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**Pushed Off the Map:
Toponymy and the politics of place in New York City**

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Abstract:

This article examines conflicts over neighborhood renaming and the politics of place. Toponymy, or the practice of place naming, is central to the constitution of place, and neighborhood renaming is a pervasive urban strategy. But despite its prevalence, the role of neighborhood toponymic conflict in processes of urban restructuring has not been given sustained engagement from urban scholars. This article uses archival and ethnographic data from an area in Brooklyn, New York to argue that contemporary neighborhood renaming facilitates uneven local development. Real estate developers and residents of expensive private housing use toponymy to legitimize their privileged positions, while public housing residents experience the same toponymic change as a form of symbolic displacement. Conflicts surrounding neighborhood renaming should therefore be seen as a symbolic dimension to struggles over resources, property, identity, and belonging in urban space.

Keywords: neighborhood; toponymy; gentrification; displacement; public housing

Introduction

Urban regions today are undergoing extensive spatial and social restructuring. This process proceeds, in part, through the creation of new neighborhood spaces, new strategies for local real estate development, and new ways of identifying and knowing the city. This article explores how these changes play out in conflicts over toponymy, the practice of place naming, looking specifically at the role of toponymy at the neighborhood scale. Neighborhood renaming is a common feature of contemporary urban development. Stigmatized place names are being erased as part of the destruction of unprofitable cityscapes. Areas that were once vilified are being rebranded. Prestige names are being created to legitimize and naturalize

displacement, gentrification, privatization, and recommodification. Renaming the city is a major strategy for remaking the city, which is why toponymic reinscription is so prevalent, and so contested.

The connection between neighborhood naming and the politics of place is exemplified by recent attempts at legal regulation. In 2011, lawmakers in the New York State Assembly proposed the Neighborhood Integrity Act in response to new coinages promoted by the real estate industry such as ProCro, BoCoCa, Rambo, Clinton, and the Piano District. The bill sought to establish that “no person or entity shall rename or re-designate a traditionally recognized neighborhood within a city with a population of one million or more” (Neighborhood Integrity Act 2011). Defining “traditionally recognized neighborhoods or neighborhood boundaries” as “those officially recognized by at least one of the Community Boards,” the bill would have made the marketing of real estate developments using place names that are not “traditionally recognized” a punishable offense. Ultimately, the Neighborhood Integrity Act did not become law. But it did highlight the contested nature of neighborhood naming in New York City. And toponymic conflict is not limited to American cities. Neighborhoods are being renamed and rebranded anywhere that they are being redeveloped. As gentrification has become a global urban strategy (Lees, Shin and López-Morales 2015; Smith 2002), so too has neighborhood renaming.

Neighborhood renaming, I argue, provides a window onto processes of redevelopment, displacement, and resistance. But despite its prevalence, the role of toponymic conflict in urban restructuring has not been given sustained engagement from urban scholars. The growing body of work in critical toponymy studies (see Rose-Redwood, Alderman, and Azaryahu 2010) has not received sufficient attention. And recent analyses of the role of place naming within neoliberal urbanization (eg Light and Young, 2015) have not focused on neighborhood toponymic struggles specifically. However, understanding the contemporary politics of place requires understanding the politics of place naming, for a number of reasons. Toponymy touches on fundamental urban political questions. Neighborhoods are major sites for urban politics today (see, *inter alia*, Hyra 2015; Madden 2014; Hankins and Martin 2012; Newman and Ashton 2005; Martin 2003). Place names can be used to signify who and what belongs and who and what does not. Place names are part of drawing social boundaries and constituting collective political subjects (Myers 1996). Through naming, city dwellers, the real estate industry, and various state institutions seek to format urban space in accordance with their particular interests and projects, to legitimize some narratives about an area’s past and future, and to delegitimize competing visions.

In short, what Bourdieu (1985: 731) calls “the power to nominate” is one of the central ways in which place is formed and contested. This paper applies this perspective to conflicts over neighborhood redevelopment using an ethnographic and historical case study of an area near downtown Brooklyn, New York City. Neighborhood renaming is a strategy to facilitate and legitimize uneven development. Struggles over neighborhood names must therefore be seen as a symbolic dimension to struggles over resources, property, identity, and belonging in urban space.

Urbanization and critical toponymy

Historically, toponymy was a subfield of linguistics that was focused on the taxonomies and etymologies of place names (Rose-Redwood, Alderman and Azaryahu 2010: 455). But the emerging literature on critical toponymy examines place naming as a form of spatial politics (Giraut and Houssay-Holzschuch, 2016; Alderman and Inwood, 2013; Rose-Redwood, 2011; Rose-Redwood and Alderman, 2011). It is focused on “understanding place naming as a contested spatial practice rather than viewing place names as transparent signifiers that designate places as ‘objects’ or ‘artifacts’ within a predefined geographical space” (Rose-Redwood, Alderman and Azaryahu 2010: 455). This perspective has been elaborated through studies of streets, memorials, infrastructure, and other sites (Crețan and Matthews 2016; Duminy 2014; Adebani 2012; Light, Nicolae and Suditu 2002; Azaryahu 1996; Finlayson 1995; Ferguson 1988).

