

# Meta Incognita: Naming as Renaming in the Early Modern Exploration of the New World\*

Petruța NĂIDUȚ

University of Bucharest, Pitar Mos 7-13, Bucharest  
E-mail: petruta.oana.naidut@gmail.com

## Abstract

The article sets off to explore the act of naming in the context of the early modern discovery, explorations and colonisation of the New World, analysing the cultural significance of place naming against the backdrop of the travel reports produced by Christopher Columbus, Thomas Harriot and Captain John Smith in the attempt to reveal the changes undergone by the ideology of toponymy. The discussion draws on the notions of cultural translation, mimesis, invisibility and the political unconscious as defined by cultural historians such as Peter Burke, John Brian Harley and new historicists such as Stephen Greenblatt.

**Keywords:** *America, appropriation, cultural translation, epistemic assimilation, naming*

## Shame in the name

In the spring of 2003, the governor of Arizona tried to solve a toponymic debate in an act of political expediency that was not without consequences. Following a series of debates on the moniker Squaw Peak, governor Napolitano urged the state board dealing with geographic names to change it to Piestewa Peak in an attempt to solve complaints by the American Indian Movement and honour Lori Piestewa, who had served in the U. S. Army and died in the Iraq war, as the first Native American female to die in combat. The opportunity to honour her was, for governor Napolitano, the opportunity to end a long controversy concerning the use of the pejorative ‘squaw’ as a toponym. Unfortunately, the problem was only partly solved since there is “a federal rule against naming natural features after people dead less than five years” (Monmonier, 2007, 5). Consequently, the state board made a concession, namely, that five years would have to pass before the change be taken into consideration. What was, after all, the source of the controversy? Coming from less politically sensitive times, the toponym “squaw” had retained, according to the American Indian Movement, “the negative connotation of a prostitute or sex slave” (2007, 3). Despite the claims of experts that the term was “an otherwise neutral Eastern Algonquin word for young woman” (2), a word that seemed to have been passed down from seventeenth-century colonizers for whom it had the same neutral meaning, Native Americans insisted that it be removed. Perhaps it was not so much the use of the term as the white colonizers and later Americans’ treatment of the indigenous people that caused such protests.

---

\* Research for this article has been partially supported by UEFISCSU grant no. 871/2009[code 1980] for a research project titled *The Cultural Institution of Literature from Early to Late Modernity in British Culture*.

Another controversy arose after the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, when Lyndon B. Johnson insisted "on renaming not only the NASA Launch Operation Center at Cape Canaveral, Florida, but also the cape itself" (2007, 5). Florida residents protested. To rename it in honour of President Kennedy would entail to erase the historical heritage that came with a name which could be traced back to French artist Jacques LeMoyne's 1564 map and drawings of Florida. The name "derived from a Spanish term for reeds and rushes" (2007, 5) was the cultural sign of over four hundred years of history that could not be wiped out despite any noble intentions or the irresistible urge of renaming ensuing from the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

Such domestic little wars over geographic names do come with institutions and an ideology of their own. To assign a name is to assign an identity, to write a history and create a cultural context which will stay with a place for a long time, if not forever. However, to rename a site is a little more than that. Apart from the new cultural load, the practice involves an erasure, a silencing of past experiences and, at times, a violent appropriation of land, language and history. That may not be the case with the toponyms cited above, but it will certainly be a point of discussion in my exploration of early modern naming and renaming of America. As mentioned earlier on, the practice does come with a set of rules, regulations and institutions. All new monikers are recorded and charted by the U. S. Geological Survey only after changes have been made by the U. S. Board on Geographic Names. The maps are used not only by scientists, but by all common travellers. The regulation of naming and renaming practices in geography is further divided between the Foreign Names Committee, which has a prominent role in the transliteration and standardization of international toponyms, and the Domestic Names Committee. Commemorative names, feature names, incident names, manufactured names, folk etymology names are all subject to the same policies and procedures such as "a firm policy prohibiting the inclusion of a word in an official geographic name considered by the Board to be derogatory to any racial, ethnic, gender, or religious group" (2007, 11). There is a tendency to erase cartographic insults such as Squaw Peak and a ban on names containing "Jap" and "Nigger." Such provisions show that naming pertains primarily to politics, and only secondarily to geography. Toponymy emerges as a scientific pursuit which engages several institutions and, quite often, contending discourses. Or, to quote from Mark Monmonier:

