity and offers some arguments for its preservation.

A study of toponymy can showcase the different sorts of environmental identities that are possible. Sharing the same root, *topos*, some toponyms offer topographical descriptors of the place where one finds oneself, calling attention to specific features of the landscape. For example, the city of Sapporo, Japan, derives its name from the Ainu language and can be translated as “river lined with large reed bed,” or “large dried-up river” (Sapporo 2013). Some toponyms, however, tell us about the culture of the people who inhabit a place and where they came from while telling us nothing of the surrounding environment. For example, take the case of New York, whose name references historical connections to the English Duke of York. Toponyms can also serve a practical navigation

¹ David Abram engages language in his work and makes his case that the development of the alphabet, and alphabetic writing more precisely, have contributed towards the rupture of humans from nature. In his text at times he engages authors like Keith Basso (1996, 154-163), who have shown how American Indian toponyms are often rich descriptors of the natural environment, however, aside from a few references to naming Abram largely focuses on the function of the written word more generally.

function, while otherwise being relatively shallow in terms of conveying any other meaning, as in the case of alphabetic and numeric numbering common as a means of providing easy navigation around many cities.

Toponyms of the sort I am interested in for the purposes of this article encapsulate communal attitudes towards the natural environment; or, if not communal, a reflection of the attitudes of those in power. I argue that many non-Western indigenous toponyms are an outgrowth of a collaborative environmental identity whereby the inhabitants of an area are deeply informed in their personal identities by their natural surroundings. That is, personal and communal identities are a reflection and an extension of the surrounding environment. This, I contest, is not always the case with Western toponyms, which frequently indicate a rupture from the surrounding environment and a cultural imposition onto the environment that is not an extension from the surrounding environment.

A comparison of Western and non-Western toponyms can be informative and reveal the benefits of collaborative environmental identities for both the inhabitants and the environments of a given area. Attentiveness to toponyms is one aspect to focus on in the construction of more sustainable environmental identities for those of us in the West. That is, by examining how others use the power of language and naming to connect their identities to the surrounding environments, we may strive to create meaningful and place-specific toponyms for ourselves that can connect us in meaningful ways to the environments we inhabit. An outgrowth of this research has been a concern for linguistic and cultural diversity. The second part of this paper will discuss the threats to linguistic

and cultural diversity and present different arguments for the importance of preserving these forms of diversity.

Why Toponyms?

The question that motivated my study of toponyms was a question that Paul Shepard asked in an essay entitled “Itinerant Thoughts on Place:” What is the difference between discovering and finding place? Shepard claims that in the United States especially, “one finds place rather than discovers place...quality is not given, it is made” (1999, 185). I interpret him to mean “finds” in the sense that we use the word *found* as an act of creation—as in Denton was “founded” in 1857. Used in this way, we mean to say that something was established, that it was created anew. To discover, for Shepard, retains an element of wonder, surprise, and chance; there is a sense of encountering something already existing that does not originate from oneself. To discover place, then, is to be impressed by the quality of place in its given state, as opposed to creating and *finding* place in the sense of imposing one’s own image upon a landscape.

There is something problematic about Shepard’s use of the word discovery however, because phrases such as the “discovery of the new world” are commonplace in the average American vocabulary; when Americans are told as children that Columbus discovered the new world, we are indeed told that he chanced upon this new land. However, we all later learn that this discovery story ignores the presence of the indigenous inhabitants of the lands and paved the way for colonial conquests laying claim to that which had been “discovered.” Using the sense of discovery as Shepard intends is more collaborative in that it is responsive to what is given, rather than an establishment upon a

perceived void. The latter has been more typical of the early exploration of America, whereby colonists sharing a mindset reflected in the philosophy of John Locke, perceive the landscape as a kind of nothingness—a waste of land waiting to be improved.² The same difference can be seen today in the way two different people can respond to the same tract of land. One person may respond positively to the land in its given state and wish it to continue in its given state. Another person may lament the plot of land in its given undeveloped state and see it as a waste of space until such time as someone with the means to do so could “improve” or develop that land for use as a super market, etc.

These varying types of relationships to environments are expressed via toponyms. The purpose of this article is to explore some of these different relationships through toponyms. I argue that one of the effects of colonization has been an attack on local toponyms in favor of imported ones.