The critical toponymy perspective holds that place names are not superficial ornaments applied to pre-existing territories but rather central elements in the constitution of place itself. Place names have performative power to shape place (Rose-Redwood, 2008). On this point, a number of social theorists are in agreement. Michel de Certeau remarks that “every power is toponymical and initiates its order of places by naming them” (1984: 130). As with the creation of personal surnames, place names are examples of what James Scott sees as the “categories that we most take for granted and with which we now routinely apprehend the social world” (Scott 1998: 64). The point here is not to reduce space or place to text, but to highlight the role of nomination as an element in their production. This is not to claim that place names per se have some sort of magical spatial power on their own. Place names, as acoustic events or legible inscriptions, do not have autonomous agency. Rather, toponyms are tools for struggles between various groups and institutions, within the overall social and economic structures of the neoliberal capitalist city. Toponymy is powerful only because of the ways in which place is valorized, exploited, produced and reproduced in contemporary capitalist urbanization.

Not every nominative utterance carries the same power to shape the world. Urban social actors do not all have equal powers to shape the toponymic landscape, nor do they all pursue the same goals when they do so. For various agencies of the state, place names are used to create administrative boundaries, demonstrate political authority, define spatial problems, shape and legitimize political subjects, and articulate territorial policy agendas. Scott, Tehranian and Mathias argue, “To follow the progress of state-making is, among other things, to trace the elaboration and application of novel systems which name and classify places, roads, people, and, above all, property” (Scott, Tehranian and Mathias 2002: 4). What Pierre Bourdieu calls “official nomination” (Bourdieu 1985: 732) refers to the practices by which names are invested with the prestige and authority of the state, and hence legitimized and naturalized. Renaming can be a way to buy political loyalty (Karimi 2016), which is one reason why official renomination, as Göran Therborn notes, has frequently “been part of regime changes” (Therborn 2013: 78). Toponymy is a way for political projects to shape the very terms by which a landscape is comprehended.

“Urban place names have a capacity for bringing hegemonic ideologies into mundane existence” (Vuolteenhao and Ainiala 2009: 227). When naming—and hence delimiting, defining, categorizing, classifying, hierarchizing, and prioritizing—is adopted and codified by the state or some other institution possessing a “monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence” (Bourdieu 1985: 732), struggles over nomination become struggles over “the legitimate vision of the social world” (Bourdieu 1985: 731). Renaming can also be a straightforward way for the state to raise money in an era of austerity. Given budgetary strains, many municipal governments are looking towards corporate branding of the built environment as a short-term economic strategy (Light and Young 2015: 441-445).

Toponymic reinscription is not only a tool of state power. It is also central to contemporary forms of the commodification of the city. For real estate capital, toponymy is a tool for marketing and valorizing urban space. From individual buildings to sports stadia, streets, and landmarks, corporate sponsorship is transforming the urban semiotic landscape. “Place names can represent a form of symbolic capital, in that they are associated with prestige and distinction and are valued for this reason” (Light and Young 2015: 437). Many instances of neighborhood renaming are straightforward exercises in place branding, usually in order to promote gentrification (Keatinge and Martin 2016; Medway and Warnaby 2014; Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2005; Kasinitz 1988). Tourism is also a major sector where place names can be sources of profit (Light 2014). And in choosing how to identify and delimit places, corporate-owned digital mapping software both profits from and shapes broader understandings of toponymy (Caquard 2013).

At the same time, there are numerous forms of what might be called everyday toponymy, the practices by which the inhabitants of a place produce and reproduce place names through routine discourse and quotidian interaction. Naming “transforms an official discourse of history into a shared cultural experience that is embedded into practices of everyday life” (Rose-Redwood, Alderman and Azaryahu 2010: 459). This too needs to be seen as political. The literature on territorial stigmatization, which analyzes the symbolic defamation of working-class and poor urban spaces, demonstrates that everyday discourses about place can bolster displacement (Slater and Hannigan forthcoming; Kallin and Slater 2014; Sakizlioglu and Uitermark 2014; Hancock and Mooney 2013; Mitchelson, Alderman, and Popke 2007). Berg argues that even “*banal* and *uncontested* forms of naming help to hide sociospatial relations of dispossession” (Berg 2011: 14). In some cases, the relations of dispossession or appropriation may not be hidden. In addition to state institutions and private firms seeking to format and shape space, urban social movements and community groups also participate in neighborhood spatial projects (Madden 2015) in part by using and changing place names. A neighborhood name can be a rallying cry to be affirmed or an incursion to be resisted.