Toponymy, which refers to the systematic study of the origin and history of toponyms, is part of onomastics, which studies all proper names. Toponymists have produced a substantial literature of place-name inventories focusing on a state, country, or region. Entries are organized alphabetically and typically include the place's location, by county or geographic coordinates, and a concise account of how and when it received its name. By contrast, applied toponymy is concerned largely with the standardization of geographic names (2007, 9).

It is precisely politics that has been the subject of debate regarding geographic names in the history of America. Within the scope of this debate fall not only recent events, but also what I would call much older historical occurrences such as the discovery, exploration and colonization of America. Although fifteenth- to seventeenth-century travellers often referred to this practice as *naming*, I wish to point out that it involved mainly *renaming*, an activity that geographers, historians and new historicists have analysed drawing on notions such as cultural translation, appropriation, the political unconscious. Early modern toponymy is far less systematic since it emerges in

the gap of cross-cultural communication for which there is no common linguistic or gestural code. The implications of this lack of shared signs can be measured against the body of literature produced in the disciplines of geography and history. My reading of terms such as geography and history is wider in scope and acknowledges an interdisciplinary approach to their object of study.

## The appropriation of Paradise

On 4 March 1493, in a letter addressed to the Spanish sovereigns, Columbus begins by recounting that:

To the first island which I found I gave the name San Salvador, in remembrance of the Divine Majesty, Who has marvelously bestowed all this; the Indians call it "Guanahani." To the second, I gave the name Isla de Santa Maria de Concepción; to the third Fernandina; to the fourth, Isabella; to the fifth, Isla Juana; and so to each one I gave a new name (Zamora, 1993, 190).

In Mary B. Campbell's own terms, Columbus appears to be obsessed with names (1991, 200). It is not simply names for the newly discovered territories. He is wise enough to assume that maybe he has come across a place that has already been named for after sailing along Juana he reaches the conclusion it must be the province of Cathay (China). He is obsessed with recording in detail every new item, be it familiar or not, he encounters. What is then the significance of assigning a name to a strange place? The answer perhaps lies with the names themselves. It accounts for a hierarchy that Columbus transplants to the New World: God, the Virgin Mary, the king, queen and prince of Spain. This is not a mere act of appropriation, which I wish to analyse further on, but a *translation*, a relocation of European experience in the newly discovered territory. To quote from John Brian Harley, "the names reproduce the divine hierarchy relocated in the New World" (1992, 530). Cultural historians of cartography such as Harley assert that naming as part of mapmaking served to "invent America in the European consciousness" (1992, 531). Quite often ignorance of native toponymy is equated to an act of cultural violence by which not only land, but history itself is appropriated (Mignolo, 1998, 128). According to Stephen Greenblatt, the whole encounter results in "kidnapping language" (1991, 86). Without dismissing any of these remarks or the arguments behind them, I would suggest that perhaps there is more at stake than the mere possessiveness that Campbell identifies in this frenzy of naming, as "in nothing does Columbus less resemble the Traveler than in the extraordinary possessiveness displayed in his propensity for naming and his avoidance of native names." (1991, 203) Despite his ignorance of native words, which could also be accounted for by the lack of an interpreter and his eagerness to please the Spanish sovereigns, Columbus's propensity toward naming might be justified differently.