The reason it is worth focusing on something like toponyms is to counter the largely technological focus of much of the discussions about contemporary environmental issues. Environmental issues are often conceived of as scientific/technological problems in need of scientific/technological solutions. Environmental philosophers contend that at the root of these problems are actually philosophical values and ideas. Technologies are not value free, and so even a discussion of environmental technologies requires discussion of the values underlying not only those technologies, but also our ideas about the environment and how we interact with it. Attentiveness to small things like toponyms is one way that we can begin to explore our attitudes towards the environment and our relationship with it. With

² For a good discussion of the influence of John Locke’s philosophy on early American land-use attitudes, see Gene Hargrove’s *Foundations of Environmental Ethics*, particularly chapter 2.

this understanding we can begin to search for ways to change our relationship and our attitudes if necessary.

Examination of Toponyms

There are at least three categories of toponyms: those that make historical/cultural references, those that make natural references, and those that make no meaningful references. I first provide some examples of the first two, as I think these are the more common types of toponyms found in the US; however the third has become increasingly common in areas with new development.

Let's begin with the example of Denton, Texas. This area was historically inhabited by the Wichita and Caddo American Indian tribes. Finding an original name for this city or this area is difficult because most available histories begin with the *founding* of Denton, which traces its origins back to 1857.

Returning to this distinction introduced by Shepard between *discovering* place and *finding* place; this act of finding or *establishing* place often violently displaces a previously existing place. To say that the city of Denton was established in 1857 can give the impression that nothing existed prior to that time; unfortunately this is rarely the case. In the case of Denton, as already mentioned, this area was Wichita and Caddo territory; John B. Denton was—in addition to being a prominent Methodist preacher and lawyer—a Texas Militia Captain and American Indian fighter. He died in the battle with the American Indian tribes of the region and the city was named in his honor.

There was a history and a place prior to Denton and it is important to realize that the establishment of Denton was simultaneously the displacement of this previously existing

place. That is, Denton was established *against* the indigenous place. The toponymy of newly established places often take their names from prominent figures involved in the act of settlement, or from places or people associated with the locations these settlers just left. Other prominent Texas cities and counties share this naming feature.

Fort Worth was named for Major William Jenkins Worth, who was a prominent soldier in the period of the Mexican-American War. Fort Worth is situated in Tarrant County, which is named for General Edward H. Tarrant, who similarly to Denton was an Indian fighter attempting to clear the area of Comanche and Kiowa settlements. Houston was of course named after the General Sam Houston, one time President of the Republic of Texas, who famously commanded the Texas Army to victory against the Mexican forces under Santa Anna. Austin, the state capital, was named for Stephen Fuller Austin, who, as a lieutenant colonel of the militia planned and sometimes led campaigns against local American Indian tribes earned the name the “Father of Texas.” Finally, Austin is the county seat of Travis County, named after William Barrett Travis—commander at the battle of the Alamo.

For the most part then, the most prominent toponyms in Texas all refer to male military heroes who were significant in the establishment of what eventually became the state of Texas. These toponyms, rather than connecting us to the Texas landscape and its human and nonhuman inhabitants, connect us to a history of military conquest. In this respect then, they are more connected with Shepard’s understanding of finding place, wherein those with the power to name overlook the naturally given and impose their own image upon the place. This fails to represent any element of collaboration with or

attunement to the naturally given; rather, it celebrates the overcoming of the naturally given.

To be fair, this is a somewhat selective listing of Texas toponyms, even though they are the most well-known Texas toponyms. There are Texas toponyms that retain a connection to the indigenous place, most notably the name Texas itself. It is speculated that name Texas comes from the Spanish—Tejas—which itself was adapted from the Caddo language word for friends, or allies—taysha.

While these toponyms may be retained, they do not perform the same function as indigenous toponyms. That is, they no longer maintain the same reference or function in the same manner for the people using those names. A more common tendency than retaining these original toponyms that cease to have meaning for the colonizers is to displace the indigenous place and import names that are disconnected from the local place.

Arguably the worst form of external imposition onto a given environment is the use of alphabetic or numeric names. New York City is a great example of alphabetic and numeric toponyms with its “alphabet city” in the Lower East Side of Manhattan and the expansive numeric grid starting from 14th street, going on into the hundreds and two hundreds all the way up to the Bronx, intersected by the long avenues, also numbered, and stretching from the East River to the Hudson. This mathematical grid makes navigating the city incredibly convenient, but is imposed abstractly upon the natural environment and tells us nothing of nothing of the environmental and cultural landscape³.