It should be clear, then, that toponymic reinscription and contestation are part and parcel of the urban process under capitalism. But the ways in which toponymic change specifically relates to the politics of neighborhood has not been fully explored. The following sections analyze neighborhood naming in New York City, using the case of an area near downtown Brooklyn located between the East River, the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and Brooklyn Heights.

Known for most of the twentieth century by various names including the Navy Yard District and Fulton Ferry, parts of this neighborhood have been known as Farragut Houses since the 1949 opening of a public housing development with that name. In the past two decades, the former warehouse zone across the street from Farragut has been turned into luxury housing and renamed Dumbo, while the area of row houses abutting the Navy Yard is now called Vinegar Hill. Over three years, as part of a larger project on urban change, I conducted fieldwork as well as thirty-seven open-ended interviews with residents, workers, community center attendees, housing activists, planners, and other participants in the area's public life.¹ I draw also on archival research conducted in the New York City Housing Authority collection at the La Guardia and Wagner Archives, the Brooklyn Collection of the Brooklyn Public Library, and other collections that include materials on neighborhood history. Data collection was carried out between 2007 and 2010, with follow-up research conducted through 2012. This was a period when conflicts in the area crystallized around the area's names, making it a useful case for understanding the stakes of toponymic struggles in the contemporary city.

Historicizing toponymic politics

Neighborhood naming in New York, as in other cities, has long been tied to social and political power. But different toponymic regimes characterize different eras of urban development. The very concept of the neighborhood as a distinct, identifiable social space “evolved only gradually from the growing complexity of the nineteenth-century city” (Scherzer 1992: 139). Prior to this, place identification often used numbered wards. But industrial urbanization in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries created an uneven landscape of stigma and prestige. Neighborhood naming reflected this, as can be seen in disparaging names including Hell's Kitchen, Hell's Hundred Acres, The Dead End, or the west side red-light district known to many as The Tenderloin, also referred to as Satan's Circus. Other areas—such as Millionaire's Row, the Silk Stocking District, or the affluent sections of Harlem known as Striver's Row and Sugar Hill—announced the presence of concentrated wealth. Neighborhood names linked to immigrant and minority groups—such as Chinatown, Kleindeutschland, Little Italy, Little Russia, or the various areas in Manhattan and Brooklyn known as Little Africa—at once both acknowledged local claims to belonging and also marked the harsh realities of ethno-racial segregation. Toponyms like San Juan Hill, a neighborhood named after a Spanish-American War battle, appear to have referenced the racist violence that occurred on local streets. In nineteenth- and early twentieth-century New York, neighborhood names and nominative discourses served to naturalize the structures of economic, ethnic, and racial inequality.

Even when a neighborhood name did not identify a particular community, place names still signified definite social locations within the urban hierarchy. In the late nineteenth century, the very name “The Bowery” carried such a strong stigma associated with deprivation and vice that there were numerous campaigns to change it. Other neighborhood names served to cement patterns of ethno-racial territorialization. “White Protestants in New York used to be known simply as *Americans*.... From the 1860s to the 1890s, Greenwich Village was known as the *American Ward*” (Allen 1993: 236). The meaning of a local name might change, but

it would continue to convey complex social knowledge about place and belonging in the urban order. The civil rights leader and writer James Weldon Johnson began his 1925 essay about the development of Harlem by noting, “In the history of New York, the significance of the name Harlem has changed from Dutch to Irish to Jewish to Negro” (Johnson 1925: 635). The particular connotation of a name might shift, but its function as a carrier of vernacular urban knowledge persisted. In the dense, dynamic spaces of the industrial city, neighborhood toponymy was one of the ways in which urban space was made to appear legible, legitimate, and natural—a symbolic tool for clarifying and standardizing ethnic, social, and racial identities and hierarchies that were in flux in a city of migrants, and a method for communicating knowledge about the social order to newcomers.

As the twentieth century progressed, the main driver of New York’s economy shifted towards corporate finance, insurance and real estate sector firms. In the midcentury heyday of the Keynesian managerial city, neighborhood growth took place at larger scales, with mass suburbanization paralleling inner-city disinvestment—both of which occurred in New York not only at the regional scale but also within the five boroughs themselves. At the same time, state-coordinated urbanization added a bureaucratic component to market-led development patterns, as functional segregation, ‘slum clearance,’ and largely automobile-centered infrastructure projects became major features of the urban process. Parts of Queens and Brooklyn were named by the real estate firms that developed them, such as Rego Park, named after the Real Good Construction Company, Co-op City, LeFrak City, or Starrett City. New residential spaces were named within a toponymic order oriented towards organizations, firms, and bureaucratic logics. State-led urban renewal projects like Manhattan’s Lincoln Center and Brooklyn’s Civic Center provided major place names. The New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) produced its own nominative geography. Some large public housing developments, such as Queensbridge Houses, constituted neighborhoods in their own right. Many smaller housing development names served similar functions within local geographies. Other housing projects developed by corporate and non-profit groups, like Stuyvesant Town, also came to be identified as neighborhoods in some usages. Neighborhood names in the middle of the twentieth century did not lose their role as tools for making sense of the uneven urban fabric. Rather, a bureaucratic overlay was added to their complex functionality.