It has been argued that Columbus is obsessed with reading signs, with assigning meaning to every little detail he records at sea and on land, as if he knew beforehand what he was supposed to find (Todorov, 1984, 15-48) since, "it was, after all, the known world that Columbus had set out to discover, if by an unknown route" (Greenblatt, 1991, 88). But perhaps Columbus is faced with yet another task that awaits explorers in the centuries to come – he has to describe both the familiar and the unfamiliar and translate the latter in terms accessible to his reader(s). The strategies he resorts to even in the act of naming are classic rhetorical strategies of rendering the unfamiliar familiar. His is a

problem of representation, he has to signify and be understood, if not by the natives with whom sometimes encounters end in misunderstanding, then by his European readers. It is a problem of mimesis and cultural translation that emerges out of his discovery. Perhaps it is not so much the epistemic gap created by novelty that he has to fill. Perhaps this frenzy of naming can be accounted for in terms of rhetoric, in “the psychology of persuasion found in classical and humanist rhetoric” (Fitzmaurice, 1997, 221). There is little doubt that he is faced with the limits of his own episteme and his frustration at not being able to identify spices, for instance, prevents him from reporting their existence. The epistemic assimilation of this world is often hindered by the cultural barrier that spans both language and gestures, which leads Wayne Franklin to the conclusion that

The struggle to include New World phenomena within the order of European knowledge, and to do so by 'naming' them, remained at the heart of the form well into the nineteenth century. But it would be misleading to describe this problem of 'inexpressibility' (or others related to it) only as a literary issue. The difficulty with words was, finally, a difficulty with the things to which particular words referred, or for which no appropriate European terms could be found (1979, 3-4).

The so called “epistemic shock” is not a matter separate from the rhetorical task of persuasion. Columbus has to emerge as a credible reporter, he has to convince his reader that what he writes is true and, in the act of naming, “to cast the unknown in terms of the known.” (Fitzmaurice, 1997, 223) In order to persuade, one needs to describe the unfamiliar in terms of what is certain or believed to be certain. It is precisely this category of that which is believed to certain, in other words, that which is credible, that is of interest in travel accounts of newly discovered lands. For lack of certainties, it has to appeal, in rhetorical terms, not so much to the intellect, for persuasion results from the exploitation of men’s emotional attachment to what they hold close to their bosoms, namely, the things they are familiar with.

Columbus’s act of naming reveals a double hierarchy which he transplants to the New World, one divine, the other political. His growing conviction that he has discovered Paradise goes hand in hand with his mission in this postlapsarian garden which seems to resonate with biblical overtones of how “God [...] brought them [beasts and fowl] unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof” (*Genesis* 2: 19-20). Historical circumstances, however, prevent him from resuming the prelapsarian task entirely, although he is struck with the beauty of the place, which itself becomes a source of inspiration for “Cabo Hermosa” and “Valle del Paraíso” (Campbell, 1991, 201).

The political dimension of naming is revealed in the ceremonies of taking possession of the land, in which circumstance Harley’s critique of European explorers appropriating land and erasing native culture is justified (Harley, 1992, 530-2). The legal ritual performed in Spanish with which Columbus took possession of the land and which was instituted as common practice among Spanish colonizers has been deemed either ridiculous or atrocious. Ridiculous since to inform the natives of their obligations to the sovereigns of Spain in a language of which they had no understanding borders on the absurd. Atrocious since the hypocritical assumption that they are not linguistically and culturally articulate enough their right to the land which they inhabit can be altogether ignored. In the context of legal ceremonies of taking possession, the act of

naming obliterates native rights and, at the epistemic level, hides the lack of transparency of and insight into native culture.

In the centuries to come, *naming as renaming* becomes a practice endowed with growing self-awareness for Europeans, now that interpreters have been trained either of their own accord or against their will and cross-cultural communication has been improved. In the reports of the voyages made by Raleigh, Frobisher and Smith both linguistic and cultural translation seem to have evolved from blind assumptions to more elaborate representations of the natives who, via mimetic appropriation, are rendered more civilised. The presence of native names and the mediated portrayal of indigenous civility mark a sixteenth-century advancement in the assimilation of the unfamiliar and its being rendered as appealing to prospective investors and colonizers. Persuasion is at work.