³ This has been made up for to some extent however by the common practice of affixing supplementary street signs underneath or above the regular alphabetic or numeric signs. These secondary signs often do tell passersby something of the history or culture of the area. This is the case, for example where signs

There is something in this reminiscent of Edmund Husserl's critique of the mathematicization of the world that he traces back to Galileo in *The Crisis of the European Sciences* (1970)—that is, we abstract from the world to create pure ideal forms and then bring them back to bear on the natural world, which may not always conform to this abstract mathematicization. This numeric grid makes navigating the city easy, but does not tell us anything about the landscape or region of New York; it rather imposes a human desire for order, convenience, and simplicity upon the land. This is arguably the worst sort of rejection of the agency of the given environment.

Perhaps even stranger than this alphanumeric system of naming is the practice of thematic or remote naming. Here, rather than the convenience of alphanumeric grids, entire neighborhoods are occasionally named, again without connection to the indigenous place, but according to the whim of a developer. This is especially noticeable in the new housing developments around the area where I lived in Denton, TX.

Before moving to Texas, I had never really witnessed the modern, suburban subdivision style housing developments so common in Texas and other areas before, where developers raze a large plot of land and in short order build similar style houses and put them up for sale. When I first moved to Denton, I was generously housed temporarily by a woman who lived in one of these thematically named subdivisions. Her house was located on Andalusian Drive. At the time I thought this was a reference to the area of southern Spain, which appeared to be a randomly chosen name with no connection to Denton, Texas.

underneath the "Ave C" sign read "Loisaida Ave." Loisaida provides testament to the Latino inhabitants of the area who referred to the "Lower East Side" area as "Loisaida" (Roberts 2012). Although not generally used, the 1945 designation of 6th avenue as the "Avenue of the Americas" also provides an interesting historical story of the avenue (Barry 2005).

I later realized it referred to the breed of horse, and the rest of the community was likewise equestrian themed; there were names like Bareback Lane, Saddleback Drive, English Saddle Lane, and Paddock Way. These were mixed in with other breed names such as Lippizan Drive, Clydesdale Drive, and Rocky Mountain Lane. Among these were names only tangentially related to equestrian culture such as Countess Lane, Butler Drive, and Spanish Lane.

This form of toponymy reflects back to the inhabitants something of their cultural and intellectual inheritance, but denies or at least obscures any natural referent; it tells us little to nothing about the surrounding nonhuman environment. In this sense, it may be even less desirable than the colonizing toponymy with its historical associations. At least the latter category of toponyms keeps alive some sense of the history of the place, for better or for worse.

Contrasting Indigenous and Colonial Toponymies

Indigenous names frequently are reflective of the local environment and serve as reminders, descriptions of, and connections to what is indigenously present. If it is true that the type of naming present in indigenous populations can help maintain and keep alive a connection to the natural environment, this might be the type of environmental identity-forming method that we can learn from indigenous cultures in constructing our own identities. For obviously, it would not make sense for us in Denton to name our towns or parks after aboriginal Australian places, flora, or fauna; so we should not appropriate indigenous names, but we can adopt that approach to toponymy and apply it locally. First let's turn to some examples of indigenous toponymy.

On a visit to the Cape Horn region of Chile, I stayed for a time in Puerto Williams, which is billed as the southernmost city in the world. Puerto Williams serves as an interesting case for examining toponyms. The city has been named Puerto Williams since the 1950's after Captain John Williams (or Juan Guillelmos) who was influential in maintaining Chilean sovereignty. Prior to taking this name, the city was given the name Puerto Luisa by an Anglican missionary in honor of his daughter. Ricardo Rozzi of the Chile Sub-Antarctic Biocultural Conservation Program pointed out that these names ignore the prior history as well as the prior and current inhabitants (humans as well as local flora and fauna). The colonizing trend has been to displace the local in favor of the spatially and culturally removed toponyms.

The prior inhabitants of this area were the Yahgans, who often named places after bird or plant species that could be found in the areas they inhabited. The original name for this area perhaps was forgotten, but due to this known naming feature, and the fact that there is a noticeable abundance of wild currant in the port vicinity, it was suggested to two of the last remaining speakers of the language at the time whether this area might once have been called Upushwaia—upush the name for the wild currant shrubs, and waia meaning bay. Rozzi reported that Ursula and Christiana Calderon, the two speakers in the discussion, agreed this might have been true, and the Yahgan community has since adopted the name. This case is interesting because we have a kind of reversal, a recapturing of the original way of relating to and inhabiting an area. This is not the universally adapted name, and the official name of the city remains Puerto Williams, but it is an interesting way of keeping the upush alive in the minds of those who hear the name, and perhaps can serve to

keep the species before the minds of the residents in a way that a name like Puerto Williams cannot.