New York neighborhood names have long expressed political identities. Parts of the Bronx in the 1930s were known as the Communist Quarter. In the late 1960s and 1970s, a new politics of neighborhood promoted other forms of toponymic identification, where new neighborhood names were invented as a form of political action. In a 1974 poem, Bimbo Rivas coined the Spanish-English amalgamation *Loisaida* and promoted it, along with Chino Garcia and other activists, as a poetic toponym-from-below—and alternative to the then-stigmatized name *Alphabet City*—for the contested northernmost area of the Lower East Side (see von Hassell 1998). Similarly, Southside Williamsburg in Brooklyn was sometimes known as *Los Sures*, also the name of a Puerto Rican housing activist group. Here, toponymy is a form of positive, politicized identification.

The 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of new toponymies of gentrification. Two particular patterns stand out. First, in what was increasingly referred to as “Brownstone Brooklyn,” a new geographical imaginary was being promoted oriented towards historical reconstruction, middle-class distinction, and the performance of authenticity. “Brownstoners” recuperated antiquated toponyms like Boerum Hill, Carroll Gardens, and Cobble Hill, and promoted them through newly formed neighborhood associations. “While modern developers unabashedly named their projects with the words *city*, *towers*, and *center* to emphasize their size, newness, and integration into a regional system, brownstone pioneers excavated the past to symbolically unearth lost community names buried under the modern cityscape” (Osman 2011: 198-199). These names were created specifically to replace stigmatized names like South Brooklyn or Gowanus. Second, current or former industrial districts were reimagined by real estate and the culture industries, yielding influential names loosely connected to local territorial landmarks, like SoHo (South of Houston Street, and also the name of a district in London) or Tribeca (Triangle Below Canal Street). Real estate developers and local media promoted a number of other, less frequently used imitations, like NoLiTa and NoHo. Here neighborhood naming is indistinguishable, both in appearance and function, from corporate branding. Through rezoning, urban design, and other state actions, these toponymies of gentrification became integrated into official planning knowledge, contributing to the reorientation of local spatial projects towards more elitist and profitable usages.

In third-wave gentrification (Hackworth and Smith 2001) in neoliberal New York, the creation of new neighborhood names or the reinscription and rebranding of old names with new meaning are central strategies in neighborhood development. As the city’s political economy underwent neoliberalization and real estate became increasingly aggressive about rent gap claiming, neighborhood renaming became common. So, too, did resistance to it, as seen in popular rejection of many new neighborhoods names and in proposals such as the Neighborhood Integrity Act. Place naming in New York is part of the production of place, and the mode of the former has changed in order to facilitate the transformations of the latter.

Knowing and naming the neighborhood

This process of neighborhood renaming and redevelopment can be seen in more detail in the case study area in downtown Brooklyn. This district contains the oldest part of the former City of Brooklyn, and had long been the site of industry connected to the waterfront and military uses associated with the Navy Yard. By the first decades of the twentieth century, some streets were known as Gairville, after the factories owned by Robert Gair, owner of a major company that manufactured cardboard boxes. Others, home to a large Irish immigrant community, were called Irishtown or, occasionally, Vinegar Hill. But the Navy Yard District, centered on Sands Street, was most famous for being Brooklyn’s red light district.

The Navy Yard District was imagined as a classic ‘slum’ and stigmatized in specific ways (see Steinbrink 2012; Arabindoo 2011). Some middle class observers and reformers referred to the areas as Hell’s Half Acre. It was most widely known, however, as The Jungle. The first NYCHA chairman, Langdon Post, noted that “we

plan to tackle very soon...the 'jungle' surrounding the Brooklyn Navy Yard... a particularly virulent source of delinquency, and the refuge of criminal characters" (*New York Times* 1934). It was seen as disorganized and dirty; a writer working for the Works Progress Administration described the Navy Yard District in 1939 as "a shapeless grotesque neighborhood, its grimy cobblestone thoroughfares filled with flophouses, crumbling tenements, and greasy restaurants" (Guild Committee for Federal Writers Publications 1992: 450). It was also held to be psychologically oppressive. The lawyer Ben LeRoy Stowell, a member of the Citizens Housing Council and the Navy Yard section of the Brooklyn Committee for Better Housing, remarked in a radio broadcast,

For over twenty-five years I have been familiar with the district. One thing I have noticed is the effect of the ugliness of the surroundings on the children and young people... How can you expect people who spend their days in ugly surroundings to appreciate beauty? When they see it they do not know what to make of it... It seems to be impossible for such a person to meet on equal footing people who live in normal surroundings (Stowell 1934: 1-2).