## The New World is Englished

On returning to England, Thomas Harriot published *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* in 1588, which was part of a greater enterprise of exploration and colonization organized and advocated by Sir Walter Raleigh, in which Harriot's narrative was illustrated by John White, a Renaissance limner. To ensure its success, Raleigh drew the support of men such as Francis Walsingham, John Dee and Richard Hakluyt. In 1590, Theodor de Bry seems to have obtained White's illustrations with the help of Hakluyt and *Virginia* was published in Latin, German, English and French. Harriot's texts served as illustrations to White's drawings of New World resources and mores. The drawings are themselves a narrative with moments of silence as they render certain details invisible and place the readers in a position of what could be termed as partial blindness or selective visibility.<sup>1</sup> What is made visible are categories familiar to European readers - villages, civil government, and an organized form of religion. The Indians are represented as "technically proficient", and civilised in their acknowledgement of distinctions of rank, age, and gender (Sloan, 2007, 108). What is made invisible are the tense relations with the natives as the result of miscommunication and the English colonizers themselves never presented in their interactions with the Roanoke Indians. What is made visible is the Englishness of the Indians, namely, their civility and the similar social codes they employ. The English representation operates a cultural translation for the audiences at home. This translation mediates between the two cultures in the attempt to familiarize and appeal, to instruct and to entertain, to satisfy the curiosity of European readers.

My discussion of naming in the context of travel reports rests on the notion of cultural translation, which is explored by Peter Burke in *Cultural Translation in Early Modern Europe* and is a term "originally coined by anthropologists in the circle of Edward Evans-Pritchard, to describe what happens in cultural encounters when each side tries to make sense of the actions of the other" (2007, 8). The increased awareness of linguistic and cultural problems in the attempt to convey meaning across cultures which appeared among anthropologists "has recently been taken up by a group of

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to draw on the notions of visibility and invisibility analysed by Stephen Greenblatt in "Invisible bullets" in *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, Howard Marchitello in "Visible strings" and John Brian Harley in *The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography*.

literary scholars concerned with the translatability of texts.” (Burke, 2007, 8) In Burke’s own terms,

Translation implies ‘negotiation’, a concept which has expanded its domain in the last generation, moving beyond the worlds of trade and diplomacy to refer to the exchange of ideas and the consequent modification of meanings. The moral is that a given translation should be regarded less as a definitive solution to a problem than as a messy compromise, involving losses or renunciations and leaving the way open for renegotiation (2007, 9).

In the context of early modern travel reports, the notion of translation as negotiation between cultures becomes extremely valuable in the attempt to account for the interplay of meanings in the texts under discussion. How is the concept of cultural translation relevant to early modern naming in the New World? The increasing number of names transliterated from the language of native Americans attests that in the latter half of the sixteenth century there is an increasing concern among English explorers to communicate more effectively with the natives and more persuasively with their own countrymen.

Harriot’s *Report* shows a genuine interest in transliteration and translation as he quotes on native names for the natural resources he describes in his advertising tract. I would venture to suggest that such an endeavour makes his narrative more credible, or, in rhetorical terms, it makes it more persuasive as it begins to accommodate the unfamiliar by transcribing its foreign name and describing it in detail. Thus Harriot creates new categories and renders them credible, certain by means of minute descriptions:

There is an herbe which is sowed a part by it selfe & is called by the inhabitants Vppowoc: In the West Indies it hath diuers names, according to the seuerall places & countries where it groweth and is vsed: The Spaniardes generally call it Tobacco. The leaues thereof being dried and brought into powder: they vse to take the fume or smoke thereof by sucking it through pipes made of claie into their stomacke and heade; from whence it purgeth superfluous fleame & other grosse humors, openeth all the pores & passages of the body: by which meanes the vse thereof, not only preserueth the body from obstructiōs; but also if any be, so that they haue not beene of too long continuance, in short time breaketh them: wherby their bodies are notably preserued in health, & know not many greeuous diseases where withall wee in England are oftentimes afflicted. [...] *Kaishucpenauk* a white kind of roots about the bignes of hen eggs & nere of that forme: their tast was not so good to our seeming as of the other, and therefore their place and manner of growing not so much cared for by vs: the inhabitats notwithstanding vsed to boile & eate many. *Tsinaw* a kind of roote much like vnto the which in England is called the *China root* brought from the East Indies. And we know not anie thing to the cōtrary but that it maie be of the same kind. These roots grow manie together in great clusters and doe bring foorth a brier stalke, but the leafe in shape far vnlike; which beeing supported by the trees it groweth nearest vnto, wil reach or climbe to the top of the highest. From these roots while they be new or fresh beeing chopt into small pieces & stampd, is strained with water a iuice that maketh bread, & also being boiled, a very good spoonemeate in maner of a gelly, and is much better in tast if it bee tempered with oyle. This *Tsinaw* is not of that sort which by some was caused to be brought into England for the *China roote*, for it was discouered since, and is in vse as is afore saide: but that which was brought hither is not yet knowne neither by vs nor by the inhabitants to serue for any vse or purpose; although the rootes in shape are very like. *Coscúshaw*, some of our company tooke to bee that kinde of roote which the Spaniards in the West Indies call *Cassauy*, whereupon also many called it by that name: it groweth in very muddie pooles and moist groundes (1590, 16-17).