Close to where I lived in Texas, there is a wonderful example of this in the town of Flower Mound. I have several friends who live in the town of Flower Mound, and it has been my experience that this name has generated more conversation than any other city name in the area. The fact that this name generates questions and conversations about its origins is further demonstrated by the following passage from local *D Magazine*:

The first thing everyone wants to know about Flower Mound is the origin of its unusual name. "The Mound" really does exist, accompanied by much legend and lore, [sic] The most widely accepted explanation for the unusual 12 1/2-acre formation rising 50 feet above a prairie near an [sic] of the town's major intersections is that it was a sacred ceremonial ground of Wichita Indians in the early 1800s. The Mound is now a preserved historical site. (Michalski 1995)

The name "Flower Mound" does, as *D Magazine* states, come from an actual flower mound that exists in the town, which according to the town's website "rises 650 feet above sea level, and it stands 50 feet above the surrounding countryside" (Town of Flower Mound 2013). The town, however, makes no reference to Wichita Indians in their account of the name's origins; it simply states that there are many contradictory stories about the origins of the mound before proceeding to outline the "unchallenged facts" about the mound (which the authors admit are few). Referencing the Texas historian A.C. Greene, the site contests the "mound" received its name in the 1840's because of the abundance of wild flowers present on the mound; over 175 different species exist there according to a non-profit organization devoted to the mound and its preservation and to ecological and scientific outreach, called the Mound Foundation.

My interest is not so much in the accurate origins of the name, but in how the name functions for citizens of the town and surrounding areas. The name itself generates discussion of this mound, which is located beside a supermarket and other residential and retail developments—a piece of land that might otherwise go unnoticed as one drives through the town. The name itself calls attention to the mound and simultaneously to the native wildflowers that grow there. As a result, some interest has been made in this little spot that might otherwise have been leveled for more development, and it has been protected and serves as a site for environmental education and outreach.

I like this example of Flower Mound, because it functions in a similar way to the name Upushwaia in Cape Horn, but is perhaps more accessible on account of its geographical and cultural proximity. Furthermore, whereas Upushwaia sounds foreign and exotic, Flower Mound is actually quite mundane; as a result, it perhaps illustrates the point even better as to how toponyms can engender positive relationships and connections to the local environment.

If Flower Mound can focus attention on the mound of native wild flowers and assist in garnering attention on native wild flowers, I think this is beneficial for both the local environment and its inhabitants. Rozzi said of the name Upushwaia that such names are expressions of a “profound sense of living together with the plants and features of the landscape” (Rozzi et al 2008, 330). Flower Mound too engenders a sense of cohabitation with the flower mound itself. If the mound were razed to provide space for a new strip mall or a new supermarket, something important would be lost from the Town of Flower Mound. The name, rather than being a source of pride and a sign of cohabitation could

become a sore spot in the town's psyche by pointing to what was once there, and what is now lost.

I certainly don't want to overstate the power of toponyms. Surely many residents of Flower Mound have little to no interest in native wild flowers and would feel no psychic pain if the mound were razed to make way for a new development site and the toponym lost its reference. However, that does not mean that toponyms cannot be useful and powerful points of connection to the landscapes. Calling this town Flower Mound may well serve to inspire some of the citizens to interact with and care for this place that might otherwise go unnoticed. It can also serve as an opportunity for environmental education activities aimed at promoting a collaborative environmental identity.

Comparing non-western indigenous toponyms with American toponyms reveals a greater frequency of environmental referents present among the indigenous toponyms than American ones. I would go further to say these indigenous toponyms frequently indicate a closer relationship with and knowledge of the surrounding environment than is present in mainstream American communities. Any lessons to be learned from conducting such a study depend upon the presence of the indigenous toponyms as a source of comparison. In the course of my research I was alarmed at how frequently these toponyms vanish and are replaced with modern and often colonial toponyms. I would like to therefore devote the next part of this article to a brief treatment of the value of linguistic and cultural diversity and present some arguments in support of preservation of linguistic and cultural diversity.

Linguistic and Cultural Diversity

As mentioned earlier in the article, environmental problems are often framed as scientific/technological problems, as opposed to cultural problems. While greater attention has been given to the threats to biodiversity, the quality of our air, water, and food in the United States, less attention has been given to the similar dangers to linguistic or cultural diversity. I would like to devote some time here to elucidating why it is important to be concerned about linguistic and cultural loss and why we ought to be more proactive in promoting linguistic and cultural conservation.