In language that at times drew on racist tropes, the area was cast as suspiciously foreign and cosmopolitan. Helen Hutton, a settlement house worker and member of the Downtown Brooklyn Community Council observed, "The Navy Yard Section has always, since early times, been one of the very colorful sections of Brooklyn where all nations, creeds and colors lived, worked, and played as neighbors" (Hutton ND). A 1934 article struck a similar tone, seeing the area as a place where "many of Brooklyn's poorest people huddle together.... Alien to an industrialized scheme, they stand out a stranger anomaly now than ever before. Color, charm, esoteric quaintness—the things one goes abroad to discover—are here, obscured by their very nearness" (Gruber 1934). Middle-class discourses of the neighborhood underscored its anachronistic otherworldliness, and toponymy was central to this process. By establishing the Navy Yard District as The Jungle, the neighborhood was equated with otherness, danger, and disorder.

The idea of the Navy Yard District as an exotic and vicious Jungle fundamentally represented the perspective of outsiders: reformers, city government officials, charities, and the middle-class public that lived in very different residential conditions. The neighborhood occupied a dominated position within the broader structures of privilege and poverty, but the ideological simplification implied by the idea of the "slum" did not capture actual social life in the area. Far from disorganized, the neighborhood was home to many communal organizations, churches, social movement organizations, community centers, and settlement houses. Like other parts of downtown Brooklyn, the neighborhood had in fact long been a stronghold of African-American activism and was home to numerous civil rights institutions. The offices of the Brooklyn Urban League were located near the Navy Yard on Fleet Place before that the organization's merger with the Harlem-based New York Urban League in 1944. Settlement houses in the area, including the Lincoln Settlement and the Hudson House, focused their work on Black youth. The stigmatizing discourses of place underpinned by the area's toponymy helped to hide these currents and served to bolster the outsiders' sense of the area as unredeemable. They also defined the area as a potential site for redevelopment by NYCHA and other city agencies.

The middle-class readers of *Cue Magazine* saw the “passing of Sands Street” as “a happy event”: “Most of the dingy saloons, so riotous yesterday, have been padlocked forever. The gamblers, thieves and drug peddlers have moved on; the harpies who once peopled the area have been replaced by young housewives with families.” In place of the stigmatized Jungle rose the fourteen-story towers of Farragut Houses, “ten modern, attractive buildings where people can now live graciously—surrounded by lawns and playgrounds instead of garbage dumps” (*Cue Magazine* 1952: 21). On September 8th, 1949, when NYCHA officially opened Farragut Houses, Mayor O’Dwyer praised public housing as “money in the bank of good citizenship” (NYCHA 1949). At first designated Navy Yard Houses (NYCHA 1945) or the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Houses (*New York Times*, 1946) the development was eventually named after Civil War hero David Glasgow Farragut, in order to cement the connection to the U. S. Navy without invoking the stigmatized district the development replaced. The buildings’ first occupants, some of whom to this day identify as the “first families” of Farragut, recall a public housing community that prided itself on its industrial worker identity and its community facilities. The development included a number of social groups and tenant organizations, as well as the Church of the Open Door, an interdenominational congregation led by Rev. Richard Siciliano that was the first church on the grounds of a NYCHA development. The Ft. Greene-Farragut Coordinating Committee, later the Navy Yard District Neighborhood Council, was organized in order to facilitate community life in Farragut and nearby Fort Greene Houses (later split administratively and renamed Ingersoll Houses and Whitman Houses).

The discourse that cast the Navy Yard District as a dangerous, exotic slum was at once a form of symbolic violence against its inhabitants and a tool in the elite-led campaign for its demolition. Following the area’s reconstruction, and as part of a broader transformation in Downtown Brooklyn, both The Jungle and the Navy Yard District dropped out of usage as toponyms. From the 1950s onward, the area was usually considered part of Fort Greene, or Downtown Brooklyn, and the area around the housing development was often simply known as Farragut.² The area was identified with industrial labor and public housing residents—until a new spatial project took root that put the area on a much different social and political trajectory.

The toponymy of inequality

Downtown Brooklyn’s post-Keynesian regime change was brought about by a transformation in the area’s social geography. Two local groups that first appeared to be in conflict—loft dwellers and real estate developers, chiefly Two Trees Management Company—remade the area as Dumbo, originally an acronym for Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass. The story of the concurrent deindustrialization and hyper-gentrification of this area can be found elsewhere (eg Hackworth 2007: 144-148; Madden 2012: 483-490). What is relevant here is the urban ideological work that is accomplished through toponymy and social knowledge about neighborhood.