The land itself bears the name of Virginia, in honour of the Queen whose support Raleigh tries to draw by invoking legends of a queen that is to liberate the natives from the Spanish yoke. No doubt, John Brian Harley would have commented that this is the political unconscious at work, just like in the case of Columbus's naming of the islands of Fernandina, Isabella and Juana. The plantations that the English try to establish in the sixteenth century engage considerable material and intellectual resources. It is an enterprise aimed at creating an empire the architect of which seems to have been John Dee. Perhaps that is an oversimplification of the vast network of men engaged in the endeavour to establish English dominion at sea and in the New World. Against the backdrop of the Black Legend (Hadfield, 2007, 48), travel narratives serve to construct an empire at a discursive level while legal ceremonies of naming and taking possession of the new found land instantiate imperial dreams. But the endeavour is not always successful or indicative of a better mental and political grasp of what lies across the ocean. Such are the cases of Frobisher's voyages in the late 1570s and Pet and Jackman's expedition of 1580 (Mancall, 2007, 80).

In search of a Northwest Passage to Asia, Martin Frobisher made three voyages to North America in 1576, 1577 and 1578, the result of which amounted to very little despite his claims that he had discovered the entrance to the passage leading to Cathay, a claim that Elizabeth proved rather sceptical about since she gave it the name 'Meta Incognita' – "the unknown mark" (Alexander, 2002, 24). In Frobisher's case, it becomes clear that the name given to the territory he explored is "an empty sign" (Greenblatt, 1991, 117) which allows at least the following interpretation: by the late sixteenth century, there is a growing consciousness among the English that the more they explore, the less they seem to know and such acts of naming become signs of this increasing awareness of the problems of translating accurately the experience and knowledge of distant lands and producing knowledge of the New World that is both reliable and useful.

In his *Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles: With the Names of the Adventurers, Planters, and Governours from Their First Beginning, Ano: 1584. To This Present 1624*, captain John Smith announces from the very beginning that his report will be accurate name-wise and at least from a historical and geographic point of view he tries to abide by his promise, as is to be seen also in the Sixth Book:

Concerning this History you are to understand the Letters-Patents granted by his Maiesty in 1606. for the limitation of *Virginia*, did extend from 34. to 44. which was diuided in two parts; namely, the first Colony and the second: the first was to the honourable City of London, and such as would aduenture with them to discouer and take their choice where they would, betwixt the degrees of 34. and 41. The second was appropriated to the Cities of *Bristol, Exeter* and *Plimoth*, &c. and the West parts of *England*, and all those that would aduenture and ioine with them, and they might make their choise any where betwixt the degrees of 38. and 44. prouided there should bee at least 100. miles distance betwixt these 2. Colonies, each of which had lawes, priuileges and authoritie, for the gouernment and aduancing their seuerall Plantations alike. Now this part of *America* hath formerly beene called *Norumbega, Virginia, Nuskoncus, Penaquida, Cannada*, and such other names as those that ranged the Coast pleased (1624, 202).