There are two main reasons why we ought to be concerned about linguistic and cultural identity. The first has to do with the fact that languages and cultures are embedded with environmental knowledge. Different cultures have different ways of interacting with and inhabiting the natural world. Some of these ways are more sustainable than others. If we wish to learn more about how to inhabit our environments, we need these others with whom we may come into dialogue. Just as biological diversity can provide greater resilience in the face of environmental challenges and disruption, so too can cultural and linguistic diversity provide similar resilience. Focusing on the value of linguistic and cultural diversity for the purposes of resilience alone, however, can sound overly instrumental. The second reason has more to do with the people of these languages and cultures. We also ought to be concerned about linguistic and cultural diversity because in many cases indigenous communities desire to keep alive their customs and language, but find this a difficult task in the face of various pressures to assimilate to mainstream cultures and languages. We need to do more to support those who want to preserve their culture, language, and ways of life.

Regarding the importance of cultural and linguistic diversity, Michael Krauss opened up the eyes of many with his alarming forecast that, “at the rate things are going—the coming century will see either the death or the doom of 90% of mankind’s languages” (Krauss 1992, 7). In a special report in 2007 titled “Language and Linguistics,” the National Science Foundation estimated the impending loss at 50% (National Science Foundation 2007). Even this more conservative estimate is shockingly high. It is worth noting that this is twice the estimated loss of biological diversity as estimated by prominent scientists such as E.O. Wilson.

In a radio interview David Lightfoot, an assistant director at the NSF, said that experts estimate that on average, one language is lost every two weeks. The NSF has responded to this crisis by partnering with the National Endowment of the Humanities in creating the Documenting Endangered Languages (DEL)⁴ program to fund research activities engaged in preserving endangered languages. This crisis however, and why it is important to protect linguistic diversity can be approached from a number of different ways. Below are three reasons taken from their special report why the NSF views the issue to be important:

- The enormous variety of these languages represents a vast, largely unmapped terrain on which linguists, cognitive scientists and philosophers can chart the full capabilities—and limits—of the human mind.
- Each endangered language embodies unique local knowledge of the cultures and natural systems in the region in which it is spoken.
- These languages are among our few sources of evidence for understanding human history. (National Science Foundation 2007)

⁴ http://www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm_summ.jsp?pims_id=12816

What I am most interested in for this chapter is the second point. Each language and culture represents a unique perspective on living in and with the natural world. As we increasingly homogenize the planet on biological, cultural, and linguistic levels we are losing these different perspectives. These different perspectives are important because they can help us in the West in the creation of more sustainable environmental identities by presenting alternative modes in inhabiting and interacting with the natural environment.

Protecting Linguistic and Cultural Diversity

Luis Mizon (1997), who analyzed the colonial mode of appropriating the indigenous places around Cape Horn, Chile, quoted the woman said to be the last of the Wollaston islanders who said:

I am the last survivor of the Wollaston islanders. There used to be five Yahgan tribes, each from a different place but all speaking the same language. Before I could walk, I had been as far as Cape Horn, strapped to my mother's back. Everybody called me Rosa, because that was how I was christened by the English missionaries, but my real name is Lakutia the kipa. Lakutia is the name of a bird and kipa means woman. All Yaghans are named after the place where they were born, and my mother gave birth to me near Lakutia Bay. That's how it is done among our people: we are given the name of the place that welcomes us to the world. (1997, 32-33)

Mizon argues that colonizers arrive at a place and treat it like a newborn baby waiting to be named, failing to acknowledge or respect that the place already has a name—naming, he claims, is an act of power, and is taken as a sign of possession. Prior to this colonial appropriation, Mizon claims that the names of this region of Chile “told the simple tale of people living in symbiosis with their environment,” whereas now they “speak of the clash of two peoples and two cultures fighting over the same territory. Indigenous names and European names of coastal features and mountains are associated with different

memories. Today these names intermingle in a landscape into which the indigenous population wanted to melt while the Europeans simply wanted to take possession of it” (1997, 33).