Dumbo specifically represents the triumph of corporate-led redevelopment seeking to legitimize itself with an appeal to cultural prestige, whereas Vinegar Hill, in usage since the 1970s, is a revived, historicist neighborhood name akin to those created elsewhere in Brooklyn at the time. A succession of new names had been proposed and used to a greater or less extent for the area, including Fulton Ferry, Between-the-Bridges, Two Bridges (a name sometimes used for an area in Manhattan), Interbridge, Down Under, Old Brooklyn, and others. Two Trees had pursued an earlier redevelopment project named Fulton Landing that resembled so-called festival marketplaces like Manhattan's South Street Seaport or Harborplace in Baltimore, but this failed to garner municipal support. Ultimately, community groups, real estate, and the city government settled on Dumbo and Vinegar Hill.

The name Dumbo was at first a token of resistance by loft tenants against what they correctly saw as the impending large-scale redevelopment of the area. The theory was that the name was odd enough that development might be slowed. According to a neighborhood website:

After much sitting around and drinking beer, to a point where none of us could remember who had suggested what, we came up with two alternatives:

DUMBO: Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass

DANYA: District Around the Navy Yard Annex

The choice was presented to the community at a huge loft party and the results weren't even close. It was DUMBO by a landslide. Everyone agreed that it had just the right kind of Dadaist anti-marketing positioning to protect our turf from developers: who, after all, would spend a million dollars for a loft in a place called DUMBO? (Davis 2007)

B., a middle-class former loft tenant long active in local housing and development organizations, recalled in an interview, "There was a certain punk delight in going up against the machine this way. The name Dumbo was specifically picked to make it this albatross." B. moved into a loft in the area in the 1970s, and recalled the coexistence of industrial and residential uses. The name Dumbo, to B., epitomized this:

The reason [the name] Dumbo succeeded, was not because it was in the abstract a catchy phrase. There was a genuine community there. All of us insisted on calling it Dumbo, because it captured the spirit of the neighborhood. It stuck.... That community-sense made it stick. I always felt that had a lot to do with it.

W., another area resident and former loft tenant, also saw the name Dumbo as a counter-cultural gesture:

You know how [the name] Dumbo came about right? There were three or four core artists who were sitting around and were like, let's name this area. Because it was no man's land. It was a cool story. Exactly what they didn't want was to bring in more developers, but that didn't happen.... People are like, what the hell is Dumbo? People think it's a crazy name dreamed up by a developer.

The community to which the name Dumbo refers is affluent or wealthy and sees itself as culturally informed. As one Dumbo artist told me, "It's very important for the long-term health of the neighborhood that Dumbo remains synonymous with a

home for the arts.” This narrative—of Dumbo as the home of artists—is used by some to oppose gentrification, but precisely the same language is also used to justify gentrification. Although originally opposed to the name Dumbo, Two Trees and other developers quickly saw the value of such a name as a way to associate the neighborhood brand with art, culture, and the loft-dwelling narrative, and explicitly adopted it as its own, promoting art and providing subsidized space to galleries as a way to bolster this connection. David Walentas, who founded Two Trees and led the area’s gentrification, remarked in 1998, “It’s like SoHo was 25 years ago... We went from SoHo to NoHo to Dumbo” (Dunlap 1998). Two Trees firmly embraced the Dumbo name and was influential in establishing it as a brand—in part drawing prestige from its origins among loft dwellers identified with the artist identity and the loft-dwelling narrative (see Zukin 1989). Recent years have seen a succession of further development of the Dumbo brand, for example as a tourist-ready Photo District or as part of an initiative called the Brooklyn Tech Triangle. In zoning changes, office relocation decisions, the creation of a business improvement district, changes to maps published by agencies including the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, and other planning actions, the city government embraced the name Dumbo as part of its official toponymy, and sought to develop the area as an affluent enclave. The ideological function of Dumbo as a toponym is to legitimize these trajectories for the area—to underscore the strategy that privileges luxury housing and the culture industries and sees industrial displacement, local inequality, and the proliferation of spaces for elite consumption as signs of success.