This increasing preoccupation with the geographic and historical accuracy of names becomes indicative of an incipient scientific control of the land taken into possession. The land has been "Englished", to quote on a term often used to designate

translation in the early modern period. To translate is to understand and finally to possess. As time goes by, the act of naming becomes increasingly institutional, precise, regulated in political, historical and geographic discourse.

The discussion does by no means exhaust the issue of early modern *naming as renaming* in America. Rather it suggests that toponymy is a little more than a systematic study of place names while its analysis in the context of early modern discovery, exploration and colonisation draws on notions such as cultural translation, mimesis, visibility and invisibility, humanist rhetoric, epistemic assimilation and cartographic insults. As opposed to the scientific claims toponymy makes at present, the endeavour of travellers to the New World beginning with Columbus reveals the ideological stages that place naming has gone through before it could be linked to accuracy and political correctness in the modern and postmodern ages.

As always, the bone of contention with naming has to do with identity, since not only people acquire a sense of belonging by receiving a name. Along the same line of thought, I would dare say that the act of naming provides a place with a set of chronological coordinates that make it signify human experience and endow it with a sense of history. The question of place identity lies at the intersection of politics, history and geography.

## Documentation Sources

1. Harriot, Thomas, *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*, 1590, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/harriot/harriot.html>, consulted 10 February 2011.
2. Smith, John, *Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles: With the Names of the Adventurers, Planters, and Governours from Their First Beginning, Ano: 1584. To This Present 1624*, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/smith/smith.html>, consulted 5 March 2011.

## References

1. Alexander, Amir. *Geometrical Landscapes: The Voyages of Discovery and the Transformation of Mathematical Practice (Writing Science)*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.
2. Albanese, Denise. *New Science, New World*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996.
3. Burke, Peter & R. Po-Chia Hsia (eds.). *Cultural Translation in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
4. Campbell, Mary B. *The Witness and the Other World. Exotic European Travel Writing, 400-1600*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991.
5. Fitzmaurice, Andrew, "Classical Rhetoric and the Promotion of the New World." In *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Volume 58, Number 2 (April 1997). The Johns Hopkins University Press. 221-243.
6. Greenblatt, Stephen. "Invisible bullets." In *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
7. Greenblatt, Stephen. *Marvelous Possessions. The Wonder of the New World*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991.
8. Hadfield, Andrew. *Literature, Travel, and Colonial Writing in the English Renaissance 1545 -1625*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

9. Harley, John Brian. "Rereading the Maps of the Columbian Encounter." In *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 82, No. 3, *The Americas before and after 1492: Current Geographical Research*. Taylor & Francis, Ltd. Sep., 1992. 522-536.
10. Mancall, Peter C.. *Hakluyt's Promise. An Elizabethan's Obsession for an English America*, Boston: Yale University Press, 2007.
11. Marchitello, Howard. "Visible Strings." In *The New Centennial Review* 2.1. 2002. 183-212.
12. Mignolo, Walter D.. *The Darker Side of the Renaissance. Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization*. The University of Michigan Press, 1998.
13. Monmonier, Mark. *From Squaw Tit to Whorehouse Meadow : How Maps Name, Claim, and Inflammate*. The University of Chicago Press, 2006.
14. Sloan, Kim. *A New World. England's first view of America*. London: The British Museum Press, 2007.
15. Zamora, Margarita. *Reading Columbus*. University of California Press, 1993.

## **Meta Incognita: Toponime noi și vechi în călătoriile cătore Lumea Nouă ale exploratorilor din epoca modernă timpurie**

### **Rezumat**

Articolul urmărește și analizează practicile toponimice în contextul descoperirilor, călătoriilor de explorare și de colonizare a Lumii Noi. Astfel este analizată semnificația culturală a toponimelor din perspectiva relatărilor de călătorie scrise de Cristofor Columb, Thomas Harriot și de Căpitanul John Smith într-o încercare de a evidenția transformările înregistrate în ideologia toponimelor. Analiza se bazează pe noțiuni precum traducere culturală, mimesis, invizibilitate și subconștient politic, așa cum au fost acestea definite de istorici ai culturii precum Peter Burke și John Brian Harley și de critici ai noului istorism ca Stephen Greenblatt.