As we saw with traditional naming however, it need not be an act of possession but rather of acknowledgment or cohabitation. However, a far more common trend is the movement not towards nature but away from it. This can be witnessed in the name change to Puerto Williams and other local toponymies; for example the channel separating Yahgan territory from neighboring Ona land was traditionally called Onashaga (Ona channel), similarly a channel within Yahgan land was named Yahgashaga (Yahgan Channel), those channels have respectively been renamed Beagle Channel in honor of the famous vessel carrying Charles Darwin, and Murray Channel.⁵ When these names change the story that they tell changes as well. The former tell a story about the environment and its inhabitants, the latter tell the story about an expedition by an English scientist. I am not against celebrating the accomplishments made by Darwin; however I am concerned about what is lost when these indigenous toponyms are displaced.

By creating a new space, giving it a new name and new meaning, we can push away or at least overlook the endemic forms of life that had formed their own unique place. When we do so, we lose valuable forms of life, and in the process we exterminate or endanger cultures, we lose knowledge about that part of the world and how to inhabit it, this knowledge which can offer universalizable features of ways to be human in general and interacting with particular landscapes in particular.

⁵ This history of naming in Chile was reported to me in conversations with Ricardo Rozzi, director of the Sub-Antarctic Biocultural Conservation Program.

When we lose indigenous toponyms that typically refer to local features of the surrounding environment or conspicuous species present in that area, this represents a significant, but difficult to quantify, loss of knowledge. I also suggest that this loss of a toponym affects our relationship to what was named. For instance, if upushwaia is the bay of wild currants, but then becomes Puerto Williams, the latter toponym does not serve to keep the wild currant present to us in our discourse.

Knowledge, culture, language, and the environment are all inextricably linked together. Do violence to one, and it threatens to destroy the others. Colonizer's toponymies often lead to anthropocentric relations with nature, and push out and do violence to the people and what had been indigenously present biologically and culturally.

As mentioned earlier, the loss of language and culture could be simultaneously be seen as a purely social issue that should be given attention regardless of environmental concerns. However, we have also seen how intimately connected language, culture, knowledge and place are, as well as how colonizing trends lead to the homogenization of biological, cultural, and linguistic diversity. The implication of this loss of diversity is a loss of knowledge—knowledge that is the result of human co-evolution with the land. This is a loss of knowledge not only about specific places but often a loss of traditional ecological knowledge. For the same reasons that it is dangerous to deplete the earth's biodiversity, it is also dangerous to deplete its cultural and linguistic diversity. These endangered languages and cultures offer different perspectives on the world and how to inhabit it, we need to incorporate as many of these different perspectives as we can to effectively confront our global environmental problems. This spirit can often be found in

indigenous toponymies, and this is why the recovery of the name upushwaia is refreshing,

Rozzi and his collaborators claim,

By reincorporating a Yahgan name like Upushwaia, we recover the profound sense of living together with the plants and features of the landscape which are expressed by the indigenous language. By preserving an explicit reference to the bio-cultural diversity of the place, the Yahgan name helps to continue cultivating an indigenous environmental ethic that regards the place as belonging to the whole biotic community and not only to humans. (Rozzi et al 2008, 330)

Toponyms as a Reflection of Environmental Identity

Comparing toponyms from different areas shows that our toponyms reflect our relationship to the surrounding environment in both positive and negative ways. From the limited range of toponyms that I have examined, there appears to be trend among indigenous non-western communities of having toponyms that express a more healthy and collaborative relationship to the environment. In contrast, the Texas toponyms I looked at tended to displace what was given both biologically and culturally, and replace it with culturally and spatially remote toponyms. This can serve to disconnect those inhabitants from the surrounding environment, such that it is no longer present in their everyday discourse. When this happens, we may neglect the and overlook the environment with harmful consequences.

I am not advocating that we borrow foreign indigenous toponyms. For even if we wanted to, they would not serve the same function disconnected from their natural context. We can emulate that practice as described by Mizon and establish even mundane names like Flower Mound that fulfill the same function as a name like Upushwaia for us in our context. To come to this awareness, it is helpful to enter into dialogue with non-Western

communities. By doing so, we can learn different ways of expressing a connection to the natural world.

I do not want to be misunderstood as suggesting that we should eliminate anthropocentric toponyms in favor of non-anthropocentric ones. There would be a certain irony to that given that I express concern about language loss; eliminating historical toponyms would likely trouble historically minded individuals who would be concerned about the history being lost. However, I would like to see a recovery, or recreation of some toponyms with environmental referents, such that we can restore a connection with and knowledge of our surrounding environments. In and of themselves, these sorts of toponyms will not resolve our environmental problems. They are just one small way that we can foster a greater awareness of our environments in our everyday discourse. However it is by focusing on these small, but significant reflections of our relationship to the environment that we may eventually cultivate a healthier and more sustainable relationship.

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