Dumbo and Vinegar Hill are names created by and for specific residential typologies, which correspond to privileged class and social categories: loft tenants, luxury condominium residents, and brownstoners. These names signify forms of neighborhood that exclude working class and poor people, and specifically residents of Farragut Houses and other nearby public housing developments. Many people who live and work in Dumbo would agree with E., a manager of a Dumbo business active in the Dumbo Neighborhood Association. Asked in interview, “Do you think the Farragut Houses are part of this neighborhood?” E. replied, “Not really, no one’s really embraced them at all, for various reasons, crime, we don’t know them, they don’t know us, so there’s tension. It would be nice to do more outreach, get them involved in things.” Similarly, S., a white Dumbo gallerist speaking about Farragut residents who are largely people of color, remarked, “They add a bit of realism. They come down every now and then and mug people.” This is a prototypical example of territorial stigma. The symbolic boundaries of neighborhood are made to correspond with and accentuate racialized class divisions. Dumbo is defined precisely, by those who use the name, as a place without working class and poor residents, who are imagined as inhabitants of another place altogether. Toponymy here serves to naturalize the inequality between those who live in the area’s public housing and those who live in luxury private housing. The name Dumbo defines the neighborhood as a separate, affluent place. By creating a symbolic boundary between public housing and exclusive private housing, toponymy facilitates uneven local development and a racialized version of “social-tenurial polarization” (Hamnett 1984).

To residents of Farragut Houses, the connection between new place names and their symbolic erasure is obvious. Many residents clearly perceive the toponymy of

gentrification as a project to displace Brooklyn's working class and communities of color. A common reaction is from L., a working-class African-American housing activist who has lived in Farragut since it opened. Asked about her reactions to the names Dumbo and Vinegar Hill, she said: "We're being pushed off the map." Many Farragut residents identify Dumbo and Vinegar Hill as names invented specifically to exclude them. Janet McDonald, a lawyer, author and memoirist who grew up in Farragut Houses, published an article noting that some affluent residents nearby "call themselves Vinegar Hill and didn't want to be known as Farragut" (McDonald 2001). F. is a former area resident of Puerto Rican background who works at the Farragut Community Center and has a long personal history in local activism. He saw Dumbo as inherently exclusionary. For F., the Dumbo narrative relies on an alternative history of the neighborhood, one that puts white, Anglophone artists and professionals as the main actors, sidelining the area's Black and Latino/a working class and poor residents. "They [Dumbo artists] don't know the history. They don't know the 1980s, how people struggled.... There's a cognitive amnesia, an amnesia about the community, and a bit of racism." To identify the neighborhood this way is to engage in social boundary work:

If you call yourself something and don't include me, I'm not a part of your community. If you call yourself an artist and not me, I'm not a part of it. It's elitism. You're not calling me an artist. You're not calling on me because I'm a human being.... Then they want us to stand up with them, they want the community to join? How does that affect me? Someone speaks on behalf of my community? I don't know you. There's gonna be a party over there, a picnic for the kids. They don't come over here and put up flyers saying, 'bring your kids.' No one says, 'come and join us.' Though to be fair we don't ask them to come join us either!

Other Farragut residents also see the creation of the Dumbo name as "something that's being done to us." Talking about Dumbo while going door-to-door in Farragut to promote a local meeting, R., a community organizer remarked to me, "The artists want to preserve historic Dumbo? First of all, the name Dumbo is only a couple of years old. The artists don't want to call the neighborhood by what it really is: Farragut." L., an activist with the group Families United for Racial and Economic Equality, explained:

It's the old divide-and-conquer... What's Dumbo? There's no Dumbo. It used to be all Fort Greene, then people started cutting it up, splitting off Ingersoll and Whitman, making Dumbo, making Downtown, when it was all Fort Greene. They changed it because Fort Greene was getting too powerful.

For many Farragut residents, the name Dumbo is an attempt by wealthy outsiders to delegitimize, weaken, or erase their claims as the proper subjects of local urban policy and politics—and then to take their place. Z., who grew up in the area but now lives off-lease in Farragut, summarized this position when asked his reaction to the name Dumbo: "DUMBO is an elephant. You know what I'm saying? It's a damn elephant."

Indeed, for many public housing residents, toponymy, gentrification, and territorial stigmatization are all intertwined. A., a longtime Farragut resident from a Caribbean-American family who is active in the Church of the Open Door and other

community organizations, remarked, “Outsiders come in, they’re like, okay, you live here, where’s Dumbo? I’m like, right here. Vinegar Hill? I don’t know where the vinegar is, but here it is.... All this weird name stuff... it’s not just the name, it’s everything that’s behind it, it’s like, we’re not them. That bothers me, it bothers me.”

A. is acutely aware of how toponymy structures city dwellers’ symbolic geography:

If someone says, where do you live? I say I live in Farragut, if it was someone I thought was in the know, someone who knew the area, and you can tell who knows the area, I would tell them ‘Farragut,’ and a light would go off and they’d go ‘oh, over here.’ But for someone who wouldn’t be in the know, I’d say I live in the projects near Dumbo. And that always strikes me as odd, to have to attribute myself towards a new section. It’s like wait a minute, they’re actually doing that to us. I’ve even told some people, I live in Vinegar Hill... But I don’t think that people in Vinegar Hill want to associate and link up with Farragut people. Trust me, I understand what goes into those decisions and what goes into those groupings.

There is a broader everyday discourse of stigma within which talk about Farragut and Dumbo fits. Many Farragut residents see the specific language that outsiders casually use to describe them and their housing—especially the words “project” and “tenant”—as derogatory. X., a Farragut resident and activist, argued:

People be like, ‘this project is horrible,’ but it’s not horrible. It gives people the wrong idea. We don’t live in ‘projects.’ This ain’t no ‘public project.’ That experiment is over. These are ‘housing developments.’ People pay rent. People have a stake. This isn’t welfare housing.

Other Farragut residents echoed this sentiment. “There’s a lot of working people down here. They [Dumbo residents] think that everyone’s on P.A. [public assistance], but there’s a lot of working people in Farragut, Ingersoll and Whitman.” For many residents of Farragut Houses and other public housing developments nearby, the creation of new toponyms is part of a broader tendency towards social exclusion, symbolic displacement, and territorial stigma. A. argued that, “When we say Farragut and Dumbo, in my mind, they’re one. You know... it’s easy from people on both sides to say, this side’s mine, that over there belongs to other people—but I always subscribe to the notion that this is mine too.” New neighborhood names bother him and other public housing residents because they communicate that he does not belong.

Neighborhood names matter to residents in this part of Brooklyn because they experience them as indexes of particular political trajectories and neighborhood spatial projects. Toponyms are elements of broader narratives about place that signal who belongs and who does not. The name Dumbo serves to further the process whereby the neighborhood becomes more gentrified, more given to elite housing, tourism, and the culture industries. Despite much anxiety among residents, the demolition and redevelopment of Farragut Houses is not in any city plan. But for many Farragut residents, the creation of a new neighborhood based around an exclusionary identity and oriented towards the needs of others constitutes its own form of displacement. In this way, toponymic practices are both elements and reflections of socio-spatial struggles.

Conclusion

Neighborhood renaming in New York today is at once an instrument for the revalorization of space, a way to promote and legitimize various forms of redevelopment and displacement, and part of pervasive everyday discourses about stigma, prestige, and belonging. Neighborhood naming is thus clearly part of everyday urban politics, and always has been so. But the forms of neighborhood development within which toponymic reinscription occurs are specific to the era of urban neoliberalization. Contemporary urban development relies upon particular strategies for branding, selling, legitimizing, and characterizing neighborhoods. Renaming is a part of these strategies, a way to naturalize certain projects for neighborhood redevelopment that contribute to displacement, marginalization, and inequality.

This case illustrates the unequal power to nominate in cities today. The power to rename urban places is monopolized by privileged urbanites including real estate firms, planners, and middle-class, largely white neighborhood groups. Working-class and poor city dwellers resist, but official nomination usually relies on the place names promoted by dominant groups. For many working class and poor urbanites, this is experienced as a form of symbolic violence and as evidence that the municipal establishment is not concerned to protect their place within the urban order.

For urban scholars, local toponymic struggles highlight the importance of critical reflexivity regarding the epistemology and ontology of neighborhood itself and the politics of urban knowledge. Through naming and bordering, urbanists can end up reifying some conceptions of neighborhoods and erasing others. Researchers should therefore be careful not to assume particular names and boundaries when studying neighborhood life and neighborhood politics. Rather, they should inquire into how toponymy and discourses of place help to constitute neighborhood itself.

City life is inescapably patterned by struggles over space and place. The very process of inhabiting and knowing the city depends upon and legitimizes particular toponymic practices. But here too critical reflexivity is called for. Attempts to ban new neighborhood names, such as the Neighborhood Integrity Act, are probably not helpful, as they rely upon the ahistorical idea of an authentic toponymy and could just as likely be used to protect neighborhood inequality as to challenge it. But this case study shows that city dwellers do resist exclusionary toponyms, and perhaps can interrupt the renaming of the city to facilitate recommodification and displacement. An understanding of the ways in which everyday urban discourses, including naming practices, are connected to structures of power can potentially point the way towards a more critical understanding of the urban order itself.

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Notes

1. Interviewees were selected based upon their participation in various neighborhood-shaping groups. Some interviewees belonged to more than one local group or institution. In accordance with Institutional Review Board requirements, I have maintained the anonymity of all interviewees, identifying them by randomly selected initials.

2. The area was identified as such in some city planning documents and a number of city-issued maps into the 2000s. For example, the 2010 statement of community district needs represents “Farragut” as a neighborhood name, alongside neighborhoods like Brooklyn Heights, Fort Greene, etc. (Department of City Planning 2008: 51). By 2012 the same document represents “Farragut Houses” as an institution, akin to the Pratt Institute, and presents Dumbo and Vinegar Hill as neighborhoods (Department of City Planning 2011: 48).

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